

THE ROLE OF THE NON-JEWISH PARENT IN BLESSINGS FOR BAR/BAT MITZVAH

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The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly provides guidance in matters of halakhah for the Conservative movement. The individual rabbi, however, is the authority for the interpretation and application of all matters of halakhah.

שאלה

May a parent who is not Jewish participate in the recitation of a blessing as part of the service in which his or her child becomes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah?

תשובה

In considering this question, a number of issues must be taken into consideration. If the b'rakhah in question is intended to be an integral part of the religious service, the individual reciting the b'rakhah must be able to do it in such a way as to be able to exempt members of the congregation from the need to recite the b'rakhah on their own. The Talmud teaches that an individual may perform a mitzvah as another's agent only if the individual serving as the agent has at least the same obligation as the individual for whom it is being performed.¹

In the case of an individual reciting a b'rakhah as part of the service – if the b'rakhah is an integral part of that service – that individual must be in a position to exempt those who will hear that recitation. Clearly, a non-Jew is not “obligated” to recite any b'rakhah. Since a non-Jew has no obligation for תפילה, that non-Jew may not lead Jews in obligatory prayer.

A potential problem also exists with the nature of the b'rakhah. The nature of many b'rakhot is such that they are appropriate for recitation only by Jews. For example, for a

¹ M. Rosh Hashanah 3:8, Berakhot 20b.

non-Jew to recite *אשר בחר בנו* or *שעשני ישראל* is to render the b'rakhah trivial. (Indeed, were a Jew to recite a b'rakhah for a mitzvah for which she/he were not obligated, it would be considered a *ברכה לבטלה*.)

Thirdly, depending on the religious belief and/or practice of the non-Jew, the recitation of certain b'rakhot and prayers may be theologically meaningless, or may create a situation in which the statements are a mockery.

It is based upon these positions that the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards has a long standing tradition of limiting the ways in which a non-Jew may participate in a religious service. In 1976, Mayer Rabinowitz wrote, "A non-Jew may not be given an aliyah. He may not serve as a *שליח ציבור* and may not be a member of the choir. However it may be permissible for the non-Jew to read a responsive reading or to address the congregation."²

On various occasions, the Law Committee considered the involvement of non-Jews in the religious service. In 1954, the CJLS determined that it was "the unanimous opinion of the Committee that the practice of having non-Jews in synagogue choirs is not in keeping with Jewish standards."³

In 1958, Philip Sigal wrote, "Choirs are regarded as extensions of the cantor's voice and it is deemed *therefore*, incorrect to use non-Jewish singers. By the same token, gentile choir leaders *at services* are deemed contrary to the spirit of the Jewish tradition and practice."⁴ The Committee reaffirmed this position in 1978, when in response to a question as to whether it was permissible for a synagogue to hire non-Jews to sing in their choir during services, the Committee "unanimously agreed that such a practice is against the basic tenets of Jewish tradition."⁵ It is interesting to note that the rationale of the Steering Committee was that the choir is an extension of the *שליח ציבור*, and thus, it would not be appropriate for an individual who is not Jewish to participate within that choir.

In these cases, the response of prohibiting the non-Jew from taking particular roles within the religious service was because it could be assumed that the individual may be reciting prayers that were inappropriate either because of content or because that individual would perform be reciting prayers which traditionally require a *שליח ציבור* – a role that this individual cannot fulfill because the individual is not Jewish.

In 1979, Seymour Siegel, Chairman of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, wrote to Loel Weiss in response to a question regarding non-Jewish participation in a Bar mitzvah ritual that "A non-Jew can participate in a service as long as there is no *היוב* involved. He can not have an aliyah, for example. But he might offer a prayer for the government or read a psalm." In this situation, the non-Jew does not take on a role which creates a problem with the religion's integrity of the service. By carefully selecting the reading and referring to it as a "reading," the religious value is not compromised.

The significant increase in the rate of intermarriage will ensure that the frequency of congregations confronting this question will grow. Thus, besides considering the legal permissibility of this question and the desire to meet the needs of the family, the policy implications must be considered. As distinctions between Jews and non-Jews are

² Letter from Mayer Rabinowitz to Louis Kaplan, 15 Sept. 1976.

³ CJLS minutes, 31 Aug. 1954.

⁴ Letter from Philip Sigal to Tzvi Porath, 3 June 1958.

⁵ CJLS Steering Committee minutes, 6 July 1978.

blended by the synagogue community, distinctions may be less discernible to those who might consider intermarriage. It is important that we not imply that the non-Jewish parent is a member of the Jewish community. Efforts should be made to find ways to give the non-Jewish parent recognition at the service without demonstrating Jewish communal membership.

Conclusion

Based on the above analysis and considerations, a parent who is not Jewish may not recite a b'rakhah as part of the service in which his or her child becomes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. There must be distinctive roles for Jewish parents. Each synagogue will have to determine those roles, based upon its service, structure and ritual. Additional readings may be selected or created for the non-Jew outside of the formal liturgy. Extant roles and rituals usually designated and filled by Jews should not be considered. It is advised that these "created" or "selected" readings be utilized only when a non-Jew participates in the service and be instituted at a unique point in the service so that the non-Jew has an appropriate role without, at the same time, signifying, symbolizing or professing his/her membership in the Jewish community.