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Web Magazine

Responding to Negative Comments about Intermarriage

Issue 190: August 29, 2006

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["In the Mix": Looking Beyond the Roadmap](#)

By Julie Wiener

"To read the Conservative movement's new 'roadmap' on intermarriage," says Wiener, "you would think that a mob of crusading gentile spouses was standing at the entrance of Conservative synagogues, poised to overrun the bima and plant a cross on the Ark."



Interfaith Ignorance Is All in the Family

By Gary Goldhammer

My wife's name is Christine. That's Christine, as in “Christ”-ine, which is about as non-Jewish as names get. A Jew named Christine is about as unlikely as a Christian named Shlomo. It's possible, but suffice it to say the guy would never get elected pope.

Yet despite her very Christian name, for years almost everyone at our synagogue and even in our own havurah thought she was Jewish. And why not: She practices Judaism, is active in our community, volunteers her time and raises our daughter in a Jewish home. She hasn't converted but is connected in ways many “natural born” Jews are not.

More than that, she is accepted as an equal. At our Reconstructionist synagogue, Judaism is lived-it is our actions, not our ancestry, that define what is a Jew. As a result, we have many interfaith families and my wife and I belong to a havurah of almost all interfaith couples.

Our Jewish and non-Jewish friends are accepting of our marriage and our choices. My wife's best friend is a Sunday school director for a Christian church. My friends don't question our marriage, although they do question how someone who looks like me got married to someone who looks like my wife (even my mom thinks I look “too Jewish”).

Of course, we can choose our friends and our spouses, and they can choose us. Family is another matter.

Silence Says it All

I have never heard a discouraging word about my interfaith marriage from anyone other than my sister--but I have heard the silence, as have others I know. And the silence says it all.

Dean, a friend from my havurah, recently converted to Judaism and renewed his marriage vows so he and his wife could have a traditional Jewish wedding. But his family didn't attend. Dean's Christian family never came to terms with his new Jewish family, and so their absence from Dean's life speaks volumes.

My family, which is 100 percent Jewish born and married, isn't much better. My sister and I used to talk, but now it's only when birthdays or mom-mandated gatherings make conversation unavoidable. When we did talk about my marriage, she would tell me she didn't accept Christine's faith, didn't think we belonged to a “real” synagogue (“it's full of Christians”) and couldn't see how our daughter, Alexandra, could be Jewish if she still celebrated Christmas with her

grandparents. I feel sorry for my sister, but she's made her choice and I accept that, along with her current silence about my family.

All is not lost. My in-laws and my own mother, who may have been skeptical or even scared at first, never disowned us. Our daughter is just another grandchild, not "the Jewish one" or "the mixed-up one." When Hanukkah and Christmas overlap, my in-laws light their own menorah and say the Hebrew prayers.

This is respect, not lip service. There is no fear of conversion from either side; we are all far too secure in ourselves for that.

The Fear Factor

I wish I could say the same for my sister. But many Jews, I must admit, feed on fear. A couple millennia of persecution can do that to a people. Nevertheless, that doesn't excuse narrow-minded thinking--at some point, the fear has to stop.

I know intermarriage is discouraged, even despised, by a large segment of Jews. My wife and I couldn't find a rabbi to marry us, so we had to settle for a cantor and a minister. Jews are afraid they will lose their identities, despite all that they might gain by embracing interfaith couples.

But we don't live in secluded villages anymore. We live in the world, with all the triumphs and all the challenges that entails.

Intermarriage is one of the highest compliments we can pay to God, for it shows that we have learned to live together and accept our differences as precious and divine--and that we can keep still Judaism and the breath of the Jewish people alive.

Intermarried Jews and Christians don't live in houses, they live under Abraham's tent --and I can't think of a better place to be.

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



Gary Goldhammer is a freelance writer based in Orange County, Calif. and the author of *Below the Fold*, available online at <http://belowthefold.typepad.com>.

