

At Kol Ami, non-Jews now participate fully

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Last fall, Kol Ami Northern Virginia Reconstructionist Community was preparing for the b'nai mitzvah of twins. Their father was Jewish, their mother was not, so Rabbi Gilah Langner planned things by the interfaith playbook.

In the Reconstructionist congregation, parents and grandparents of a bar or bat mitzvah are typically called up to the Torah to recite a blessing, according to Herb Levy, Kol Ami's community coordinator. But a non-Jewish parent is not.

In this case, though, the twins' mother wanted to join the rest of the family for the blessing. And after some discussion with congregants, Langner honored her wishes. The mother was called to the Torah, called an aliyah, and recited the blessing.

According to Levy, the story didn't end there.

"That instance raised the larger question of how comfortable or uncomfortable the non-Jewish spouses felt in Kol Ami," Levy says. "We have non-Jewish spouses who are virtually uninvolved, and we have non-Jewish parents who are so involved everyone forgets that they're not Jews."

That rethinking led to a new policy adopted this month. Now, at Kol Ami, "all members, both Jewish and non-Jewish, are welcome to participate fully in prayer services and all the rituals of those services," the policy reads. Non-Jewish members can now receive an aliyah; be counted in a minyan, or quorum; and read from the Torah.

Langner said the congregation's leadership surveyed a number of Reconstructionist communities about their practices to make non-Jews feel more welcome, but found that the idea of granting non-Jews full religious participation was largely off the table.

"We discovered an awful lot of pain and hurt that we didn't realize was there. It was submerged," Langner says. "And it came out a lot around b'nai mitzvahs and certain other times of the year, when non-Jewish members were feeling very accepted but nevertheless excluded or marginalized or overlooked and disregarded. It was really an eye-opener for us."

Support for the changes has been nearly unanimous in the congregation, she said.

"What do you do? Should we leave the non-Jewish parents sitting in the audience and not participating, not being able to fully celebrate their child's bar mitzvah when they've been contributing to the synagogue, and helping their child learn every step of the way?"

While the policy might blur the lines between Jewish and non-Jewish members at Kol Ami, Levy says it contains one proscription: No proselytizing from other religions.

Levy says the new policy might rub some the wrong way.

"It stretches the boundaries. I was raised Orthodox. And in the community I was raised in, they would look at what we've just done as heresy," Levy says. "It's not that we're seeking to distance ourselves from other Jews, but we're seeking to open our doors to the 58 percent of Jews who are marrying non-Jews. And that number is particularly high in Arlington and Alexandria, where our members are."

Langner says that as a result of the policy, the congregation wants to approach Jewish education with added depth. She doesn't simply want to offer ritual rights to non-Jews, she also wants them to understand the rituals' significance.

"We're going to be studying as a community and doing a lot more intensive exploration of prayers and services," Langner says. "If we're going to take non-Jewish members seriously on the religious level, they ought to know what the prayers are all about, on a really deep level."

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