

At the very end of September, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College formalized a policy change that rocked the institutional Jewish world. President Deborah Waxman announced that the school would begin graduating rabbis who were in committed partnerships with people who are not Jewish.

This announcement makes RRC the first rabbinical school of a mainstream Jewish denomination to accept and graduate students in relationships with non-Jews. Up until this point, if someone wanted to be a rabbi, but s/he were in a committed relationship with someone who was not Jewish, the partner had to convert, or rabbinical studies were not an option.

In discussing the reason for the change, Dr. Waxman noted: “We have concluded that the status of a rabbinical student’s partner is not a reliable measure of the student’s commitment to Judaism—or lack thereof. Nor does it undermine their passion for creating meaningful Judaism and bringing us closer to a just world.” She also promised: “We have strengthened our admissions standards on reviewing an applicant’s commitment to Jewish continuity in their personal, familial and communal life.”

The Reconstructionist movement effectively acknowledges that intermarried Jewish families can be just as Jewishly committed as endogamous Jewish families. This is, of course, not particularly news at TBI, where many of our highly committed member families are intermarried.

It does, however, introduce an interesting question for the Reconstructionist movement. How does the school determine someone’s “commitment to Jewish continuity in their personal, familial and communal life”?

How do any of us, for that matter?

We soon will be celebrating Hanukkah, which commemorates a battle between ancient Greek cultural domination and the Jews who wanted to hang on to their particularist Jewish traditions. The Jews who were zealous in their love of tradition won the day with Hanukkah, preserving the rights to practice Shabbat, kashrut, maintain the sanctity of the holy Temple, and circumcise their sons. Yet, there is a great irony about Hanukkah, sandwiched here in the US between Thanksgiving and Christmas. It began as a victory against a larger cultural hegemony, and today it has been distorted into “the Jewish Christmas.” I suspect the Maccabees would disapprove.

Of course, the glory of the Reconstructionist movement is that we have always celebrated the tension of living within two civilizations. As the recent policy change reflects, the essential markers of Judaism may be a moving target. In light of the RRC’s new policy, and in our upcoming celebrations of Hanukkah, I hope we can all examine how our “commitment to Jewish continuity” might play out, in our own “personal, familial and communal lives.” I wish us all rich conversations!