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[De](#)

[Home](#) > > [Current Web Magazine Issue](#)

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[RESOURCE PAGES](#)

[CURRENT WEB MAGAZINE ISSUE](#)

[ARTICLE ARCHIVE](#)

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[Print entire issue](#)

Web Magazine

Dealing with Non-Jewish Relatives

Issue 189: August 15, 2006

FEATURED ARTICLES



A Grandmother's Gift

By **Ellen S. Glazer**

A powerful lesson is learned when a devout Catholic grandmother gives her Jewish granddaughter a Star of David.

[Read More](#)

When a Child Converts

By **Rabbi Diane Cohen**

What do you do if your child chooses Jesus?

[Read More](#)



Homecomings

By **Leona Junguzza**

A family of lapsed Jehovah's Witnesses learns to adjust when its matriarch converts to Judaism.

[Read More](#)

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

More Articles on [Dealing with Non-Jewish Relatives](#)

[Are We Still an Interfaith Family?](#)

By **Esther Shchory**



She married an Israeli, lives in Israel and goes to synagogue... so why does her mom still invite her over for Christmas?

[Making the Cut](#)



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Password:

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By Julie Wiener



Many non-Jewish families wonder why Jews celebrate a baby's pain--and why a bris precludes a baptism.

From Our Article Archives



[Living Well in the Extended Interfaith Family](#)

By Karen Kushner

An experienced outreach professional shares her tips on how to handle non-Jewish relatives.

News and Opinion

[Victim Hailed as Dedicated Convert](#)

By Rebecca Spence

Outreach to interfaith families was only one of the many achievements of Pam Waechter, who died in last month's shooting at the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle.

[Lessons in Jewish Ways](#)

By Frances Grandy Taylor



A new program in Connecticut teaches non-Jewish mamas how to make a Jewish home.

[Dad, Daughter, Dog and a Talk about God](#)

By Jim Keen



Wondering what God looks like? Ask a nine-year-old.

[Rocking the Cradle: A Mid-Life Conversion Story](#)

By Carol Weiss Rubel



The Catholic daughter of an interfaith marriage loses her faith and discovers Judaism.

Arts and Entertainment



[Meeting the Jewish Parents, Spanish-Style](#)

By Michael Fox

A Jewish woman is in love with a Palestinian man. Need we say more?

[Printer Fr](#)



A Grandmother's Gift

By Ellen S. Glazer

My young niece, Jackie, wears a diamond Star of David around her neck, a birthday present from her grandmother. Although I might otherwise be uncomfortable with a six-year-old wearing diamonds, Jackie's necklace deeply moves me and other members of our family. This is because it came not from her Grandma Helen, my exuberantly Jewish stepmother, but rather from Rose, her devout, Italian Catholic grandmother. Rose's gift to Jackie was a gift to our entire family--and, from my perspective, to other Jews as well.

Helen tells me of her amazement: "I don't think I could do it. I could never buy one of my grandchildren a cross." Her words prompt me to think of what I would do if I found myself in a similar situation: How would I react if I had a Christian grandchild? The answer, I'll admit, is not well. Helen couldn't buy one of her grandchildren a cross. I couldn't do it either. Thinking about Rose, a recent widow in her 80s, walking into a jewelry store and asking to see Stars of David awes me. Her gift has brought home to me in a very profound way what it means for "the other side of the family" when children are Jews in an interfaith home.

I remember attending a Bar Mitzvah service of the third and youngest son of an interfaith couple. The older two boys had become bar mitzvahs, but at another synagogue. Hence, the rabbi who worked with Danny, the third b'nai mitzah, was new to the family. During the service, she turned to Danny's Christian mom and her extended family, and thanked them. She thanked them for their gift. She thanked them for so generously and supportively giving Danny to the Jewish people.

I know there are some people who say, "It doesn't matter to me" or "As long as he has a religion, I don't care what it is," or "As long as there are good values in the home." This may be true for them, but for many people, it *does* matter. No doubt there are countless Christian grandparents who have had to keep their feelings to themselves as they attended brides, naming ceremonies and Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. My guess is that they say to themselves what my friend, Audrey, tells me she says to herself as she prepares to attend her second son's wedding. Like her older son, her middle boy will be married in a Catholic Church. Audrey will be there with her elderly observant Jewish parents and with her ex-husband and his family, all of whom are Jewish. "What I am I going to do?" Audrey says, "I can either celebrate with my children or lose them. So I celebrate."

I admire Audrey and hope that I could react and act as she does. It would be a tall order, but as Audrey says, there is no other choice. This, to me, seems very different than Grandma Rose's situation with Jackie. Yes, she had to attend Jackie's naming ceremony and family Hanukkah and Passover celebrations. These are "going along" kinds of things--very different than actively

seeking and buying and giving a Star of David.

At six, Jackie is too young to have an understanding of the meaning of her grandmother's gift. She knows the necklace is "special" because people are making a small fuss about it. I suspect that she thinks the fuss is because it cost a lot and is so beautiful. This is true, in a sense, but it will take many years for Jackie to fully comprehend the extraordinary meaning of her grandmother's gift.

"Diamonds are forever." By going out and seeking a diamond Star of David, Rose made several statements to her family, to herself, to other Jews and most of all, to Jackie. By giving a beautiful gift intended to be prominently displayed and to last forever, she was saying, "I accept, embrace and rejoice in my granddaughter's Jewish identity. " I hope that this courageous and generous woman will be alive and well seven years from now when Jackie becomes a Bat Mitzvah. I like to think that Jackie will still proudly wear her Star of David necklace and that she will have begun to appreciate what a remarkable gift it was.

What do *you* think? [Join The Discussion](#)



Ellen S. Glazer is a clinical social worker in private practice in Newton, Massachusetts. Her work focuses on infertility, adoption, pregnancy loss and parenting after infertility. She is the author or co-author of six books, the most recent being [Having Your Baby Through Egg Donation](#).

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When a Child Converts

By Rabbi Diane Cohen

Eleven years ago, my youngest son, Chuck, was married in the church where his bride had been raised. But it was not an intermarriage. Months before the wedding, he informed me that he had accepted Jesus as his personal savior. At the age of 20, he had become convinced that one could be both Jewish and Christian.

Two years later, his middle brother, Josh, called me to tell me that Chuck had given him the great gift of understanding Jesus' role in his life, and he, too, had become a Christian.

My eldest son, Scott, and I spoke at length about this second conversion. Scott, at 25, cried and told me he felt like an only child.

The journey from those two moments in our family's story to today has been a long, difficult one. What do you say when your son shows you a picture of a young Chinese man and announces, "I brought him to Jesus, Mom"? If I were Christian, the answer would be easy. But as a rabbi, I was at a loss--do I say "mazel tov"? Congratulations? Job well done?

Do I turn away from my sons, behave as though they are truly lost to me, as many families did generations ago? Do I avoid talking to them on the phone, display no interest in their lives? Do I acknowledge wedding anniversaries? And what--oh what--do I do when the children come? How do I, as a rabbi, someone whose profession is defined by love of Judaism and the commitment to transmit Jewish living to future generations--how do I look on a child born to my son but into a Christian home?

