

## Creating a Ten-Step Welcoming Plan



Nearly every congregation in the conservative movement says that they are a welcoming synagogue. The words, "Warm" and "Egalitarian" often accompany the word "Welcoming." Sometimes the phrase "USCJ compliant" or some derivative phrase accompanies these three words. However, when asked what these congregations do with regard to welcoming, the phrase most likely to be heard is "Shabbos Greeters," and the like.

We live in a world where one third of all married Jewish families include a non-jewish partner. Since nearly half of all Jewish marriages today are interfaith marriages, the likelihood is that this statistic will not change with any significance.

In this light, Welcoming takes on new and expanding meanings.

We can no longer use these words and simply respond with, "You know what I mean."

Moreover, we can no longer – or should no longer – use these words without taking some specific actions to back up in deed what we say so simply in words.

What follows below is an attempt to begin to codify actions which are both significant and of quality. These actions, if taken, will justify the use of the word "Welcoming"

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The Idea of Welcoming, when applied to intermarried couples, families and extended families requires attitudinal change. Whether we choose to admit it or not, Intermarried families don't know they are welcome if we do not say so. And say so with clarity. In addition the children of these families sometimes learn about "unwelcoming" when they are treated with a lack of sensitivity in the classroom and in other aspects of their lives within synagogue.

Because of this, the following is a "Ten Step Plan for Welcoming."

- a. The Synagogue Website – The Website is more than a way to communicate with our members. People who are "schul shopping" look at the website and draw conclusions. If the Website does not specifically say the synagogue welcomes interfaith couples, then they are they Not Welcome.
- b. Review the bylaws of our synagogue and the "Arms" of the synagogue. Do they welcome the non-Jewish spouse or do they "un-welcome" that person. Is the issue of membership treated in a way to include the non-jewish spouse as part of the overall synagogue family.
- c. We need to increase the number of "aliyahs" to our interfaith couples and perhaps also include their children in these "aliyahs." We need to honor them and the commitment they have made to raise their children as Jews and provide a Jewish Home for them. We also need to let our congregants know that this recognition is synagogue-wide. And where possible and appropriate, this needs to be inclusive of the High Holidays as well (The word, aliyah, is used in the general sense and is not limited to Torah Blessings.).
- d. At some point, including the High Holidays, the Rabbi needs to address issues of Keruv and Welcoming from the Bimah.

- e. We need to teach the non-Jewish Female Spouse how to bless the Sabbath Candles. Specifically, we give or teach her a blessing (or encourage her to use the existing blessing) to welcome Shabbos and the joy of Welcoming Shabbos into the home.
- f. An In-home Interfaith Passover – Being able to clearly tell our Story without the Haggadah. That is, we need to understand our story well enough to teach and tell it not only to our children, but also to our non-Jewish in-laws and extended family at our table.
- g. Modifying the monthly synagogue bulletin. The bulletin should congratulate all parents, grandparents and children in matters of births, deaths, marriages and bar/bat mitzvahs.
- h. Understanding the importance of “the New Jewish Family” and what it means for this family to be together on the Sabbath and the Holidays. And understanding that this cannot happen if the family has been made to feel unwelcome.

The above Ten-Plus Steps are both a plan and a guideline. Some are quite necessary. Others will come over time.

As we look at these above “steps,” we must continually ask, “If we do none of these things, or only pick at the easy ones, then what messages are we sending through our institutions to our congregant family?”