

A Guide to Practices for Multi-Faith Families at Tikvat Israel

Rabbi Marc Israel – June 2024

Statement of Inclusion

At Tikvat Israel, we appreciate the great diversity of backgrounds that make up the Jewish community today. Our congregation includes people steeped in Jewish experience and training and those just discovering the beauty and richness of Judaism. Some come from traditional religious backgrounds; others grew up in non-observant homes. Some are Jews by choice; others are part of multi-faith families. Our membership includes singles, couples, LGBTQ+ families, single-parent families, persons with disabilities, Jews of Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Mizrahi backgrounds, White Jews and Jews of Color.

Together we are united in our common desire to belong to a congregation where community means friendship, where religious practice means spiritual inspiration, and where education for young and old means personal growth and discovery. We strive to make all members feel comfortable in our services and activities. Tikvat Israel is a place where everyone becomes enriched through friendship, prayer and mitzvot.

Multi-Faith Families at Tikvat Israel

We embrace and include the entire family of our Tikvat Israel members, regardless of any individual's religious affiliation. We do this in the spirit of the Torah's teaching: "The strangers who reside with you shall be to you as your citizens; you shall love each one as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the ETERNAL your God." (Leviticus 19:34) Family members of all faiths are invited to participate in all synagogue events and all lifecycle events in accordance with Conservative movement's traditions and our understanding of Jewish law. Even when all members of a nuclear family are Jewish, most families now include close relatives who are not, and we invite them to participate in Tikvat Israel's services, events, and celebrations. This document aims to clarify the ways in which we include family members in lifecycle events.

Why Do We Make Distinctions?

There are many ways someone of any faith can participate in any lifecycle event, so it is fair to ask why certain roles are reserved only for people who are Jewish. This is for two main reasons:

- 1) First and foremost, we respect each individual's personal beliefs and do not want to impose our belief system on someone who is not Jewish. Just like someone who is not Catholic would not take the Eucharist at a Catholic Mass, we do not ask people of other faiths to say words indicating they believe and take on the responsibilities of Judaism.
- 2) We also respect our Jewish community and Jewish tradition and take seriously the words of our prayers and the responsibilities that are unique to the Jewish community.

Specifically, this means that we do not ask people of other faiths to recite blessings that:

- Include the words "*asher bachar banu*" (express appreciation for the privilege of bringing forth the Torah to the world);
- Include the words "*asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav*" (express appreciation for the unique responsibility to fulfill the Torah's commandments);
- Fulfill a *mitzvah* on behalf of others (eg, Shabbat morning *kiddush* - blessing over wine).

Lifecycle Events

When a Baby is Born

o **Brit Milah**

We encourage parents of all biologically-male babies born into the community to have the baby circumcised through *Brit Milah* (Jewish ritual circumcision) on the 8th day (or as soon as possible thereafter if the baby's health or other issues delay the circumcision). If the birthing parent is Jewish and the other parent is not Jewish, the child is considered Jewish-by-birth and the birthing parent recites the blessing authorizing the *mohel* (person who performs the rite of circumcision).¹ If the birthing parent is not Jewish, the baby can still have a *brit milah* on the 8th day, which allows parents options to decide the baby's religion at a later date without requiring a 2nd procedure. The Jewish parent recites the blessing authorizing the *mohel*, and the circumcision is done "*b'shem gerut*" (as a step towards conversion).² For special circumstances, please consult the rabbi.

At a *Brit Milah*, people of all faiths can:

- Bring the baby forward before being placed on Elijah's seat.
- Read a psalm, poem, or sing a song that is appropriate for the occasion.
- Offer their child the *Birkat HaYeladim* (blessing for children).
- Speak about the meaning of the Hebrew or English name.