I looked for answers but could find none. My colleagues could not imagine what help to offer me. I sought theological responses from professors and received inadequate responses. I felt unbearably alone, abandoned by my children and unsupported by my colleagues. It was clear that I would have to struggle through this uncharted territory by myself.

To be honest, I didn't even know what kind of support I wanted. But those I spoke to tried to find solutions to the problem. In retrospect, all I wanted was for someone to listen and to commiserate. Ask me how it felt. Offer pastoral guidance. None came.

After several months of tense conversations with my youngest, the newlywed, a bus was bombed in Gaza, and one of the fatalities was the daughter of a physician in New Jersey. I remember having just gotten off the phone with Chuck when I heard the stunning news. And I wept as I

realized that the life of that family had been forever changed. As I told my colleagues that night, there are losses and there are Losses. I can mourn my son's decision, but I can still pick up the phone and talk to him. That young woman would never be coming home, and I simply could not equate my loss with her family's.

In the years that have passed, my children and I, my two younger sons and their older brother, have all made peace with the decisions that had been so hurtful. I am grateful every time one of my sons tells me he's had a long talk with one of his brothers about "stuff"--business issues, child rearing, just touching base. I am grateful when my children call just to talk, grateful that the lines of communication have remained open. I have learned that, like in many families fractured by political choices, there are some things that can't be discussed. My sons will tell me that they are preparing a sermon or to teach Sunday school, and I have approached these activities without getting too close to the details. I can't. Parents have an option--to focus on the choice or to focus on the child. The first option is destructive, the second is healing. There are too many blessings to be lost in my life if I focus on the choice rather than on the child.

Oh, and the grandchildren? The lights of my life. All of them, the Christian ones and the new Jewish one. I simply cannot be angry or resentful to a child who did not ask to be born into a particular family. My little ones did not make the choice--their father did. And personally, there is no greater blessing than when a small child climbs into your lap and says, "I love you, Bubbie."

In the years since I shared my sons' conversion stories, I have been put in touch with other families currently facing the trauma I have already been through. I've considered it a privilege to offer a hand to them, to listen to them, to share my story and assure them that there is healing down the road. While our parents' network is still small, I hope someday to find enough families (because I have no doubt that they are out there) to help make local connections. I am tentatively calling my group [Parent2Parent](#). I invite any parent whose son or daughter has converted out of Judaism to contact me at RavDina@gmail.com. I can offer no real answers, only the knowledge that you are not alone. And that can make all the difference in the world.

What do you think?

[Join The Discussion](#)



Rabbi Diane Cohen was ordained in 1993 by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. She has held pulpits in a variety of communities in the northeast and the mid-south, and is currently on hiatus, caring for her newest granddaughter.

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Homecomings

By Leona Junguzza

My journey to Judaism has been a lifelong search for my spiritual home, one that I am grateful my three daughters, brought up as Jehovah's Witnesses, have been able to accept.

My parents raised me in the Eastern Orthodox religion. I always remember feeling like there was something missing. My maternal grandparents escaped from Czechoslovakia at a time when pogroms were raging through Eastern Europe. Were they Jews? Had they falsely raised my parents to believe they were Christians? I probably will never know for certain, yet as I searched for a religion that felt comfortable for me, studying and examining many religions--including Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, Buddhism and various forms of Christianity--none of them felt quite right.

Several years ago, I focused on Judaism because one of the strongest reasons I had spent time with Jehovah's Witnesses was their attentiveness to the Hebrew Scriptures. The Hebrew Bible was a magnet drawing me in, and so I decided to investigate Judaism. As soon as I began to learn about it, I sensed a rightness, a feeling of belonging, and as I continued to study and attend Jewish services my certainty grew. Studying with a small group led by a rabbi, my love for what I was learning gradually led me to the decision to convert. However, I didn't feel as if I were converting, but rather returning--that Judaism was my real home. On December 23, 2004, I met with the tribunal of rabbis and underwent immersion in the mikvah, the ritual bath. Never before had I experienced such intense emotion as I did that day: I had come home!

Chris, my significant other, has been a distanced Jew for most of his life, so when we began dating I was unaware of his background. After two months of dating I realized how important he was becoming to me and told him we needed to have a serious talk. I explained my commitment to Judaism and my concern about his feelings. His reply, "Leona, I'm a Jew," stunned me. His father had changed his last name and given his children Christian-sounding names, hoping to protect them from persecution. Chris' attendance at services was minimal. When he married, it was not to a Jew, which further removed him from mainstream Judaism. Although both his sons became Bar Mitzvah, Chris had never done so. He has been very supportive of my journey, but my "brand" of Judaism--Reform--is very different from his, which is secular, and he is a bit cautious. Chris still follows the pattern of his life, while I, as a new convert, have a heightened awareness of my spiritual needs, which include becoming an active part of a spiritual community.

My own adult children have watched and wondered what on earth I was doing! They had been raised as Jehovah's Witnesses, although all of them left that denomination long ago. Sadly, not

one of them has yet found a spiritual home. The pain of disfellowshipping (similar to shunning) they experienced when they left the Jehovah's Witnesses, each in her own time, was very great, and the loss of longtime friends left wounds that have been slow to heal. Because religion was such a large part of our lives, we have had very open discussions about my current path. Perhaps the most difficult discussion was when "the" question was asked: How can you deny that Jesus is the Messiah? Since we had studied the scriptures together as a family, argued about them and discussed them often, I was able to refer to sections of the Hebrew scriptures to help them understand my conviction. When I reassured them that I still view Jesus as a prophet, they became less anxious. I had been dreading that question, yet when it came I was ready, and so were they.

My children also have a familiarity with the Hebrew calendar, the festivals and celebrations, which greatly aided their acceptance of my conversion and its impact on them. This impact has been the greatest around the holidays. Since my three daughters are all adults and not living at home, I was hopeful we could work together to solve the holiday problem. Thankfully, so far we have been successful. We are all very close and my active involvement in Judaism has strengthened our bond. I believe the primary reason is their very enthusiastic involvement in my celebration of holidays: they have attended them all with a willing-to-learn attitude.

The first family holiday in my home was Purim. We all dressed in costumes, had a wonderful feast beginning with dessert, and played games as I told the story of Purim. During the telling, everyone booed loudly using their noisemakers at the mention of Haman's name. I loved every minute of it, as did all the children and grandchildren.

My children and grandchildren have joined Chris, his family, and me for the Passover seder twice now. Our first seder together was very stressful. I worried about everything--from the food, to the seating arrangement, to the order of the meal. While I had attended Passover celebrations at friends' homes, I had never hosted one. The second year was much better as we used an unusual hagaddah (book telling the story of the Israelites' escape from slavery in Egypt)--*A Different Night* by David Dishon and Noam Zion. It is a family participation guide that allowed us to design our own very special and unique seder meal. While I still spent lots of time cooking, planning and stressing, we had a wonderful time. Everyone--even my granddaughter Jenna who was only four years old--took part, read or said prayers, and ate so much we could hardly move.

Chris and I also wanted to share Yom Kippur, the most solemn of holidays, with both of our families. Yom Kippur concludes several days of praying, meditation and reflection on the previous year and a day of fasting to repent for transgressions committed during that year. We debated whether to take everyone out for Chinese food after services in the evening but decided to bring in the food and have our families back to our home. Only my youngest daughter was able to attend services with us, but perhaps next year the others will join us, at least for a while. There were thirteen of us at dinner; we spoke about the significance of the High Holidays and then we let the chopsticks fly.

