

Gateways Into Jewish Living – (Some) Dissent

Rabbi Aaron Alexander

This paper was submitted, in July 2026, as a dissent to “Gateways Into Jewish Living: Guiding the Conservative/Masorti Rabbi in Supporting Families with Non-Jewish Loved Ones.” Dissenting and concurring papers are not official positions of the CJLS.

I want to begin by offering a hearty *kol ha-kavod* to the editors of this critical project, Rabbis Barmash and Barton. Our colleagues and communities will no doubt benefit from the *halakhic* guidance provided in this paper. I’m also grateful to each of the authors who contributed their effort and expertise to the topics covered.

I’d also like to note that while the CJLS was deliberating on this paper, our colleague Rabbi Aaron Brusso published an important piece in *Sources: A Journal of Jewish Ideas*. In this essay he powerfully describes the limits of strict *halakhic* discourse when working with diverse couples and families, and offers grounded wisdom from which clergy may glean. I find this helpful to use as a prism for navigating that space between and around relational particularity and universality, boundaries and inclusion, continuity and commitment. He writes:

The American Jewish communal conversations about marriage and intermarriage began by using sociology and demographics to feed a debate on continuity versus inclusion. For my work as a rabbi, that has always been the wrong place to start. Every couple is different. Every conversation is different. Without a pastoral position of radical agnosticism toward the issue a couple is bringing into my office, I won’t be able to see what is in front of me. Once I know who is in front of me, I can then help them individuate their needs from what their parents want, and articulate, based on their identities, the role religion has played for each of them individually. If there are dissonances, I can help them figure out whether and how that comes together in their relationship. And knowing that religion is a powerful expression of meaning and identity, I can help a couple face the intersection of their identities and the particularistic meaning system of the tradition honestly. Sometimes the couple leaves my office more thoughtful about the content of their wedding and relationship. Sometimes they want to study more. And sometimes this becomes a pathway to conversion. But all have appreciated the dignity of self-definition, and they have appreciated the integrity of the tradition...

We need to help families own conversations freed from our judgment. We need to help couples own the work of discussing the relationship between their identities and the religious particularity of Judaism honestly. And, as a rabbi, my job is not to use authority to predetermine outcomes, but to facilitate a meeting between the people sitting in front of me and the tradition so that their identities can be in direct relationship with the power of the Torah's particularity.¹

I believe our approach to the opportunities and challenges that face us rely on the careful balance Rabbi Brusso articulates. The language we choose to use, the *halakhic* concepts we deploy, the Torah that shapes these conversations—each may pre-determine the broad or narrow scope by which our relational commitments progress, or regress.

As I briefly explain my votes (in particular, my “no” votes) in the paragraphs that follow, please know that it is from within the lens of both my commitment to *halakhah* as well as the very people in front of me that I write.

Section 5 – Families Where One Partner Is Not Jewish and the Bimah

Rabbis Spitzer and Barton raise these questions (among others):

May a non-Jew accompany a Jew up for an aliyah?

*1. May the non-Jewish parent of a b*mitzvah come up with their spouse for an aliyah?*

2. May a Jew and a non-Jewish partner have a “joint aliyah,” and may they have a joint mi shebeirakh? If so, what might the ceremony look like

My ‘no’ vote to this section is in part **disagreement**, and in part **discomfort**. I’ll begin with my disagreement. In their 4th and final ruling, Rabbis Spitzer and Barton write:

A rabbi may offer an intermarrying couple who intend to live an exclusively Jewish life (and if having children, raise Jewish children) a *mi shebeirakh* on the occasion of an *aliyah* enjoyed by the Jewish partner accompanied by the non-Jewish partner after the wedding day or before

¹ Jewish Marriage and Intermarriage: A Pastoral Perspective
<https://www.sourcesjournal.org/articles/jewish-marriage-and-intermarriage-a-pastoral-perspective>

the wedding day but not on the wedding day.

I agree that a rabbi may offer an intermarrying couple building a Jewish home a special blessing. Personally, I'd go further, and claim a rabbi *ought* to do so. I disagree with the conclusion that it couldn't happen on the wedding day. Nor do I understand it, as it comes with no explanation.

Try as I may, I fail to see how limiting the timeframe of *before* to at least the day before—and not the morning of—creates any meaningful distinction. If it were a Sunday evening wedding and simultaneously Rosh Hodesh, would it make a difference if the couple came early that Sunday morning for an Aliyah instead of the day before? The same would apply for a Saturday night wedding. What difference does it make if the *aufruf/alayah* happens on the day of the wedding or not?

****A rabbi who would otherwise offer this mi shebeirakh blessing after an aliyah, may certainly do so on the day of the couple's wedding.***

My *discomfort* with Section 5 is centered on the overall discussion of the topic of inviting a non-Jew onto the Bimah to accompany their spouse and/or other Jews formally receiving the *aliyah*.

First, it should be noted that this isn't just a question of parents. It could also be one set of grandparents who are not Jewish, accompanying Jewish grandparents. It could be step-siblings, aunts/uncles, long-time friends coupled with Jews, and so forth.

Next, I generally agree with the authors' conclusion to this question:

Although we have permitted the non-Jewish parent to be present on the *bimah* in some way, it is ultimately up to the clergy and lay leaders to decide which approach works best for their *kehillah* (synagogue community), school, or organization.