Jewish family members can also:

- Serve as the *k'vatter* (place the baby on Elijah's chair).
- Serve as the *Sandek* (person who holds the baby during the circumcision).
- Recite the blessings of the covenant (or perform the circumcision).
- Lead *Birkat HaMazon* (blessing after eating) at the celebratory meal.

o **Baby Naming/*Simchat Bat***

For biologically-female babies, if the birthing parent is Jewish, the baby is considered Jewish-by-birth and we proceed with the naming/*Simchat Bat* (Joy of Welcoming a Daughter) at the earliest convenient time for the family. Ideally, this takes place before the child's 1st birthday. If the birthing parent is not Jewish, we hold the naming/*Simchat bat* after the child goes to the *mikvah* (ritual bath) and completes their conversion.³

¹ Traditionally, since women are not obligated to recite the blessing for *brit milah* they were also not permitted to do so. However, women's roles with *brit milah* is not new - Tziporah circumcised Moses (Exodus 4:25). Most rabbinic authorities permit women to perform circumcisions. In our day, when we do not distinguish obligation for *mitzvot* based on a person's gender, the Jewish parent should recite the blessing, regardless of that parent's gender.

² In order to complete the conversion, at a later date, the parents would need to appear before a *Beit Din* (court of three rabbis) and the child would need to go to the *mikvah* (ritual bath).

³ If parents know they want to raise the baby as Jewish, the ideal timing for *mikvah* is 6-18 months, unless there are health issues. At this age, the lungs are sufficiently strong and the babies tend not to be traumatized by briefly going underwater.

If the naming ceremony takes place during Shabbat morning services:

People of all faiths can:

- Open the Doors of the Ark.⁴
- Accompany their spouse when they go up for an *aliyah* (honor) to the Torah.⁵
- Participate in bringing the baby forward to the bimah (raised platform).
- Read a psalm, poem, or sing a song that is appropriate for the occasion.
- Offer their own child *Birkat HaYeladim* – the blessing for children – either in English or Hebrew.
- Speak about the meaning of the Hebrew or English name.

Jewish family members can also:

- Be called up for an *aliyah* (recite blessings over the Torah) and read Torah.
- Participate in any additional rituals, such as bathing of feet, that may be used to mark the entering into the covenant of the Jewish people.
- Lead *Birkat HaMazon* at the celebratory meal.

Note that it is not a requirement that a *Brit Milah* or naming/*Simchat Bat* take place in the synagogue. Our clergy are happy to assist you in the planning and in leading the service wherever it takes place.

Bnai Mitzvah

A child must be *halakhically* Jewish (have a Jewish birthing parent or have gone through ritual conversion) prior to celebrating *Bnai Mitzvah*. As part of the celebration,

People of all faiths can:

- Accompany a Jewish spouse when they go up for an *aliyah* to the Torah.
- Open the Doors of the Ark.⁶
- Recite the Prayer for Peace or the Prayer for the Country.

Jewish family members can also:

- Be called up for an *aliyah* (recite blessings over the Torah) and read Torah.
- Carry the Torah, *Hagba'ah* (lift the Torah), and *G'lilah* (wrap the Torah).
- Read the prayer for the State of Israel.
- Participate in leading other parts of the service.

⁴ Our current practice is that 2-4 people can open the ark, with at least one person being Jewish.

⁵ According to Maimonides legal code (and others), everyone is allowed to approach the Torah, touch it, and even read from it. (Laws of Tefillin, Mezuzah and the Torah Scroll 10:8). However, in keeping with the Talmudic principle that someone may only fulfill a mitzvah for someone else if they are equally commanded (Brachot 29a) only Jews read from the Torah in public settings, as their reading fulfills the obligation for the congregation to hear it.

⁶ See Note 4.

Weddings

We celebrate every time a member of our community finds a partner they want to marry. Prior to engagement or after, the rabbi and/or cantor are available to counsel the couple, consult in the planning of the wedding ceremony, and assist the couple in any way possible. We are also happy to celebrate any upcoming marriage at a Shabbat service. Please note, in accordance with the Conservative Movement's policy, the rabbi and cantor are only permitted to participate in wedding ceremonies when both partners are Jewish.⁷ If one partner is not Jewish, the clergy are happy to help couples find a Jewish officiant to lead the ceremony.

o *Aufruf*

Prior to the wedding, we invite all couples to celebrate their forth-coming marriage at a Shabbat morning service. The couple is invited to the *bimah*, where the rabbi offers a blessing.