This past winter we celebrated only Hanukkah, not Christmas. Chris's sons, eighteen and twenty-one, were a little dismayed, since they had grown up celebrating both Christmas and Hanukkah. Still, they joined us for a traditional meal of brisket, latkes, plenty of gelt and presents all around. The grandchildren helped make jelly doughnuts for dessert and everyone gobbled them up. Isn't it amazing how food is so central to all our celebrations?

What to do about the Christian holidays presented a concern. My home has always been the traditional holiday location. As my girls grew up and moved away, they mostly came home for the holidays. Would they feel abandoned? Now they are parts of extended families as well, and holidays are divided amongst them. After discussions with my rabbi, I reached a comfortable decision. While I would no longer host Christmas or Easter at my home, this didn't mean I had to close the door on being with my children, grandchildren or extended family. My daughters are developing their own traditions and celebrating their holidays in their own unique ways. They invite me to their homes for these celebrations and, of course, we all have the holiday of Thanksgiving in common.

I no longer need all the containers filled with holiday decorations and ornaments collected over the years. My daughters will have those to keep, along with their associated memories. And I now have the benefit of added storage space! Blending our celebrations and our faiths has added new dimensions to all of our lives. All of us, in a way, have come home.

What do *you* think? [Join The Discussion](#)



Leona Junguzza is the program coordinator for Health Management Resources in Norwood, Massachusetts, and has recently converted to Judaism. She shares the joy of life with Chris, her significant other, three daughters, five grandchildren and one adorable dog, Maxie.

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Are We Still an Interfaith Family?

By Esther Shchory

Being interfaith in Israel has a strange dissonance. Most of the time the fact that I have Christian relatives seems irrelevant to my life. We go to synagogue most Fridays and our year is played out to the rhythm of the Jewish calendar. Then we approach the 24th of December and my mother asks when my children will be free to come and decorate the tree. I smile and flick through my diary but inside lurks the question why? Just like me she keeps kosher, eats matzah on Passover and tries to fast on Yom Kippur. Our religion is celebrated in a synagogue, not a church. We have finally realized the destiny that I always thought she wanted for our family. So why does she still feel connected to the English-Christian calendar and yearn to decorate a tree at Christmas?

I grew up having parents who lived in different countries. My father, a Sephardic (non-European) Jew, lived in Israel. My mother, who was hesitant about marriage or living in Israel, lived in England. I grew up in England with my grandmother, who regularly attended the Church of England, and my mother, who had little patience for Christianity and rejected organized religion.



Despite this my mother insisted that I be raised in the religion of my father, even though she had very little idea of the day-to-day business of being Jewish. My Jewish education consisted of "Fiddler on the Roof," Israeli folks songs, the Old Testament, and the Holocaust.

Of course I wasn't totally isolated from my grandmother's religion. My local school had started its career as part of the Church of England, which ensured that morning assembly was heavy on the hymns, grace was said before meals and Christmas was celebrated with a carol concert at the parish church. We even had an occasional visit by the vicar.

In later years many of my Jewish educators have looked aghast at such a scenario, but my teachers were aware I was Jewish, were very respectful of this fact and even helped me to identify the elements of our studies most relevant to Judaism. And though they offered to let me opt out of certain activities, they made no comment when I decided that my Jewish identity was strong enough not to be adversely affected by attending them.

By the time I was ten I had convinced my mother that I must meet my father for the first time and

when we visited him in Israel I discovered that I had more than forty first cousins--Jewish cousins. We shared in Shabbat (Sabbath) celebrations and made family visits to the synagogue. I reveled in the Jewish experience and the vitality of being Israeli--and, of course, finally getting to know my father.

Before my mother and I returned to England my parents had decided to get married and my father came to live with us. Although my father was a secular kibbutznik he came from an Orthodox family and with his guidance our daily life and yearly calendar became more Jewish. We still celebrated the Christian holidays for my Christian grandmother who lived with us, but we also started to celebrate Jewish holidays and visited synagogue where I was shaken to discover that most other Jews did not consider me Jewish. I was aching to dive into my Jewish heritage, but the synagogue board regarded us with a certain detachment and declared that my father and I could join, but my mother could not. To make matters worse, the synagogue provided no outreach or adult education programs, so as I was enjoying Sunday school with other congregants' children my mother was struggling to learn Hebrew in a university class with two nuns and a priest. Suddenly, the mother who had always tried to nurture my Jewish soul was avoiding the synagogue and finding our Jewish experiences painful.

At secular secondary (high) school my Jewish identity also suffered a few knocks and bruises. Although my non-Jewish friends begged to visit on Friday to join our celebrations and partake of my father's homemade challah (Shabbat bread), my classmates from Jewish studies weren't so enthusiastic. They felt I was too voluble about Israel, too willing to tell everyone I was Jewish, basically too proud of being an Israeli Jew!



For a while these reactions caused me great self-doubt. At the age of seventeen I sat at a memorial service surveying my surroundings and considering that Christianity was quite pleasant--the lovely stained-glass windows, the beautiful songs, the calm atmosphere. I began to wonder if being Jewish was really worth it. Wouldn't it just be easier to let go and be Christian like everyone else? As we came to "For Jesus Christ's sake" at the end of the prayer I understood that though the two religions had a lot in common, I couldn't join in. I also realized that most people I met would not be as supportive of my Jewish identity as my first teachers. Being half-Israeli complicated the situation even further.

Whether as an escape or to look for an answer I decided to visit Israel for three months. After ten months I returned home to announce I had volunteered to do military service and was making 'aliyah' (immigrating to Israel). I had discovered a home where living at a Jewish pace of life is not a constant struggle against the stream and even people who don't consider me Jewish find it quite unremarkable that I have a Jewish way of life--celebrating the holidays, going to synagogue on Friday, not mixing milk or meat. Despite the fact that at times life in Israel can be the cause of hair-ripping frustration, I felt more free to be myself and less of an alien there.

My parents were a little shocked at my decision, but when I found myself a husband on an army base they gave in to the inevitable and moved to Israel to be closer to any future grandchildren.

Once settled in Israel I still desired to officially become a Jew but felt unable to reconcile certain questions of equality and pluralism with an Orthodox conversion. I found my place in the Reform movement where I was accepted as a Jew under patrilineal descent after a course of study to affirm my Jewish identity.

And now my mother wants a Christmas tree and presents. I thought I had finished with being different, with celebrations that most people don't understand. In my house there are no Christmas decorations, except for the many cards sent by our Christian friends. I only want to be concerned with Hanukkah traditions, such as spinning tops and eating doughnuts, like my neighbors.

I take a deep breath and examine the situation rationally. I am Jewish, but I also believe in pluralism, which means I can accept my mother's desire for a secular Christmas without compromising my own beliefs. I can accept that even in Israel she still wants us to be an interfaith family.

What do *you* think? [Join The Discussion](#)



Esther Shchory lives in Israel and is married to an Israeli who gave her an unpronounceable surname and two beautiful children. They are members on their local Reform synagogue, where Esther is a board member and active volunteer. She is a stay-at-home mother and also works part-time from home. Her parents live close by.

