

Patrilineal Descent and the Conservative Movement

By Julie Wiener

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When Reform rabbis voted in 1983 to accept as Jewish the children of Jewish fathers and gentile mothers, many leaders, Orthodox and Conservative, worried the policy would irrevocably divide the Jewish world.

They were concerned that it might create a class of people who believed they were Jews, but who other Jews could not recognize as such--and thus could not marry or include in ritual acts in which participants must be Jewish.

A generation later, many--including Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg, who in 1985 wrote a *Moment* magazine essay entitled "Will There Be One Jewish People in the Year 2000?"--believe that the Jewish community has in fact split.

But whatever chasm has emerged is less Reform Jews versus everyone else than it is Orthodox Jews versus everyone else.

While the Conservative movement sided with the Orthodox on patrilineal descent -- and continues to adhere to traditional "Who is a Jew" definitions--patrilineal descent has not divided Conservative and Reform Jews greatly, at least not recently.

In fact, whereas a decade ago the Conservative movement publicly affirmed its policy of not allowing "patrilineal" Jews into its Ramah camps without a conversion, today most Conservative leaders I contacted about this issue seemed eager to downplay the issue's importance and to emphasize their commitment to reaching out to (and converting), rather than excluding, "patrilineal" Jews.

That may be because the Conservative movement--whose leaders long argued that it was impossible to welcome the intermarried without condoning intermarriage--is making a greater effort these days to reach out to interfaith families. It may also be because, regardless of movement policies, rank-and-file Conservative Jews have never been particularly rigid about the traditional definitions. A 1986 study done by

sociologist Steven M. Cohen found that only 10 percent of Conservative Jews were both strongly opposed to their children marrying "patrilineal" Jews and upset with Reform rabbis for advancing the new view of "who is a Jew."

To be sure, patrilineal descent has created some dilemmas for Conservative rabbis and institutions, particularly when families with a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother want to enroll their child in a Conservative [Hebrew](#) school or in one of the movement's Ramah camps and don't realize that, unlike Reform, the movement does not recognize the child as Jewish.

Some families have found Conservative requirements of conversion off-putting-- particularly when they're communicated in an insensitive manner. "I can't tell you how many times people have to come to me and said they've been accepted to a religious school in another movement and then a year before the [bar mitzvah](#) they were told, 'Oh, by the way you're not Jewish'," says Rabbi Robert Levine of [Congregation Rodeph Sholom](#), which is Reform.

Nonetheless, many Conservative rabbis insist that their conversion requirements pose little barrier, especially when applied to infants and children, for whom conversion to Judaism is very simple.

"What we require is that both parents be on board, obviously, and that both agree to the child being raised and educated as a Jew; that they assure us there will be no religious ambiguity in the house," says Rabbi Gordon Tucker of [Temple Israel Center of White Plains](#), who says he's performed "a reasonable number" of conversions for children and infants.

The process has been fairly conflict-free, Rabbi Tucker says, noting that "in the overwhelming majority of cases, they say 'OK, tell us what we have to do.' It helps that we have a [mikveh](#) in the [shul](#), and I can go down the hall and show them what's involved."

Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, the executive director of the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly, argues that the Conservative requirement that children of gentile mothers and Jewish fathers undergo a conversion in order to be considered

Jewish, is not all that different from the Reform movement's saying that acceptance of such children is contingent upon "appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people."

"The Conservative movement is also asking for public affirmation of Judaism," explains Rabbi Schonfeld. "The public affirmation that we're asking for is conversion, with mikveh. It's two different affirmations." Rabbi Charles Simon, executive director of the Conservative movement's [Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs](#)--long an advocate for welcoming interfaith families--says that most Conservative synagogues "handle this well," welcoming "patrilineal" children up until about age 10, then explaining "they need to go to the mikveh before they can get a bar mitzvah date."

Karen Kushner, executive director of the [Jewish Welcome Network](#), a San Francisco group that consults with Jewish institutions that wish to be more inclusive, says, "What I like to encourage them to do is take the entire class to the mikveh and make it an affirmation for those who have Jewish mothers and serve as a conversion for the children of the Jewish fathers, so they don't feel singled out."

The situation is more complicated for "patrilineal" adults, both because adult conversion to Judaism is a more involved process than child or infant conversion, and because people who have grown up considering themselves Jewish often feel insulted to have anyone even gently question their status.

"There's a struggle to develop appropriate rhetoric," says Rabbi Simon. "Often [Conservative rabbis] say, you are Jewish but there is one technicality."

"The Conservative response to patrilineal descent is compassionate and understanding, not rejecting," he adds, noting that "a person who has been raised Jewish all his or her life and is Jewishly knowledgeable but hasn't gone to the mikveh would have to go through a symbolic conversion. They wouldn't have to study 40 weeks. We would say this is a technicality and would take care of it as quickly as possible."