

BCRC Ritual Policy on The Role of the Non-Jew in Synagogue Life

March 4, 2007

Foreword

Beth Chaverim Reform Congregation (BCRC) is a Reform Jewish congregation and an affiliate of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ). The BCRC Mission Statement is that the members of BCRC will provide the Jewish community with a forum for experiencing the religious, cultural, and celebratory aspects of Jewish life, offering this experience in an organized, open, egalitarian environment where all members are comfortable with their diverse beliefs and Jewish heritage. BCRC will foster the viability of the Jewish people by providing Jewish religious education to our children and providing our members with an active Jewish community in Loudoun County, Virginia.

Members of our congregation are Jewish families, and many of our families include spouses and/or children who either practice or have a heritage of other faiths. While variety brings wonderful new ideas and energy into our BCRC family, there is the need to qualify and clearly articulate our position on how people of different faiths can participate and hopefully feel a part of our reform Jewish traditions and spirituality. We believe that clarity and openness in our ritual policies will foster an atmosphere of respect and avoid unnecessary ill feelings about participation in our worship services.

Overall, it is the policy of BCRC to welcome and respect people of all faiths who choose to belong and participate in BCRC services and activities. However, we are a Jewish congregation and, as such, we must observe certain guidelines set forth in Reform Judaism, as they relate to roles for our non-Jewish family members. After some research, we discovered that although there are common practices (see Background and Research section below), each Jewish congregation is different in the policies it adopts for the role of non-Jews. There are no hard and fast rules. Hence the BCRC Worship Committee has discussed, debated, and arrived at words which we hope reach the delicate balance of both allowing maximum involvement of our non-Jewish congregants while maintaining the spiritual integrity of our Jewish worship services and offering a house of prayer, tradition, and community for Jews who come to pray and celebrate our faith.

Further, we are now entering a period of growth in our congregation with the advent of a new, more permanent home. We therefore felt it prudent and timely to review our existing policies and bring this issue to light so that all existing and new congregants can have a clear and unambiguous understanding on this important aspect of ritual practices of Reform Judaism at BCRC.

The following are preexisting policies that the BCRC Worship Committee has reaffirmed with some revisions:

1. A non-Jew may open and close the Ark.
2. A non-Jew may recite non-liturgical readings (poems, non-liturgical blessings) but may not recite liturgical readings (this includes all prayers that are based on mitzvot or commandments).

3. A non-Jew may go to the bimah during a Shabbat Bar/Bar Mitzvah Service and stand with their family. They may recite the shechechyanu (blessing honoring the simcha; they may say this blessing in Hebrew if they wish). In the case of the L'Dor V'Dor ("Torah passing") ceremony, the non-Jewish parent may stand together with the Jewish spouse/family. The Rabbi must verbally acknowledge the important contribution of the non-Jewish parent and, provided that the Rabbi is comfortable with it, the congregation supports the policy that the non-Jewish parent may help in the actual passing of the Torah.

The BCRC Worship Committee has adopted the following new policies:

1. Non-Jews may touch the Torah with their siddur (prayer book) as it passes in procession, which shows a sign of honor and respect.
2. Any adult congregant may stand and recite the Kaddish for a loved one on the anniversary of their death, or stand in memory of the many innocent people whose deaths have had an effect on them.
3. A non-Jewish member may serve as a musical accompanist at any service.
4. A non-Jew may not serve as the Sheliach Sebur (prayer leader).
5. A non-Jew may not recite an aliyah (blessing over the Torah) as this is a mitzvah or commandment. In the case of a Shabbat Bar/Bat Mitzvah Service, a non-Jewish parent may stand with their Jewish spouse, who accepts the honor of an aliyah, on the bimah. The program should say that the aliyah is given to the Jewish parent "with" the non-Jewish parent. It is understood that only the Jewish parent will recite the aliyah.
6. A kippah (head covering) and tallit (prayer shawl for Shabbat morning services) may be worn by non-Jews (and Jews alike), but this is not required or expected.
7. Mitzvot such as lighting candles, blessing the lulav and etrog, blowing the shofar, reading from and/or raising or carrying the Torah in procession are reserved for Jewish members. However, non-Jewish members may stand with their Jewish family members who are fulfilling these commandments.

The above policies address mainly "ritual" involvement of non-Jews in our synagogue. Clearly, our policy leaves several areas unanswered for non-Jews such as voting, governance, clubs and a host of other issues. These will be addressed in other congregational documents such as the BCRC Constitution and By-Laws.

Closing Thoughts

This policy document is not set in stone. It is a living document which will change based on the sense of the people in leadership positions in BCRC at the time. A review of this document should occur at least annually and we suggest that it come before the BCRC Board to be re-approved at least every other year to ensure it is current and supported by the congregation leadership.

We therefore set out here to minimize any misconception or confusion about our policy and hold it up as a banner to welcome people of all faiths into our Reform Jewish congregation.

Background and Research.

The mission of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) is to “preserve and promote Judaism and to encourage all efforts for the dissemination of its teachings in a Liberal spirit; to advance the cause of Jewish learning; to foster fellowship and cooperation among rabbis and other Jewish scholars; and to serve the welfare of its members”. The CCAR has published several volumes of its response literature over the years. Recently, it has made many of these teachings available on-line (www.ccarnet.org).

There are five basic CCAR ritual principles which BCRC follows:

- 1) No non-Jew should offer a prayer that contains the formula “who has commanded us” or “who has chosen us”. As a non-Jew, it simply does not make sense because non-Jews are not commanded as are the Jews.
- 2) Non-Jews should not be asked to say or do anything that compromises their religious integrity.
- 3) Jewish worship contains acts and prayers that are the responsibilities of Jews to perform or say. Some of these actions may be performed by another Jew as expert ritual stand-in (e.g., one rarely finds Jewish parents willing to perform the circumcision of their own son.) Non-Jews, no matter how learned or sincere, are not afforded that responsibility.
- 4) The Religious obligations of Jews cannot be fulfilled by non-Jewish proxy.
- 5) Participation in life-cycle events is a recognition of support and commitment by both parents to raise a child Jewish, a vital component of a child’s healthy religious life. Family members are encouraged to participate in appropriate ways during these celebrations.

These principles are in keeping with opinions expressed by the numerous Reform Responsa, published in the context of answering questions about the extent of participation of non-Jews in the synagogue.

Questions on this document should be directed to the BCRC Worship Committee.