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Making The Cut

By Julie Wiener

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In my family, boys are so rare as to be exotic.

I have one “full” sister, four half-sisters and a stepsister (I did have a stepbrother, but have not been in touch with him since his father and my mother divorced). So far, I have two nieces and, God willing, in a few weeks I will give birth to my second daughter--unless ultrasound technology has completely tricked us.

So it's not surprising that my brit milah experience is quite limited. And while I have no problem with brises, I'm relieved that my Catholic husband and I will likely never have to decide whether or not to host one. Joe, an animal-loving vegetarian who was traumatized when we neutered our pet cat years ago, can't stand the idea of hurting an infant, whereas I find the moment of pain minor compared to the risk of a Jewish boy growing up feeling he does not belong in the larger Jewish community--not to mention the prospect of having to undergo a far more painful circumcision later in life.

We're not alone in our disagreement. Circumcision is an emotional issue that often drives a wedge between spouses or at least reveals existing fissures. Many gentiles are mystified when Jewish relatives who ignore many other mitzvot suddenly become passionate and uncompromising defenders of this ancient ritual, one that can seem as primitive as animal sacrifice.

“We've had people call us and say, 'My husband agreed to raise the child Jewish, I'm due next week and when I talked to him about the brit, he said, What does circumcision have to do with raising the child Jewish?’” said Paul Golin, associate executive director of the Jewish Outreach Institute, an organization that seeks to help the Jewish community welcome and fully embrace all members of interfaith families into Jewish life. (Full disclosure: I'm on the women's advisory board.)

Laura Morris, a non-practicing Catholic, said she and her Jewish husband were taken aback two years ago when she was pregnant and her secular in-laws started talking about brit.

“They had never expressed any particular opinions about their religion,” she said. “We weren't married in a Jewish ceremony. But all of a sudden when it became clear that we were expecting a boy, they expressed the importance to them of having a brit. It came out of left field.”

For the Morrises, who had already been planning on circumcising their son, the brit was a surprise but a non-issue. The two read up on brit milah, decided they felt comfortable with it and easily found a willing mohel, even though many mohels refuse to perform a brit on the child of a gentile mother.

But for many other couples, the brit--if not the circumcision itself--becomes a battleground and one in which Jewish tradition emerges as the loser. Jessica, who was raised in a Conservative Jewish home, said her and her Greek Orthodox husband's decision two years ago not to have a brit for their son, "was the beginning of the end for me--in this phase of my life at least--in actively trying to have a Jewish family."

Although her husband was comfortable with the circumcision, Jessica felt like a brit--with its message of Jewish covenant--would insult her in-laws, who were already troubled by the fact that their grandson would not be baptized.

"At the moment when your marriage is really the most a union--to say [the child is] not yours, it's mine, just seemed like not something to say," she said. The couple did, however, have their son circumcised in the hospital.

"I tried to think appropriate thoughts [during the circumcision], but there are no appropriate thoughts when the ceremony is stripped from the operation," Jessica said, a little sadly.

Another family I know, in which the father is Jewish and the mother is not, took the opposite approach: they skipped the circumcision altogether, but held a Jewish naming ceremony for their son, something they said "forced us out of mainstream Judaism" and which, unfortunately, led to tensions with the baby's Jewish grandmother.

However, among people I've spoken with, circumcision without a brit seems the more common route, a way to preserve the child's future Jewish options without it being a public affair. Of course this is not a possibility for those who object to all aspects of the foreskin removal, but it works for those who simply find it creepy to have a crowd watching or who fear a public Jewish ceremony will spur the other side of the family to demand a baptism.

But for JOI's Golin, the hospital circumcision can simply be a way of procrastinating on the decision of how to raise the children.

"A lot of interfaith couples are practicing conflict avoidance," he said, adding that "for us in the Jewish community, that's kind of a sad loss because the kids get nothing in a lot of ways."

Golin wonders if the Jewish community should be doing more to educate about the positive aspects of a brit, showing how it can be an opportunity. For example, he pointed out that if the parents want children with gentile mothers to be raised Jewish, a brit can be combined with a conversion--a simple procedure that enables families to sidestep "who is a Jew" difficulties and is much easier than undergoing a conversion later in life.

Although Laura Morris didn't convert her son to Judaism at the brit, she saw the ceremony as saying he "has an agreement to consider being Jewish."

“I feel making that decision [to have a brit] has made me far more interested in raising our son Jewish,” she said.

What do *you* think? [Join The Discussion](#)



Julie Wiener's column on intermarried life appears in the *The Jewish Week* the third week of the month. You can reach her at julie.inthemix@gmail.com.

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Living Well in the Extended Interfaith Family

By Karen Kushner

Being with our family is supposed to be comfortable. It may not be the most stimulating, or the most perfect, but we know what to expect, right? The usual turkey dinner, Aunt Carol's kugel, Uncle Arnie's jokes, and a flute recital by cousin Julia. Private jokes and reminiscences, tolerance for idiosyncrasies that are so very familiar. But this year is different. New people are coming. Our son or daughter (our niece or nephew or cousin) has married someone . . . different.

We are upset, our thoughts are racing. This is not the future we fantasized about. We knew the younger generation would get married and bring their spouses to holiday celebrations, but we had pictured it differently. We expected them to be like us, we thought their recipes would be just like ours, that they would laugh at our jokes, enjoy our stories, understand our language. They would come from a family just like ours. They would create another generation, just like us.

Now we feel self-conscious. Will he look at us like we are weird? Will she think I have no style? No class? No intelligence? What do we do now? Explain why we do what we do? Talk about what Jewish culture is? Is it insulting to explain things? Maybe it is better not to offer to clarify? If I don't explain, isn't that unwelcoming? She went to an Introduction to Judaism course, maybe she knows more than I do! I haven't taken a class since I was twelve.

No matter what alternative you choose, it seems either inauthentic or rude or awkward. You expected to be sharing the cooking for a seder with daughters-in-law and nephews' wives, building a sukkah, wooden hut, with sons-in-law and nieces' husbands, watching crowds of children searching for the afikoman. Crowds of Jewish children! Now all this seems in jeopardy.

Unexpected change can make people behave in uncharacteristic ways. You may be irritated, resentful, angry. You can't help wanting things to be different, to be the way they were. You may tell jokes about the superiority of Jews, the ineptness of non-Jews. You use many more Yiddish expressions, describe your boss as having a "goyisheh kopf." You use all the Hebrew words you know in your conversations.

When your dreams about the Jewish future of your family go up in smoke, you are left lost and confused. The old rules are gone, but what are the new rules? Your role and your place in this changed family are not on any map you've seen. How do you make someone new part of the family? How do you make someone different a member of the clan! How will your family ever feel comfortable again? What do you do now that there are two religions in one family?

I know you have all read statistics that intermarriage rates are 50 percent and that this is the end of the Jewish people, but these statistics ignore the many interfaith couples that raise Jewish children. Many non-Jewish spouses are working hard to create Jewish children. These parents take their Jewish parenting seriously, often learning side by side with their children and going to adult classes. They send a clear message to their children that Jewish education is important. They become learned and many find that raising Jewish children leads them to become a Jew. They are better "Jewish" parents than many born Jews whose ambivalence about being Jewish is unresolved and who drop off their children for an education that they take no interest in and give no time to for themselves.

