

Central Conference of American Rabbis
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ccarnet.org

CCAR Creating Dialogue Instead of Debate Over Intermarriage Issues

At its recently concluded 119th Annual Convention, the Reform Rabbis of the Central Conference of American Rabbis initiated a new approach towards addressing the challenges and opportunities of intermarriage. Recognizing that Reform Rabbis are uniquely positioned to lead the Reform community and the entire American Jewish community to engaging all people – in-married and intermarried – in Jewish life, the CCAR is initiating programs to guide and support its members in the critical work of welcoming intermarried families into the Jewish community through the work of a specially appointed Task Force.

The time has come “where debating positions should be transformed into dialogue among rabbis and between rabbis and the members of their communities,” said Rabbi Peter Knobel, CCAR President, who explained that the initial program at the CCAR Convention provided rabbis with the chance to sit with colleagues en masse and share their experiences – free of judgment or argument – on intermarriage. The rabbis shared both successes and dilemmas they have faced in working with intermarried couples. “Please understand that this conversation is not about generating simplistic solutions. We are here to learn from each other.”

Rabbi Knobel explained that the key lesson that all came away with was that they are not alone in this issue. All rabbis deal with intermarriage in their communities and each must craft his/her own response to it. “We no longer want to make positions or pass resolutions which may divide us, but rather to work together to make the next generation of Jews,” Knobel said. “The goal is to provide Reform Rabbis with information, strategies, tools and guidelines that will enable them to lead more effectively as they face the myriad issues arising out of intermarriage.”

Knobel pointed out that the complexity of intermarriage issues demands that we not look just at the question of officiation alone, but also outreach, conversion and the involvement of non-Jewish family members in congregational life. “We have seen time and time again that a rabbi can successfully reach out to an intermarried family whether or not he/she officiates at the wedding. Whether a rabbi can or cannot officiate is a deeply personal matter. But here again, we are looking to change the dialogue: it is not whether a rabbi should/should not officiate, but rather if each rabbi decides that he/she can/cannot officiate. Regardless of that decision, all rabbis have opportunities to actively engage Jews in Jewish life whether unmarried or intermarried.”

The CCAR rabbis also heard from both Dr. Leonard Saxe (Professor of Jewish Community Research and Social Policy at Brandeis University) and Dr. Steven Cohen (Professor of Jewish Social Policy at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion). In addition to presenting information from their most recent research, both speakers challenged the Reform Rabbis to help Reform Jews engage more meaningfully in Jewish life.