

Reform rabbis more open to intermarriage: Calls for increased outreach and understanding

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In a major shift, Reform rabbis have publicly acknowledged intermarriage as a given that calls for increased outreach and understanding, rather than as a threat to Jewish identity that must be resisted at all costs.

The Central Conference of American Rabbis, which represents nearly 2,000 Reform rabbis from around the world, embraced the change during its annual convention in San Francisco.

Traditionally, the Reform movement—the most liberal of three major branches of mainstream Judaism—has wavered on whether to sanction weddings between Jews and non-Jews; Conservative and Orthodox clergy will not officially perform such ceremonies.

Yet 25 years of demographic studies have documented a growing trend toward intermarriage, with as many as half of American Jews now marrying outside their faith. With Jews making up less than 3 percent of the U.S. population and less than 1 percent around the world, Jewish leaders have long warned that mixed marriages weaken Jewish identity and threaten long-term survival.

The traditional view of Judaism as an ethnicity, passed down through the mother, also fuels this conflict, including heated debates about whether “half-Jews” meet requirements for enrollment in religious schools, Israeli citizenship and other faith-based endeavors.

“When a Jew marries a Jew, there is a greater likelihood of Jewish continuity,” admitted CCAR President Rabbi Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus, in her group’s announcement on March 8. “But in the case of intermarriage, the opportunity for Jewish continuity is significant, especially if there is effective rabbinic leadership.”

The Reform rabbis' last statement on this issue, in 1973, had reiterated its 1909 stance that "mixed marriage is contrary to the Jewish tradition and should be discouraged." Rabbis were encouraged to provide conversion opportunities for non-Jewish spouses and educational opportunities for their children.

Now, after a task force spent the last three years studying the issue, the CCAR maintains that Reform rabbis may still opt not to officiate at interfaith weddings as "a deeply personal matter of conscience."

The new position is not a formal policy or resolution, but rather a semiofficial "recognition" of changing times. "Ignoring intermarriage won't make it go away," Dreyfus said. "We want to embrace it as an opportunity." -*Religion News Service*