I can't give you hard and fast rules to ensure that the non-Jews in your family will make this choice, but I can give you some rules towards making sure your family relationships don't preclude that from happening!

1. As you would a completely new acquaintance, get to know this new generation of adults in your family. You may think that you know your family members because you have seen them at family events for years, but you may be surprised to learn their interests and perspectives. Introduce yourself to them. Allow them to meet you and be surprised by your uniqueness. This is the most welcoming thing you can do.

2. Accept the non-Jewish partners for who they are. Pushing people to be different creates resistance to change. People change most when they feel respected and accepted.

3. Give explanations if they want them. Give them opportunities to display their Jewish knowledge if they want to. Find out just what they do want and do your best to make them comfortable. Their comfort will make you comfortable.

4. Discover their good qualities and tell them why you appreciate them, with comments like "You are such an attentive father," or "You are such a hard worker." After all, if your relatives choose to love and spend the rest of their lives with these people, then there must be something very special about them.

5. Get rid of your assumptions about Christianity, or Islam or Buddhism, and ask lots of questions. Avoid thinking and speaking in stereotypes. This means you have to explore the meaning and purpose of religion. Create a climate where they can be equally curious about Judaism. Talking to them will make you clearer on your own connections to Judaism.

6. Be scrupulously honest and never pretend to be or feel what you do not. Let this be true especially for your feelings for Judaism. Let them know why it is important to you. If you have never talked about it before or if you are discovering its importance for the first time, as you see the younger generation moving away from Judaism, that's okay. Just talk about it as it speaks to you. "I get enraged when I read in the newspaper . . ." "I worry about the rise of anti-Semitism when . . ." Let them hear how Judaism works in your life and why it has an important place FOR YOU.

7. Be truthful about your doubts and complaints about Judaism. It is okay to say, "I wish some of this sexist stuff wasn't there." or "For long periods of my life, I found this all boring." Judaism is not a religion of belief, and we have a long history of sages and rabbis who were

doubters at some time in their lives. Let them know that doubting is acceptable in Judaism.

8. Have fun being Jewish. Find ways to *really* celebrate, with friends as well as family. Let them see that being Jewish is more than liturgy and synagogue attendance. It is a way of life with beautiful music, delicious recipes, and jokes and silliness, too.

9. Notice any and all similarities between their non-Jewish values and yours, and speak of them. If they quote Bible passages, you can say, "We both think reading the Bible is important." If they say grace, you can say, "We both think thanking God for the food we eat is important." Criticizing and emphasizing differences creates DISTANCE. What you want to do is reduce the distance. Perhaps one day they will see themselves within Judaism. Even if they never do, you both will have acknowledged all those similarities, and you will have reduced your own fears of your values not being carried forward into the next generation.

10. Become a junior partner in the religious upbringing of the children these couples are raising. Follow the goals and agenda that their parents design. Never, never, go behind their backs to promote Judaism. You are, of course, allowed to live your own life as Jewishly as you would if they were not there.

11. Never compete with the non-Jewish extended family. As much as possible integrate the Jewish and non-Jewish members into one family. Invite them to your holiday celebrations and go to their celebrations when you are invited. This keeps the children from having to feel they need to choose one side over the other.

12. Show respect for all other religions in front of your relatives' children. Never belittle or make fun of any practice or belief of the non-Jewish parent or non-Jewish relatives. Many children learn to avoid any religion because they sense it is a topic of conflict in their family. By discarding all religions they attempt to avoid making anyone sad or angry.

13. Encourage the adoption of one religion for children. Having a religion is healthier than not having a religion, even if it is not Judaism. Following two traditions is an enormous undertaking and most families cannot do it evenhandedly. Even if they chose that the children be Christian, you can still find ways to pass down your Jewish values, but only if you can keep a warm and loving relationship with their parents.



Karen Kushner is director of the Jewish Choice Initiative, a grant-supported program under the auspices of the Union for Reform Judaism in the San Francisco area. It is a new vision of outreach to the intermarried, the unaffiliated and 20 somethings to bring them into the synagogue community--Renewal, Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative or Orthodox.

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Victim Hailed As Dedicated Convert

By Rebecca Spence

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Pamela Waechter was just settling into her new role as top fund-raiser at the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle.

She had spent eight years working her way up through the ranks of her city's central Jewish charity, starting as an outreach coordinator before serving both as a director of the women's division and a special events planner. Finally, in February, she landed the job as director of annual giving.

Waechter, 58, was unsure whether she could rise to the challenge of the high-powered position, but her colleagues knew she was "more than qualified," as one said.

As nearly 2,000 mourners gathered Monday at Temple B'nai Torah in Bellevue, Wash., to honor Waechter, who was killed during the July 28 shooting spree at Seattle's Jewish federation, they remembered her for her overwhelming commitment to the Jewish community.

"The main focus of her life, other than her two children, was service to the Jewish people and the Jewish community," Rabbi James Mirel said. Mirel is the senior rabbi at Temple B'nai Torah, the Reform congregation where Waechter had been a member since the late 1970s.

Waechter began life as a Lutheran and then converted to Judaism when she married Bill Waechter. Raised in Minnesota, Waechter moved with her new husband to Seattle, where she embraced Jewish life wholeheartedly, both spiritually and professionally. The couple later divorced, but her commitment to the Jewish community did not waver.

Waechter initially began volunteering for the synagogue before joining its board, and eventually served a term as the board's president. In the 1990s, she also joined the board of the Union for Reform Judaism. "She undertook these tasks with a wonderful, positive attitude and a real commitment," Mirel said.

Before becoming a staff member at the federation, Waechter worked at the Seattle-area Jewish Family Service, where she coordinated the food bank and worked in outreach. At the federation, Waechter was remembered as a zealous and dedicated Jewish communal servant. "Pam brought a passion to everything she did, a passion for Judaism, and a passion for social services," said Robin

Boehler, board chair at the federation.

She loved to garden, spend time with her two dogs and travel. Recently she had gone on a trip to Africa. Boehler said that she witnessed firsthand Waechter's skill as an amateur photographer on past trips to St. Petersburg, Russia, and to Israel. "She was outstanding," said Boehler, who first heard of the shooting when she got an urgent call on her cell phone as her plane touched down in the Denver airport, where she was changing planes.

Waechter's two children, Nicole Waechter Guzman, 36, and Mark Waechter, 33, held a press conference over the weekend at Guzman's home in north Seattle. "I called her 'Super Jew,'" Guzman reportedly said at the press conference, referring to her mother.

While going through her mother's papers, Guzman came across something eerily prescient: Stashed away in Waechter's files were two letters--one to her daughter and one to her son--that she had written before leaving for a trip to Israel two years ago in the event that she didn't make it back alive. The letters expressed her commitment to traveling to Israel, despite the potential dangers.

Other staff members at Jewish federations across the country expressed a similar sentiment. "I'm very proud and grateful to be able to do this work, and if this is what I'm doing when it's my time to go, that's fine with me," said Susan Kardos, director of the initiative for day school excellence at Boston's Combined Jewish Philanthropies.

Kardos was among many staff members at Jewish charities who, for the most part, said that the horrific incident had in no way frightened them out of their jobs.

