

Tools for Building a Culture of Keruv

The Keruv Commission's Recommendations for Movement Implementation

The Leadership Council of Conservative Judaism's (LCCJ) Keruv Commission was charged initially with preparing principles of outreach for the movement. The commission believes it is incumbent for us to augment the principles with ideas for putting them into practice.

Our first charge was to prepare a brochure available to movement constituencies in both paper and electronic formats. The brochure can be used as is or it can be customized by individual congregations. It can be uploaded to congregational web sites and included with existing printed materials. Some congregations may require training in the use of these materials.

The commission also was charged with identifying movement congregations that have developed successful inclusionary practices and to share those methods with congregations looking to become more inclusive.

To further build a culture of keruv within the Conservative movement, the commission recommends the following:

- Expanded networking and training
- Development of a keruv blog and other on-line networking forums
- Keruv speakers and workshops at national and regional conventions
- Movement-wide keruv programming
- Consultants to assist congregations and organizations in developing keruv programming,
- Speakers to promote the movement's keruv initiatives
- Public relations campaign in the Jewish media and beyond
- Articles in CJ: Voices of Conservative/Masorti Judaism
- Organizational keruv committees to foster movement-wide initiatives and programming specific to those organizations

Among the most notable achievements of the LCCJ Keruv Commission has been the seamless teamwork that has existed among us. We recommend that the movement leverage this cooperation and charge the commission with the further development of the Conservative Keruv initiative.

Case Studies within the Conservative Movement

A Keruv Shabbat Experience

Program

Ma Tovv — How Lovely are Your Tents

An Open Discussion on Interdating, Dual Faith Families, and Jewish Continuity

Description

As Shabbat is central to our tradition, a Shabbat keruv event is important for engaging and welcoming interfaith families. A congregation held a Keruv Shabbat. This event was held on a Friday night as part of a congregation's Synaplex program. It began with a Kabbalat Shabbat and Ma'ariv service.

After services, participants enjoyed a Shabbat dinner. After Birkat Hamazon the rabbi spoke about keruv followed by breakout sessions at which attendees discussed their own feelings and offered support and counsel to others in their groups. One group studied biblical and rabbinic texts relating to intermarriage issues.

Third Thursday Keruv Programming

Program

Ongoing Discussion Group

Description

A Chicago-area congregation runs a series of keruv programs on the third Thursday of each month. The topics vary from Jewish home traditions to embracing your interfaith family to holidays and lifecycle events. Some programs are targeted at parents and grandparents of intermarried children and some are targeted at intermarried couples.

Innovative Use of Electronic Media

Program

Facebook Group

Description

Understanding that new media is a key in reaching out to young couples, a Chicago area keruv group was begun on Facebook to provide a networking forum for people whose lives have been touched by interfaith relationships. They make clear that the Facebook group is committed to helping people feel a part of the Conservative Jewish community in Chicago.

A Welcoming Brochure for Interfaith Families

Program

Information for Interfaith Families Brochure

Description

Several Conservative synagogues have developed brochures designed to provide information for interfaith families when they consider membership in their shuls. The brochures express a warm welcome to families that include a supportive non-Jewish spouse or partner. They also provide clear guidance on the halakhic standards and traditions of Conservative congregations as they relate to non-Jews in our communities.

A typical brochure begins by offering a warm welcome to interfaith families who may be considering membership at the synagogue. It then clarifies the synagogue's policies and traditions in areas ranging from b'nai mitzvah to conversion of children to baby namings. The brochure attempts to offer a warm membership invitation combined with a clear explanation of the congregation's commitment to halakhah.

A Personal Rabbinic Initiative to Welcome Non-Jews

Program

Third Thursdays at the Pub

Description

Even with educational programming and keruv groups, non-Jews may at times feel distanced from our congregations. They may feel uncomfortable at services and classes because of a lack of knowledge about Jewish tradition and ritual. It is important to find non-traditional portals of entry for supportive non-Jewish spouses.