People of all faiths can:

- Accompany their fiancé when they are called to the Torah for an *aliyah*.
- Open the Doors of the Ark.⁸
- Recite the Prayer for Peace or the Prayer for the Country

Jewish family members can also:

- Be called up for an *aliyah* (recite blessings over the Torah) and read Torah.
- Carry the Torah, *Hagba'ah* (lift the Torah), and *G'lilah* (wrap the Torah)
- Read the prayer for the State of Israel
- Participate in leading other parts of the service.

o **Wedding Ceremony**

People of all faiths can:

- Hold the *Chuppah* (wedding canopy) poles.
- Be a part of the procession and stand near the *chuppah*.
- Recite the English translation of the Seven Blessings.
- Recite a poem or song that has been approved prior to the day of the wedding by the rabbi or cantor.

Jewish friends and family members can also

- Witness and sign the *Ketubah* (marriage contract).⁹
- Read the *Ketubah* under the *Chuppah*.

⁷ In its February 2024 "Report of the Standards Working Group," the Rabbinical Assembly reaffirmed its policy that Conservative clergy may only officiate at weddings for two Jews. At the same time, the report encouraged the RA to review how rabbis can celebrate couple's marriage, including *aufruf*, with an aim towards becoming more inclusive.

⁸ See note 4

⁹ In addition to being Jewish, a witness for a ketubah should be someone the couple sees as an exemplar of Jewish living, able to sign their name in Hebrew, and not be an immediate relative of bride, groom, or the other witness. The requirement that the witness be an exemplar of Jewish living is based on a passage in the Shulchan Arukh Choshen Mishpat 34:2 that prohibits a known transgressor from serving as a witness.

- Recite the *Sheva Brachot* (seven blessings) in Hebrew.

Illness

It is appropriate to pray for friends and family of all faiths who are in need of healing. People of all faiths are included on the synagogue *Mi sheberakh* (prayer for the sick) list. The rabbi and/or cantor will visit the sick and recite blessings or psalms of healing for all family members who are in need, regardless of their religious faith tradition.

Death and Mourning

- Upon request, the rabbi and/or cantor will officiate at a funeral for all members of the congregation and their immediate family, regardless of the deceased's religious affiliation.
- Upon the death of a loved one, it is appropriate for Jewish individuals to sit *shiva* (observe seven days of mourning), recite *Kaddish* (mourner's prayer), and observe the *Yahrzeit* (anniversary of death according to the Hebrew calendar) for immediate relatives, regardless of the deceased person's religious belief.
- The prayer *El Malei Rachamim* (God full of compassion) and the *Yizkor* (Remembrance) prayers we recite on certain holidays make reference to the individual being part of the Jewish people.¹⁰ Therefore, out of respect for the deceased, these should only be recited if that person was Jewish.

Converting to Judaism

Rabbinic tradition discourages us from actively seeking to convert people who are not Jewish. However, if someone is interested in converting, our clergy would be happy to work with you.

Other Synagogue Events/Leadership Opportunities.

At Tikvat Israel, everyone in a family unit can be a member of the synagogue, regardless of their faith. Members of all faiths may vote on nearly all synagogue matters.¹¹ Family members of all faiths are included in our congregational directory without differentiation and receive all synagogue mailings and emails. (Like all members, they can opt out if they do not want to be included.) We encourage members of all faiths to participate in synagogue events and services and to serve on committees or other leadership positions except on the religious practices committee, as a *mashgiach* (overseeing the *kashrut* of the kitchen), as president of the congregation, or in a position slated for the incumbent to become president. Finally, please note

¹⁰ *El Malei Rachamim* refers to the deceased being "*tachat canfei haShekhinah*" (under the wings of God's Holy Presence), which is defined in Yebamot 46b as someone who has undergone brit milah and mikvah. *Yizkor* prayers refer to the soul of our loved one being intertwined with the soul of our ancestors. Reciting these prayers for someone who is not Jewish may also be perceived as posthumously "converting" the deceased.

¹¹ The by-laws of the congregation state that only Jewish family members may vote on "religious matters."

that this guide is a “living” document – as we continue to learn and expand our understanding on ways to be most inclusive, we will adapt and update our practices.