While federations play a role in funding and promoting Israeli causes, many staffers at such charities say that they tend to view their jobs primarily as delivering social services to the Jewish poor and infirm--making it particularly shocking to think that they could be viewed as potential targets.

"We're a charity organization and we have to take these measures to defend ourselves?" asked Karen Flayhart, director of marketing and communications at the Jewish Federation of Cincinnati. "It's outrageous."

Another federation staffer echoed Flayhart's dismay. "We do social service, humanitarian work," said Gail Weinberg, financial resource development director at the Jewish Federation of Greater Kansas City. She added, "It just makes it all the more devastating that someone doing the work they cared so deeply about could have been killed, and others seriously injured."

Rebecca Spence is a staff writer for the *Forward*.

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Lessons In Jewish Ways

By Frances Grandy Taylor

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At the Chai Center for Jewish Life in Avon, a group of women has been planning Friday's Shabbat dinner celebrating the Jewish Sabbath. But this Shabbat dinner is for members of the Mother's Circle, a group of about a dozen non-Jewish women in interfaith marriages who are raising their children as Jews.

The women have been meeting for the past eight weeks, studying Jewish holidays and rituals, culture and history. At the start of this week's planning meeting, one member walks in with two freshly baked golden-brown loaves of challah bread, a first effort. She smiles as she's greeted with a chorus of praise.

"Wow, it's beautiful!" the members say. "How did you do that?"

Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath that begins every Friday at sundown, is a time for family and friends to come together and to put the busy pace of the week on hold. The mothers' group spends time exploring ways to balance spirituality with practicality to observe Shabbat. This Friday's potluck dinner will include 14 families with activities that also allow children to pitch in.

With interfaith marriage steadily on the rise, an increasing number of Jewish children have a parent who is not Jewish. Raising children in a faith that is not your own can be a challenge, which is why the Chai Center started the Mother's Circle program. The women have been exploring their own feelings about religion and faith and gaining confidence in their ability to transmit the Jewish faith to their children.

Laura Kinyon, a licensed clinical social worker and family counselor from Avon who directs the program, says the women in the group are the "unsung heroes" of the Jewish community, and there are likely hundreds of them in Greater Hartford.

The program is a project of the Jewish Outreach Institute of New York in cooperation with Chai and the Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford. Rabbi Howard Herman, who leads Farmington Valley Jewish Congregation, is a consultant to the mothers' group.

"Until our first session earlier this year, there was little or no meeting place or support for these women ... to deepen their connection to the Jewish world in a welcoming setting among their peers," says Kinyon, who is Jewish and whose husband is a convert to Judaism. "I grew up in a non-observant home--most of my Jewish learning took place later in life. I very much understand what these women are going through because I had to do it myself."

While the mothers met in one room, their children played in another, supervised by baby-sitters provided by the program. Liddy Doyle, a mother of two, says she joined the program because she wanted her children to have a greater understanding of Judaism.

"I wanted a comfort level with learning more. I was intimidated to even ask the questions," Doyle says. "Now when I go to the Judaica store or meet a rabbi, I feel like I can put myself right out there to ask questions. You feel a sense of community among these women. We have a common goal."

Rebecca Ruhn says her family is modern Orthodox, and though she was more versed in Jewish tradition than many in the group, she often feels she has more to learn.

"I wanted to be among people who maybe didn't know as much as I did, because sometimes I feel I am just faking my way through," Ruhn says, laughing.

The group has met for eight sessions, and the Shabbat dinner celebration will mark the end of the program for the summer. The women have decided to continue meeting informally at the home of a member this summer until the program resumes for eight weeks in September.

"It's been very comfortable. Everybody is very open," says Barbara Rosenberg of Simsbury, a mother of two. "I think we speak freely and ask questions here in a way that you might not do elsewhere for fear of offending someone or making them feel like you are questioning their background."

Though the present group will continue for another eight weeks, a new one will also start to accommodate a waiting list.

"When this group ends, we have planted a seed so that they can continue on as a peer-support group for friends and family," Kinyon says. "The challenge is how do you have a Jewish home when you didn't grow up Jewish? We're here to let them know that they are not alone."

For more information about the Mother's Circle, call 860-677-1235, or visit www.jewishhartford.org.

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What do *you* think? [Join The Discussion](#)



Frances Grandy Taylor is a staff writer for the *Hartford Courant*.

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Dad, Daughter, Dog, and a Talk about God

By Jim Keen

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On a cold night in February, Gabby suggested that we take our dog, Sandy, for a walk. Gabby, my oldest daughter, is nine years old. Sandy is a one-year-old goofy Labrador who is always up for a walk. I jumped at the chance to get some dad-daughter-dog time. Somewhere, in the middle of our neighborhood, we also included God in our walk.

As we started from our driveway, we noticed the constellation Orion up in the southern sky. The stars were big and bright. It was one of those cloudless evenings that lets all of the heat escape from the earth's crust. So we wrapped our scarves a little tighter and pulled our hats down to cover our ear lobes.

I think looking up at the heavens prompted me to tell Gabby the story of the first time she ever asked me about God. She was five years old and totally caught me off guard. My daughter is Jewish; I am Protestant. I tried to explain God in a way shared by both Jews and Christians: there is only one God, God is everywhere, and God is a loving God. I also recalled stumbling over myself not to say the wrong thing.

When I told Gabby this, she laughed. Sandy looked up at us, and then crossed the sidewalk to check out a blue spruce. I asked Gabby what her impressions of God were today.

"He's a nice old man in the shape of clouds--wispy, of course--looking down on us from a bright blue summer sky. He watches over our every step and helps us with our journey."

I couldn't believe she said that. It was so beautiful. It's pretty much how I've always pictured God, although I am certain that I never explained it to her that way. I've also been conscious of not portraying God as any gender. I had to ask her, "Why do you suppose we picture God as a man?"

"I don't know," she replied. "I think some people see God as a woman. He probably can look like whatever he wants us to think he looks like." I had to chuckle a little to myself. Despite our best efforts to make God gender-neutral, it just hasn't caught on.

My curiosity over Gabby's view of God compelled me to ask her more. Sandy still wanted to see what was going on over at the park, so I had time. "If we know God is good, why do you think bad things still happen?"

"I think to test us," she replied.

Hmm. Not a bad answer. I thought back to George Burns' line in the movie, *Oh God Book II*, and added, "I suppose you're right. How could we ever know pleasure without pain? Happy without sad?"

I found speaking with Gabby enlightening. It was a very touching conversation. I have another daughter, Molly, who is six years old. I recently asked her what she thought God was. "One." she replied. That's it; that's all she said. I thought this great answer was just as illuminating--straight from the *Sh'ma*, but simple and to the point. It's amazing how complicated we adults can make things. I'm glad I've got my daughters to help me see the universe more clearly.

As Gabby and I wrapped up our walk with Sandy, I had to ask one more question: "Do you think that we believe in the same God?"

"Yes, just different religions," she answered.

As a Christian dad raising Jewish girls, it sure feels reassuring to hear that. Turning back into our driveway, my cheeks were frozen, but my heart was warmed.

What do *you* think? [Join The Discussion](#)



Jim Keen is a freelance writer based in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He is intermarried and has two daughters. His new book, [Inside Intermarriage](#) (URJ Press), will be available in September.