One rabbi sensed the need for a different way to draw non-Jews in his community (primarily men) closer to the synagogue. He recognized that it was important to set a tone that communicates the congregation's commitment to keruv. He initiated a program that invites non-Jewish spouses to a non-threatening setting (a pub in this case) on the third Thursday of each month. Topics of these sessions range from football and politics to Torah and holidays. Participants report a much stronger connection to the community and enhanced commitment to the synagogue and Jewish life.

Focus on Parents and Grandparents of Intermarried/Interdating Children

Program

Married Out, Not Opted Out

Description

In all of our congregations, we have many people whose children and grandchildren are dating and marrying people who are not Jewish. They often have a need to express their feelings about their own personal situations and to learn from others who have faced similar issues. One synagogue has sponsored a monthly meeting to support those with concerns that their children and grandchildren may leave the tent of Judaism through intermarriage.

Each meeting is led by a competent and experienced facilitator. Participants learn how to cope with their anxieties, to avoid judgmental behavior, and to utilize supportive and appropriate language in their dealings with their children and grandchildren. The focus is to guide young interfaith couples to embrace Judaism in their lives. "Jews who intermarry are not making a declaration of secession from Judaism or the community," said the rabbi, who does individual counseling. "We do not want to lose them. Every Jew is precious, and we want to hold on to any Jews who want to retain their affiliation."

Putting Holidays at the Center of the Keruv Initiative

Program

The Jewish Holidays

Description

Jewish holidays are an important focus when building home and family observance. Non-Jews in our communities may be unfamiliar with the rituals, customs, and even holiday-specific foods. One congregation has focused its interfaith activities on making holidays more approachable by appreciating common themes and values.

The group meets four to six times a year and the sessions include a vegetarian Sukkot dinner, a Hanukkah party, and a second night Passover seder, all at the homes of congregants. There is also a Keruv Question and Answer session with the rabbi to address holidays and other issues.

Making GLBT Congregants Welcome

Program

Keshet Havurah/Outreach Program

Description

Our congregations welcome Jews irrespective of sexual orientation but few offer programs targeted at making the Gay Lesbian Bisexual and Transsexual community more welcome. For more than ten years, a shul- sponsored Keshet Havurah has helped GLBT members feel comfortable within a Conservative Jewish context.

The group organizes a Shabbat dinner on the fourth Friday of every month following Kabbalat Shabbat services. At each dinner, there is a speaker from the GLBT community. The group also works with the congregation's Chicken Soupers Program to offer kosher meals to people in the community with AIDS and other serious illnesses.

Engaging the Unaffiliated Community

Program

Interfaith Think Tank

Description

While there have been many initiatives to address the needs of the intermarried couples and parents of intermarried couples within our synagogues, a larger issue has been how to reach out to unaffiliated interfaith couples. One synagogue tried a very innovative approach in February 2008.

The keruv committee and the rabbi publicized a think tank program targeting unaffiliated intermarried couples in the community. They publicized the event widely and invited people to come and discuss their reasons for not affiliating. The objective was to learn from the unaffiliated and to answer questions about life at a Conservative synagogue.

Using Film as a Stimulus for Discussion

Program

Putting Yourself in the Pictures: Jewish Journeys 2008-2009

Description

Film provides a non-threatening medium for engaging participants in a discussion. In a keruv film series, movies are selected that either include explicit Jewish themes or are entirely secular. Each film has an emotional or plot component that could lead to a discussion of broader Jewish or keruv themes. At one synagogue, each film is followed by a discussion that may elicit intermarriage themes and topics. Suggested movies are: "Keeping the Faith," "I am David," "Life is a House," and "Chocolat." The series is primarily targeted at parents and grandparents of intermarried children.

Public Space Outreach in a Supermarket

Program

Passover in the Aisles

Description

There is also a need to reach out to unaffiliated people who might not consider Conservative synagogues. Retail locations represent unthreatening venues to meet and engage these unaffiliated people.

For one congregation, Passover is an ideal time to make informal contact with Jews who may be shopping the kosher for Pesach aisles. Representatives from the synagogue staff set a table next to the kosher food displays with haggadot, Passover recipes, a seder plate raffle, and holiday information. They talk to shoppers, answer questions, and invite shoppers to fill out cards for follow-up contact from the synagogue. The store is happy to provide space as it leads to increased sales and interest.