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Tips for Responding to Insensitive Comments about Interfaith Families

By Sarah Litvin

When she was a kid, Laurel Snyder would have to wait after Hebrew school on Sundays for her mother to pick her up. "She's just always late," was her response to worried teachers and administrators. When kids teased her about her mom's tardiness, and started asking suspicious questions, she would snap back, "It's because she goes somewhere Sunday mornings, OK? It happens every week, so stop asking." Laurel remembers the stress of not knowing what she could and should tell kids and adults about the *real* reason why her mom was always late. Would they kick her out of school if they knew? Would kids make fun of her? Would she be put on the spot to answer tons of questions? By Bat Mitzvah year, Laurel found herself in a peer group where being different was cool. After years of making excuses, Laurel finally decided to reveal the truth: "She's at church, but I'm Jewish."

Snyder, who recently edited and wrote for the anthology *Half/Life: Jew-ish Tales from Interfaith Homes*, grew to accept and celebrate her interfaith identity. But for many children--and adults--in interfaith families, hearing negative comments or being made to feel different because of their intermarriage or interfaith heritage can be painful and damaging. We talked to several outreach professionals and others involved in interfaith identity issues about how to cope and respond constructively when you hear insensitive or negative things about intermarriage or growing up in an interfaith family.

Tips for Parents Counseling and Consoling Children

1. Be prepared to define your family's identity.

Parents need to be comfortable with their own identity, and their family's cultural/religious identity, if they hope to explain this complex identity to their children, says Helena McMahon, director of Interfaith Connection in San Francisco. Perhaps you choose to identify the family as "half-Jewish," or as "Jews who celebrate Shabbat and go to synagogue but have a Christmas tree." Whatever your identity, be sure to clarify it to your children with pride.

2. Make sure kids know who they are and how to explain their complex identity to people who may question it.

Dawn Kepler, the director of Building Jewish Bridges in Oakland, California, relates the story of a young man who was never told that some Jews wouldn't see him as Jewish because he didn't have a Jewish mother. In college, the accusation caused him great anguish and confusion. "Let them

know earlier!" Kepler says. By explaining, "This is who we are, even though sometimes people don't understand or agree," your child will feel proud and confident in his/her identity, McMahon says. Both Kepler and McMahon emphasize the importance of continuing discussions about identity and self-definition at different stages in the child's development.

3. Validate hurt feelings and express compassion.

Being excluded or told you don't belong hurts, and the child's feelings of sadness and fear are real. Kepler reminds parents not to let their own feelings of anger or injustice overshadow their compassion for their child.

4. Assure the child that the comment was not personal--it was about something larger than him/her.

Several outreach workers assert that most negativity about intermarriage is ideological rather than personal. Though the specifics of the debate over intermarriage may be beyond their comprehension, children should know that your family is not the sole target or any verbal abuse. For younger children, Phyllis Adler, of *Stepping Stones to a Jewish Me* in Denver, finds it essential to explain, "This person isn't talking about *our* family, but about families *like* ours." In the same way, if the derogatory comment came from another child, Snyder reminds parents not to take it too seriously. "Kids are seldom developed racists," she says. "They are most likely just repeating something they heard at home."

5. Build pride in your child's complex identity. McMahon explains the benefits of an interfaith family: beyond the double presents in December, kids benefit from learning to appreciate the beauty of each parent's faith and the opportunity to learn intimately about people of different faiths and backgrounds. "Frame this openness to appreciating different backgrounds as an asset," she advises, "and offer your own brand and love of Judaism without stepping on the toes of your kids."

Tips for What to Say to People Who Make Insensitive Comments about Intermarriage and How to Say It--for Kids and Adults

1. Decide whether to respond or not.

The trick is to determine whether the person who made the comment is "open to dialogue," Adler says. Adler's and Snyder's advice boils down to three main considerations:

- How significant is my relationship with this person? Is it someone on the playground, or a future relative?
- What am I willing to give? How much time do I have and want to spend on this person? Do I have control over my emotions?
- Do I have a reasonable chance of changing his/her mind?