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Rocking the Cradle: A Mid-life Conversion Story

By Carol Weiss Rubel

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*Rock a bye, Baby
In the treetop
When the wind blows, the cradle will rock
When the bough breaks
The cradle will fall
And down will come Baby ...
Cradle and all*

The cradle will fall . . . and fall, it did. The cradle of Roman Catholicism--the faith into which I was baptized as an infant and which I participated in until adulthood--"came down" recently and catapulted me into a decision to convert to Judaism. Unlike the nursery rhyme baby who finds herself adrift and without anchor, after my decision I found myself finally at a place in which I felt as if my "authentic self" had space to breathe, to think and to rest. My decision to convert was not made lightly--nor was it made in the glow of impending marriage. My decision to convert was not made to appease future in-laws or to please a spouse. My decision to convert was made because--finally--a confluence of abstracts had come together in an almost mystical way --"the time" for me to claim my father's heritage had come.

As the adult daughter of an interfaith marriage, I have lived a life full of the richness of two different--but intertwined--traditions. Because I am in my early fifties, I was born in a time before there was a publicized "December Dilemma" for interfaith households. I was raised in a time when intermarriage was still a real oddity--a time in which many Jewish partners in interfaith marriages found themselves metaphorically dead to their families and many non-Jewish partners in those marriages found themselves ostracized by both their families of birth and their families of marriage. How I managed to be lucky enough to be raised by individuals who remained dedicated to their respective religious traditions through their entire lives--and still fostered an atmosphere of respect for their spouse' tradition--is beyond me. But--lucky I was, because that is exactly what my home was like growing up.

Yes, our family had a Christmas tree. Yes, my sister and I had Easter eggs. Yes, my Irish-Catholic mother, my sister and I attended Mass on every single Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation. But . .

. we also were weaned on chicken soup and matzoh balls. We saw our father kiss a mezuzah upon entering and exiting our home--but never thought too much about it because it was as ordinary a part of his daily behavior as was brushing his teeth. We kept a pishka for the General Israel Girls' Orphanage in our kitchen. We watched my father mark the yarzheits (yearly memorial anniversaries) of his parents. Many childhood Sunday mornings found us returning from Mass to feast on a potato kugle prepared by one of my father's relatives and brought to our home . . . as much to provide an excuse to visit *with* us as to provide lunch *for* us ! In major ways--like observing our father spending the High Holy Days in the neighborhood synagogue--and minor ways--like learning not to hang wash on the line on a Jewish holy day, we lived a delicate balance between the worlds of the "doer" and the "watcher."

I think that in my secret heart, however, I was meant to be a "doer." My sister was not--and that is all right. Just as children born from the same parents can have different colored hair and eyes and different likes and dislikes--so, too--the ability to connect with religious identification can be as different for siblings as any other thing might be. The journey for me to move from the world of the observer to the world of the participant was a long one. It not only took years, but it also took agonizing introspection, a complete upheaval of my personal comfort zone . . . and the support of two men: my husband and my rabbi.

My feelings for my cradle religion were affected deeply by its theology-- (including--but not limited to--the role of women) and by the scandals which have ripped the Church's members to their core. My personal desire to listen to sermons about God and man's relationship to Him rather than to pleas for participation in debt reduction campaigns also, if truth be told, colored my feelings about the Catholicism which surrounded me. As I found myself sitting in church--week after week--being agitated and unsettled rather than connected and comforted, I started to wonder why I was still going through the motions of slipping envelopes into collection plates and dashing madly to sit in a weekend Mass--to insure that my body was present while my eyes searched through the monthly missal to find the "Old Testament" reading for the weekend. Finally, I stopped attending Mass. No one was more surprised--or bothered--by that decision than my husband.

Like my mother, I had married a Jew. My husband is funny, tall, funny, smart, funny . . . and a deeply religious Conservative Jew. When he fell in love with me, I know that he was as surprised as anyone else--including his children! I am a "subsequent spouse" . . . not the one who is biological mother to his children--but the one who came along years after the dissolution of that relationship. I know that he was surprised, because he had always preached against the evils and dangers of intermarriage to his children--but, as he discovered, the heart follows its own direction. And, sometimes, "b'shert" can present itself as the extraordinary juxtaposition of two opposites . . . and that is just what happened with the two of us. After making some painful decisions himself (which included the severing--not by his choice, but by hers--of the relationship with one Orthodox daughter), our marriage marked the establishment of a home in which the two traditions of Catholicism and Judaism existed side-by-side. Just as in the home of my youth there was great respect for each other's religious identity and observance. Things might have continued as they had forever . . . except for the stirrings and turbulence within my own spirit.

I cannot explain--even now--how it came to pass that I started to feel more connected to Judaism. Perhaps it happened when I decided, one Chanukah, to learn the blessings in Hebrew so that I could gift my husband with that new skill as we lit the menorah. Or, perhaps it happened when I

convinced my husband that it was our responsibility to remain in our hometown (rather than visit other family) to host the annual seder for his elderly relatives. But, actually, I think that watching my husband live his daily life unfettered by continual internal rantings against his religion is what sealed the deal for me. I finally admitted to myself that I wanted to feel that same kind of peace that he felt . . . and I finally quieted myself sufficiently to listen to what my soul and my heart had been trying to tell my mind for years: my essence was Jewish.

Had I been allowed to make the choice of religious affiliation myself, there is no doubt in my mind that I would have opted for my father's tradition rather than my mother's. That decision would have had nothing to do with caring for one parent more than the other or even with identifying more with the essential tenets of one faith as compared to another. Rather, that decision would have been made simply because everything about Judaism always seemed to "feel" better to me than anything about Catholicism. A "spiritual changeling," it took me decades to gain the confidence to correct the cosmic glitch created by infant baptism.

Accomplishing the conversion process was not as difficult for me as it might have been for others. Certainly, growing up exposed to concepts, traditions and practice made much of the mandatory instruction relatively easy. But, I suspect that the real challenge for people who are brave enough to change an aspect of their personality as seminal as religious affiliation lies in finding the support needed to make the journey seem possible. That support came for me, first, from my husband. Although I made the initial contact with a rabbi without my husband's knowledge, his reaction to my decision was instantaneous. Never once during our marriage had he asked me to convert or to consider doing so. But his delight in my decision was palpable . . . in fact, several months before I actually summoned up the courage to approach a rabbi, my husband observed--rather offhandedly--"Gee--you already do everything we do. Why don't you just come on over?" Remember--I told you all at the beginning of this piece that my husband's character trait which shines over everything else about him is his humor!

The architect of my journey, however, was not my husband . . . and it was not even me. The man into whose hands I placed complete trust was my husband's rabbi, a rabbi who had just accepted the pulpit of the Conservative synagogue a few weeks prior to my approaching him. Perhaps it was his newness to the city and to the congregation that made him so open to my first contact. Or, perhaps it was his willingness to listen to my story and respect the family from which I had come as well as the family of which I was now a part that made me feel as if he could help me navigate through this new experience. Or . . . quite possibly, his appearance in my town . . . in my life . . . at this time was "b'shert" in the truest sense. "Rabbi Joe" provided me with a series of individual classes that helped me understand the "why" behind the "what" . . . in other words, his enthusiastic teaching helped me frame the traditions, practices and rituals I had observed and participated in throughout my life into a context that was rich and meaningful. Most significant, however, was Rabbi Joe's philosophy: conversion was not the ceremony held at the end (although his insistence on the traditional mikvah and Bet Din was absolute!) . . . conversion was the process he guided me through as weeks turned into months and months moved from season to season. The culminating ceremony was, to Rabbi Joe, the "punctuation mark at the end of the sentence."

