

Frequently Asked Questions: The *Teshuvah* on Supporting Families with Non-Jewish Loved Ones

1. What is a *teshuvah*, and what does this one say?

A *teshuvah* is a formal rabbinic response to a question of *halakhah* (Jewish law). This *teshuvah*, “Gateways into Jewish Living: Guiding the Conservative/Masorti Rabbi in Supporting Families with Non-Jewish Loved Ones,” outlines a continuum of approaches for engaging intermarried couples and families — from basic acts of welcome into the Jewish community, to more formal rituals and ceremonies that recognize and support key moments in their lives. It offers practical opportunities to support a couple or family where one partner or parent isn’t Jewish but who are interested in living an exclusively Jewish life or supporting an exclusively Jewish family life.

2. What is the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS), and how does it decide matters of Jewish law?

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) sets halakhic policy for Rabbinical Assembly rabbis and the Conservative/Masorti Movement. It includes 25 rabbis who are voting members, along with five non-voting lay representatives from the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and one non-voting cantor from the Cantors’ Assembly. Each section of this *teshuvah* containing a new ruling was voted on individually and approved by a majority of the committee. The size of that majority varied by section.

3. In what ways can a rabbi or synagogue honor a couple before or after their wedding day?

The *teshuvah* formalizes multiple ways for rabbis and communities to mark a couple’s life together. These include a public *mi shebeirakh* (blessing) that can be offered before or after the wedding day, and a *hanukat habayit* ceremony to dedicate the home of a couple building a Jewish life together. Both create meaningful, sanctioned moments of celebration and support around the wedding.

4. What impact will this have on families in Conservative/Masorti communities?

The *teshuvah*’s rulings mean that many of a family’s most significant life-cycle moments — coming of age, loss, and mourning — can be met with halakhically sanctioned support and presence.

It welcomes non-Jewish parents on the *bimah* during their children’s *b’nei mitzvah* and offers congratulations and other ways of inclusion to intermarried couples that were once considered unacceptable. It affirms and encourages that a Jew observe full Jewish mourning practices — including sitting *shivah* and reciting *Kaddish* — for a non-Jewish parent, spouse, or child, with rabbis permitted to officiate at funerals for non-Jewish family members.

It also encourages observance and clarifies practice around “everyday” *mitzvot*, like Shabbat and Passover, and putting up a *mezuzah*.

5. Does this change who a Conservative/Masorti rabbi can officiate a wedding for?

No. Conservative/Masorti clergy may officiate only when both partners are Jewish. The Standard of Religious Practice is neither debated nor changed in this *teshuvah*.

But our Movement understands that a wedding ceremony is one moment in a couple's life together — this *teshuvah* focuses on the many meaningful ways rabbis and communities can walk alongside a couple before and after it.

6. What practical impact does this have on synagogues?

In addition to encouraging communal welcome and ritual inclusion, the *teshuvah* affirms that synagogues may hire an intermarried Jewish person for most roles other than clergy or other positions that specifically model Jewish observance. This reflects a recognition that a person's choice of life partner is one factor among many in assessing their fitness for communal service, not a disqualifying one.

7. How will my community decide how to apply this guidance?

The *teshuvah* leaves much of its practical application to local rabbinic judgment. Many local rabbis (as *mara d'atra*) and communities have already adopted some practices described in this *teshuvah*, while others have waited for more formal guidance. The role of this *teshuvah* is to establish and broaden what's halakhically permitted, so individual rabbis can review and implement a wider range of welcoming and inclusive practices in a manner appropriate to their communities.

8. How will this guidance be interpreted in different parts of the world?

Conservative/Masorti communities span the globe. The *teshuvah* presents universal halakhic principles while recognizing that “sociological realities and expectations vary significantly” among these diverse communities. Our gifted rabbinic leaders in various parts of the world will make contextually informed decisions about the communities they serve, based on their community's needs, which may be distinct from a US-based perspective.

9. How does this *teshuvah* relate to the Movement's past approach?

It has been more than 40 years since the CJLS last addressed questions of intermarriage in a sustained, halakhic way. The *teshuvah* emphatically rethinks prior positions that shamed and excluded Interfaith couples, for example, by refusing to say *mazel tov* or publicly acknowledge their engagements.

At the same time, there are some elements of the *teshuvah* that may have already been practiced by certain communities in the movement, but are far from universal. These include the opportunity to celebrate a couple's engagement with a *mi shebeirakh* before or after the wedding day, and a ceremony to sanctify their home with a *mezuzah*.



Taken together, it reflects the Movement's recognition that its earlier approach of expressing disapproval did not change people's decisions, but instead alienated many couples and families from Jewish life. Our goal is to create gateways so everyone can find a place to learn and find joy and inspiration in our *mitzvot* and traditions, within the boundaries of halakhic standards, principles, and rules.