2. Build a relationship.

One conversation is seldom enough to change someone's mind about interfaith marriage. Adler says "you must risk honest dialogue" and be prepared "to let yourself be in a process." McMahon asserts that knowing someone personally "bridges gaps that feel unbridgeable."

3. Reframe the issue to make a theoretical argument rather than a personal attack.

When someone tells Laurel Snyder, "You don't look like a Jew," she asks, "What does a Jew look

like?" and sometimes even asks, "Why are there black African and white Eastern European and brown Middle Eastern Jews?" before launching into a detailed history of Jewish intermarriage. She thus converts a personal insult into an anthropological inquiry.

4. Try to understand the other person's point of view.

For those less inclined to go into history and anthropology, Kepler says it's still important to understand other perspectives. "Everyone has a different idea of who they are, and defines their world from the center out," she says. Before you can change a person's opinion, you must first understand where that opinion comes from.

5. Describe the advantages of an interfaith family or relationship.

Use personal anecdotes and opinions. Kepler says, "I always think it must be harder for someone who excludes parts of the Jewish community... I rejoice in the opportunity to accept everyone!" Snyder points to talented people from interfaith families, such as J.D. Salinger, Frida Kahlo and Sarah Jessica Parker. She attributes their creative genius to their "un-streamlined, half-Jewish, identities." Or, offer this perspective: the intermarried sensitize more people to Jewish issues and thereby make the world safer for Jews. Best of all, come up with your own additional take on why your interfaith family is special.

When somebody says something negative about intermarriage or having an interfaith heritage, you have three choices: you can insult, ignore or inform. While we never recommend insulting someone back, sometimes the best response is no response. There are many people whose attitudes won't be changed, or just aren't worth the time. But the most challenging--and potentially most fruitful--response is to inform the person who made the comments. Over time, constructive dialogue has the best chance of changing attitudes that are unfortunately rather common in the Jewish community. Jewish tradition puts strong emphasis on tikkun olam (repairing the world). Your conversation with an insensitive, ignorant, or misinformed person could be a first step to repairing the Jewish world.

What do you think?

[Join The Discussion](#)



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A Newfound Love and a Lost Friendship

By Heather Lazar

Three years ago, I craved adventure. Yearning to escape my life as a poor graduate student, I went on a free trip to Israel, sponsored by Taglit-birthright israel. Although I took the journey for selfish reasons, I gained so much more substance in the process. I did not realize that going to Israel can be truly a homecoming for a Jew. I found myself falling in love with a rare and exotic beauty--the land of Israel. In this emotional state, I became very close friends with a fellow birthright journeyer. She was also from Chicago and had been a stranger to me before the trip.

Like two ends separated by a large distance on the same pole, my friend was secure in her world of Judaism, and I was unsure. Her religious background was Conservative leaning toward Orthodox Judaism; mine was Reform. Unlike me, she did not question a strict adherence to a singular belief system. In my feeble attempt to grasp this hidden part of my newfound self, I clung to someone who was much more solid in her Jewish identity.



When we returned to Chicago, I felt less connected to her. My spiritual feelings were intense in Israel, but like many other things, they dulled over time. Still, I made small changes, such as attending Friday night services and social gatherings of young Jewish people. Even though I had never based my decision to go out with someone on race or religion, I began to think that I wanted to marry Jewish. The more I went to the Jewish services and functions, however, the more I realized that I was just different from the people who attended them. I could not make myself *be* Jewish simply because I *was* Jewish. Joining one exclusive community led me to feel lost--from myself.

Although I dated some Jewish men after my return from Israel, I met someone very special while studying Linguistics in graduate school. He was not Jewish. At first, I tried to deny my feelings for him. Anyone who has ever fallen in love, however, knows how impossible this is. All the clichés are true. Love just happens. It is ironic that I met the love of my life at a time when I was trying to focus on my Jewish identity.

As my relationship grew in intensity and bloomed into love, my birthright friend became hostile. She criticized me for the choices that I was making. She also expressed her anger over my decisions to my family. Since my parents were initially very unhappy about my serious

relationship with a non-Jewish person, this created a lot of tension. Most hurtful, she treated my partner unfairly and told him that I would never marry him.