Despite feeling that the approaching change was a positive one for me, I found that the days immediately preceding the ceremony were difficult. I could not sleep. I had an almost constant headache. My back ached. My temper was shorter than usual and my emotions were running even closer to the surface than they normally do. In short, I was a wreck. My husband's even-tempered

responses to the chaos around him and his silent efforts to give me as much room as possible manifested themselves in a thousand ways . . . and, while I was unable to acknowledge his kindness then, I will never forget it.

Finally, the day came. I found that the feelings I dealt with that day were, in many ways, similar to what I had experienced on my wedding day. More than anything, I wanted to be by myself--I wanted to not simply prepare physically for the experience, but to still myself and listen to the voice of God as I had when I made my initial decision. And--that is exactly what I did. The hours I spent getting ready to meet my husband, Rabbi Joe and the other members of the Bet Din were hours I would not have traded for the world. The reflection and contemplation steadied me and supported me as I made the drive into town.

Rabbi Joe's approach to the conversion ceremony inverted the more traditional order of things in that he asked me to visit the mikvah before meeting with the Bet Din. When I asked him why, his response made perfect sense: he felt that it was important for me to make the physical step prior to asking that the legal one be certified. Knowing the "why" behind the "what" had been his paradigm for my entire course of instruction, so, of course, he had no difficulty connecting the last two dots for me!

Walking across the street from the synagogue to the mikvah accompanied by my husband and the three men who comprised the Bet Din was almost surreal to me. They all tried to make the journey an easy one--and each man said something lighthearted and comforting. Hearing them talking outside of the small room in which I made my final preparations provided a sensory anchor for the experience . . . walking into the actual mikvah room and completing the immersion rite was, truly, an experience unlike anything else I have ever encountered. Every fear I had experienced evaporated and I felt confident and strong as I recited the ancient Hebrew blessings. I felt as if I were getting closer to where I wanted to be. Each chorus of "amen" from the waiting and listening men strengthened the sensory anchor and urged me forward through the next steps.

Following the immersion rite, we walked back into the rabbi's study where--true to his word--the "conversation" commenced. It was friendly and focused more on my personal story and intentions than on attempting to find minutiae from law and history with which to confound me. After a very long time, the pronouncement came: "We're ready to sign"! And, sign they all did! Each man's signature attested to the fact that I was, now, in my spiritual home. My husband was invited into the room then and all four men stood and sang a song of congratulations and joy to me . . . how could I not feel loved, respected and honored in the midst of that? The last part of the ceremony included only Rabbi Joe, my husband and me. We walked into the sanctuary so that the Aron Kodesh could be opened for me and so that I could make my personal declaration of faith. So there, before God, anchored by the love of my life on one side and the architect of my journey on the other, I became--fully, finally and forever--part of the people of Israel . . . part of the family into which I had been born--but not raised.

My home town is far from Oz . . . but Dorothy's words could not be more appropriate . . . "There's no place like home." This home, this Jewish spiritual home, took me a long time to find--but the journey was worth the effort.

What do you think? [Join The Discussion](#)



Carol Weiss Rubel, a nationally recognized educator specializing in work with at-risk teens, lives in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania, with her husband Jeff. If you have converted to Judaism and would like to share the story of your journey for possible inclusion in an upcoming book dealing with the transformative change of conversion, please email either of the book's authors: Carol Rubel at CarolW44@aol.com or Arnine Weiss at Urojock@aol.com.

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Meeting the Jewish parents, Spanish-Style

By Michael Fox

To be perfectly frank, I can't make a good case for why I liked the Spanish-Jewish family comedy *Only Human* so much more than the American-Jewish family comedy *Keeping Up with the Steins*.

Perhaps stereotypes are less grating in a foreign language. Or maybe the characters are familiar without being painfully familiar, if you know what I mean.

Or, more likely, Dominc Harari and Teresa de Pelegri's debut feature benefits from a more appealing cast and a wittier screenplay. Can you imagine anything funnier than a container of frozen soup intended for Shabbat dinner skidding out a seventh-story window and beaming a passerby?

OK, lots of things. But that absurdist incident morphs into a resonant plot device that somehow manages to be hilarious and poignant, surreal and transformational.

The movie begins on a terrific note, with an enchanting couple clearly in love (and lust) expressing their nervousness (and desire) as they ride in an elevator. Leni (pale-skinned redhead Marian Aguilera) has brought Rafi (the bearded Guillerrmo Toledo) home to meet her Madrid family, and they're both taking a big risk.

Leni's Jewish brood is a breeding ground for tsuris (angst). Older sister Tania (Maria Botto) is a nymphomaniac belly dancer with a spoiled and petulant six-year-old daughter. Her younger brother David (Fernando Ramallo) is newly frum (observant), and his demands on this Erev Shabbat (eve of the Sabbath) are making everyone testy. And her beloved elderly grandfather Dudu (Max Berliner) is not only blind but a little dotty.

That leaves her mother, Gloria (Norma Aleandro), a deeply unhappy woman with no sex life, no control over her underachieving children and no prospects for improvement. Where's Señor Dalinsky? Who knows? He could be working late yet again or, God forbid, having an affair.

Rafi should have no problem making a great impression on this crowd. Except he's not exactly how Leni had represented him when she called her mother to set the date. He's not Israeli, you see. He's Palestinian.

Now Rafi's lived in Spain since he was seven, so he's just as assimilated (both culturally and in appearance) as Leni. And I'm not sure that it's any more of a scandal than if he were a generic

non-Jewish Spaniard.

But it does allow for some entertaining dialogue that skewers stereotypes and, in a pithy lovers' quarrel, condenses every argument and justification ever compiled by Israelis and Palestinians into a two-minute drill. (If only Steven Spielberg's *Munich* had been as economical in its political exchanges.)

The filmmakers met in Columbia's graduate film program more than a decade ago, and became collaborators and husband and wife. Harari was born in England of Egyptian Jewish ancestry, while de Pelegri is Spanish Catholic. She subsequently converted to Judaism.

Harari and de Pelegri originally set the film in London, but their Spanish producers lobbied for a change of venue. All to the good, I say, since the film has an ebullience that one does not associate with England.

Only Human has a warm spot in its heart, and sooner or later every family member is "rehabilitated" and welcomed back into the fold. The film doesn't offer a message or life lesson that we haven't gleaned from a thousand other movies, but we don't expect one.

It does remind us, with brio and a certain amount of self-deprecation, that first (and even second) impressions can be deceiving.

I can't claim that *Only Human* is an especially memorable movie, but its vivacious cast effortlessly sweeps us up in its ditzzy maelstrom. By the time the film consciously steals the last line of Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* for its own closer, we've come to appreciate the Dalinsky clan more than ever seemed possible when they opened the door for Leni and Rafi.

What do you think?

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