Yes, it should absolutely be up to each community to decide how this will precisely work. There is no law that would prevent a non-Jew from not only being present on the *bimah*, but also standing right beside the Jewish person reciting the blessing. Conceptually, however, I might have left *Marit Ayin* (for the sake of appearances), aside for the discussion of whether and/or how a non-Jew may be present on the Bimah.

Marit Ayin operates from a place of fear. Practically: what permitted acts should we prohibit so as not to mislead others into thinking a violation is occurring? In prohibiting this permitted act,

those watching won't suspect me of wrongdoing (*hashud*), or potentially be led to their own violation of *halakhah* (*marit ayin*).

Marit Ayin and its counterpart, *hashud* (suspicion), are not uncomplicated in that their textual and legal definitions are dependent in interpreting the situations in which *Hazal* named them as guiding decisions. In other words, they are not fixed concepts which may be obviously deployed in any new context. In my opinion, offering *Marit Ayin* as the primary concept for which a congregation ought to determine its practice requires a full fleshing out of this concept.

If certain *bimah* choreographies might lead to negative outcomes, those outcomes ought to be explicitly identified. What exactly am I to be fearful of in this situation? I assume that the authors' are concerned that those in the pews will think a non-Jew is also reciting the aliyah. Since the blessing over Torah reading is meant to be recited only by Jews, and quite specific to the Jewish people, there is a level to which I understand this concern, and agree with it. But setting this citation against the backdrop of a principle built on fear seems to move away from the ways many of us have shifted the conversation in our communities.

Furthermore, the communal and/or individual reaction and/or consequence of a non-Jew reciting a blessing specific to Jews is that... people present should answer *amen*.² In other words, there is no actual transgression involved, therefore *marit ayin* may not apply at all. It simply needs further exploration.

In our community, non-Jewish family members may (and most often do choose to) stand right next to their Jewish counterparts as the Jewish counterpart recites the blessing. Beforehand, clergy and the family together discuss the boundaries around who may actually recite the blessing, and why. We discuss the meaning/s of our tradition's choreography of this *Sinai* inspired ritual. This relational moment doesn't dismiss or diminish boundaries, nor does it center fear. As Rabbi Brusso articulates: "my job is not to use authority to predetermine outcomes, but to facilitate a meeting between the people sitting in front of me and the tradition so that their identities can be in direct relationship with the power of the Torah's particularity."

Has it happened that somebody not Jewish has also said the words *asher bachar banu*? I'm sure it has on rare occasions. It'll be okay. The response at the moment is: *amen*. Then it's an opportunity to reflect upon, and refine, our preparation for these *aliyot*.

Section 6: A *Hanukkat Habayit* (Dedication of the Jewish Home) Ceremony for Couples Consisting of a Jewish Partner and a Non-Jewish Partner Who Have Decided to Build an

² Tosefta Berakhot, 5:21

***Exclusively Jewish Home and Family Together* by Rabbi Emily Barton**

May the ḥanukkat habayit ceremony that already exists in our tradition be used by couples of a Jewish partner and a non-Jewish partner who have decided to build an exclusively Jewish home and family together (and for families who are maintaining an exclusively Jewish home and raising Jewish children)?

In this section, I abstained. In her conclusion, Rabbi Barton writes:

A *ḥanukkat habayit* ceremony may be a way to welcome couples in which one partner is not Jewish who have decided to build an exclusively Jewish home and family together. This ceremony can also be used for any couple/family wishing to affix a *mezuzah* in their new home as part of a special occasion.

I agree with Rabbi Barton's conclusion, and am grateful for the beautiful resources found within this section. I abstained primarily because of the section within the larger section titled, *Expectations*. Rabbi Barton outlines the demands clergy should employ before participating in such a ceremony, such as no other non-Jewish symbols in the home, and a requirement of regular meetings for 3-6 months prior to the *mezuzah* being affixed to the home.

I appreciate that Rabbi Barton chooses the word *should* instead of *must*. A clergy-person may also choose to, after just one meeting, put up the *mezuzah* with the family. Or a clergy-person may decide that since there is a Jewish person living Jewishly in the home, that's enough to warrant a *mezuzah*, therefore the help and support of clergy. In other words, my abstention isn't because I disagree with the conclusion, but because within the body of the section we suggest holding certain families to standards that we likely do not apply to others.

****Clergy may determine the scope of expectations they feel appropriate for their community in facilitating/supporting any hannukat ha-Hayit for a Jewish family's home.***

Section 11: *May an Intermarried Jew Be Hired by a Conservative Institution?* By Rabbi Joshua Heller

Rabbi Heller concludes:

A Conservative community must not engage someone who is intermarried for any role that might be considered *klei kodesh*, clergy. For roles where a non-Jewish candidate might also be considered, there is no reason to reject a candidate who is married to a non-Jew. For roles with religious or

communal significance, a candidate must be considered for the totality of their skills and Jewish commitment, of which their choice of life partner may be one factor among many.

I abstained from this section as well. I appreciate that Rabbi Heller offers a significant, meaningful, and sensitive change to the 1997 CJLS ruling. And, in general, I agree with much of what Rabbi Heller has written. I have reservations about potentially including a *mohel/et* in this ruling. I think they ought to fall outside the parameters of this section of the paper—their choice of life partner should have no bearing on whether or not they are recommended by other clergy.

I also think Rabbi Heller's last line of the *Pesak Din* is compelling,³ and might even guide some of our colleagues to a more expansive position on hiring critical synagogue leadership roles.

³ "For roles with religious or communal significance, a candidate must be considered for the totality of their skills and Jewish commitment, of which their choice of life partner may be one factor among many."