With such hostility, she and I had trouble communicating or understanding one another. Since I always felt defensive when she made comments, I could never find the right words at the right time. The two of us could not agree on this one important decision--to choose to develop a serious relationship with a non-Jew.

To be honest, her comments about betraying the Jewish community still hurt me. I do not agree with her. I think a person can be Jewish and love another person who is not Jewish. Love can expand the boundaries of your ethnicity, culture, and religion without erasing them. Furthermore, love is a mitzvah, or good deed, and a blessing, not a curse or a burden. Love is powerful, sweet, and the meaning of life, whether the love is shared between people of the same ethnicity and/or religion or not.

Her comments also hurt because I feel guilty for not living up to others' expectations. In a way, I feel that I let others down by being true to myself. The famous words of Rabbi Hillel mirror my situation: "If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I? And if not now, when?"

I do not know if there is a right and a wrong in the matter at all. I just know that it feels right to be with the person I chose. I made the right decision for me, but there will always be people, like my friend, who will think I am less of a Jew because of it. I, however, feel whole, complete, and actually more appreciative of being Jewish because my partner values my culture and wants to learn more about Judaism.

Ultimately, I found something that was missing in my life in Israel. It was not that I needed to be more Jewish but that I needed to be at peace with being Jewish. I do not know if friends happen for a reason, but I do know that I picked a destiny and that in a strange way, the friend I made in Israel was a part of it. I also know that we can choose whether to be angry or forgiving, whether to be truthful or dishonest, and I choose to share this story as a way of healing. As Rabbi Hillel would say, "If not now, when?"

What do *you* think?

[Join The Discussion](#)



Heather Lazar currently lives in the Uptown neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois, and works as an associate editor for an educational publisher. She is greatly looking forward to marrying her soulmate in April 2007.

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Opening Yourself to Danger

By Zachary Kushner

When I was 12 I told my best friend that I didn't understand why anyone would have sex before they got married. It was too complicated, too risky. Why would I open myself to such dangers? Similarly, when I was 14 I told a different best friend that I was only interested in dating other Jews. To do otherwise would be complicated and risky. Then at 15 I actually started kissing girls-- Jewish ones, at Jewish camp--and by 18 I was wooing Charlotte, who was interesting and intelligent but not Jewish.

When, at 32, I announced my intentions to marry a non-Jew, I did not expect unanimous support. I anticipated the concern of my family, the criticism of my friends and the protests of my youth. The voices said the same thing in chorus: "Don't you think it would be easier if you married a nice Jewish girl? It's so confusing for kids when their parents practice different religions! Don't do it. It's too complicated, too risky. Why open yourself to such dangers?" How confusing to be on a path towards something that you know in your heart is right, while other people, and even parts of yourself, warn you that you might be going astray.

What can one do? The pressure to marry is real. The wisdom of marrying within your community is real as well. So when I fell in love it both bothered me that the person I loved wasn't Jewish and comforted me that my searching was over. Combined, it felt exhilarating--as if I were leaping from a plane. A tandem jump, if you will, of discussion and planning and dreaming.

These exhilarating premarital negotiations were frequently tempered, however, by challenges from our families and friends. Had we discussed how to raise children? Had we discussed what sort of home we would have? Was being Jewish important to us? No matter how delicately they phrased the questions, it felt like an inquisition. I became defensive. It seemed as if they were asking me, "Are you aware of the risk?" I wanted to respond, "How could we not be?"

Choosing a spouse essentially extends your family. If your family shows even small signs of doubt about your wedding, it stings. The objections from those who didn't know or want to know my fiancée were more insulting. There were those who saw her only as a non-Jew, nothing more. "What is the point of meeting her?" they whispered. Marrying a non-Jew meant I had strayed beyond recovery.

Hearing of these reactions--none were spoken to my face--saddened me, but for their sake, not for mine. What could these people know of love if they could so easily dismiss its risky pursuit? Considering their objections, however, only made me feel more solid in my choice. I did not

choose to marry a non-Jew to be hurtful or out of disrespect for my upbringing. I chose to marry a non-Jew because the reasons and emotions in support of the choice outweighed the risk.

