

New Ceremony for Interfaith Couples

One of the things I have learned in my rabbinate at Temple Emunah is the way that interfaith families can play a significant role in our *shul* community. Through the work of our *Keruv* Committee we have become a place where interfaith families who are making Jewish choices can feel not merely comfortable and welcomed, but valued.

In 2010, the Rabbinical Assembly (RA: the International organization of Conservative/Masorti rabbis) created the Commission on *Keruv* (Outreach), Conversion, and Jewish Peoplehood and appointed me as a co-chair. We met over the course of a few years, culminating in an RA convention with a major focus on intermarriage and related *Keruv* issues. One of the areas I concentrated on was creating a new ceremony to welcome interfaith couples. I wanted to find a ritual through which a couple could celebrate their love and the Jewish choices they were making, while including family and friends.

Of course, I wanted to be sure that this ritual and celebration would be within our understanding of *halakhah* (Jewish law). It was a bit of a challenge. The result was a ceremony which was distributed by the RA last month to the entire membership and appears on their website. I want to share this new ceremony with you so you can know about our efforts to create a most welcoming community and so that couples who may be interested in such a ceremony can learn about it. Please share it or the RA website version widely. I look forward to hearing your response and working with you and our Temple Emunah *Keruv* Committee to continue to create such a welcoming and inclusive community.

Rabbi David Lerner

Hanukkat Habayit Ceremony for an Interfaith Couple or Family

The ritual is called *Hanukkat Habayit* Ceremony for an Interfaith Couple or Family. It celebrates the Jewish choices a couple has made. It offers a meaningful ritual for interfaith couples who have decided to build an exclusively Jewish home and family together. (This may or may not work well for blended families.)

The core element in the ceremony is placing a *mezuzah* on the doorpost of the home. A *mezuzah* is, after all, something that should be on the doorpost of every home occupied by a Jew. Utilizing the existing ceremony for affixing a *mezuzah* seems like a logical place to start, since the act does not create something new, nor is it controversial. Rather, it accurately involves the rabbi and the community—welcoming the couple and supporting them in bringing more Judaism into their home and into their lives. The way we expand upon it does, however, create some potential challenges and may make some of us uncomfortable as we seek to straddle the space between our tradition and *keruv*.

Who is eligible for such a *simḥah*? Only couples who have made the commitment to build an exclusively Jewish home in which the children, if there are any, will be raised exclusively as Jews. That means that, if the mother is not Jewish, the children would undergo a *halakhic* conversion.

Expectations

There should also be the clear expectation that non-Jewish symbols and observances would not be a part of the couple's home, such as a Christmas tree. In addition, there should be a requirement to meet regularly with the rabbi for a learning program lasting between three and six months, enabling the rabbi and the couple to get to know each other prior to the ceremony, form a bond, and discuss what it is involved in building a Jewish home and the values that should animate it. Without these prior discussions both partners are agreeing to something they do not really understand. How, for example, can they agree to raise exclusively Jewish children if they, particularly the non-Jewish partner, do not know what that entails? These sessions also allow them to plan the ceremony that will represent the culmination of this learning program.

The setting for the ceremony would be in the couple's home, preferably in a large room near a doorway. The only additional item needed is a small table to hold the items in the ceremony.

The Ritual

Once all participants and guests are assembled, the rabbi leads *Hinei Ma Tov* to set a welcoming mood and shares words of welcome introducing the ceremony and discussing the importance of building a Jewish home. The couple recites lines

reflecting their love for each other and continues by sharing an English prayer that they can recite together. The rabbi then takes a wine-filled Kiddush cup and recites both the blessing over wine and the blessing in response to God's goodness in Hebrew and English; followed by *birkat kohanim* (the Priestly Benediction) and relates it to building a Jewish home, and to mitzvot like lighting Shabbat and holiday candles and, if appropriate, raising Jewish children where this *brakhah* is recited every Friday night. The rabbi addresses the couple, speaking personally about them, their learning together, and what each brings to the other and to the new Jewish home they are creating. It would be helpful to speak to the power and significance of the *mezuzah* as well.

Finally, the couple and the rabbi move to the front door (or another appropriate doorway) to affix the *mezuzah*. The Jewish partner recites the blessing in Hebrew and both partners recite it in English, followed by the actual affixing of the *mezuzah*. The guests join in with *Siman Tov*. Everyone is invited to a meal celebrating this event.

The rabbi would, of course, continue to speak with the couple in the following months to guide them in their Jewish growth. A year's free membership to a local Conservative/Masorti synagogue or *minyán* would be a wonderful housewarming gift for these families. I believe this *Hanukat Habayit* ritual can sow the seeds for a fuller integration of the family into the Jewish community and for building a stronger foundation for a Jewish home.

I would love to hear comments and thoughts about this new ritual.

To read the version on the Rabbinical Assembly's website, see:

www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/hanukat-habayit-ceremony-interfaith-couple.