Now that the wedding lies behind me, I've discovered a different sort of challenge to my interfaith union, one that emanates from outside the Jewish community. Traveling around the world together I see how my wife is at greater risk because she married a Jew. Imagine standing beside your non-Jewish spouse in a foreign airport and noticing that the bookseller's rack contains copies of *Mein Kampf*. This is a world where people actively--and occasionally violently--dislike Jews. What have I gotten my wife into?

I suppose I am glad to have not considered anti-Semites when proposing marriage, but now I wonder: should they have affected me at least as much as the negative assaults of those that disapproved?

There are disadvantages to intermarriage--complications and risk--but accentuating them unduly serves little purpose. Life is complicated and, if you open yourself to experience, risky as well. I am thankful that those who loved me made sure my thinking remained clear, even if hearing their concerns was unpleasant. The barbs of those who loved me less, I survived. I believe that together my wife and I will navigate the hurdles of our complicated lives. That is what it means to be married.

To read about his wife's family's reaction to her impending intermarriage, see [Overcoming Our Religious Differences](#).

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



From Tanzania to Sri Lanka to Borneo, freelance writer Zack Kushner and his wife have navigated the risks of dodgy local cuisines, unlicensed taxis and, to a lesser degree, intermarriage. After eight months on the road together they remain happily married. They are on their way to New Zealand to make a new home.

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Overcoming Our Religious Differences

By Madhavi Kushner

Religion has never really mattered to me. I was raised by my mother in an ashram community that celebrated every religious holiday and drew teachings from such widely varying sources as Confucius, the Bible and the *Bhagavad Gita*. From this inclusive upbringing, I went on to study science and have since eschewed religious belief in favor of a conviction in science and logic.

Religion doesn't matter to most of my Jewish friends either. My good friend Faye describes herself as Jewish by tradition and agnostic by belief. Despite growing up in a traditional Jewish family, she has rarely dated Jewish men. As for me, when I found myself seriously involved with a Jewish man, I didn't give his religion a second thought. Like Faye, I always believed the person to be more important than the religion. Obviously, however, the two cannot be so easily separated. To begin with, all of us come with a family.

When I told my mother, still a member of the ashram, about my Jewish fiancé, she had recently seen a TV documentary about a strictly Orthodox Jewish family. She grew apprehensive. Would I have to wear a wig? Would I have to manage two kitchens, one for milk and one for meat? Should she expect 17 grandchildren? My father, a committed atheist, fretted that my fiancé's larger family would subsume the opinions and beliefs we shared. My stepmother chimed in to articulate her concerns about child-rearing. Had Zack and I talked about this? How would I feel raising children in any religion, let alone one that I knew nothing about?



When my family questioned my match with Zack it made me feel like they doubted my judgment. Their questioning implied that religion acts as a trump card in a relationship, which need not be true. I did my best to dismiss their concerns as a minor part of my total relationship with Zack; they did not back down. Then, when I met my future in-laws I realized that as much as Zack and I might like to trivialize religion's role in our relationship, the fact that it is important to his family means that it can't be insignificant to us.

The first time I was introduced to my fiancé's family was at a Passover seder. I had flown in from Australia that morning and I was the only one present who didn't know the words to the prayers and couldn't bluff her way through liturgical Hebrew. I was very conscious of being "The Non-Jew at the Table." Though no one said anything discouraging and or gave me any strange looks, I

still felt awkward and out-of-place. These were not my traditions, and as welcoming as my in-laws were, it was a struggle to feel comfortable amongst the kiddush cups and matzah.

After the seder, I was forced to accept the fact that my family may have been onto something with their insistent questioning. What *was* I getting myself into? Was I comfortable with my husband's Judaism? Much to my chagrin, I had discovered that addressing my family's concerns about our differences in faith was helpful; all that nagging had been for a good cause. They asked questions not to undermine my relationship, but to support it.

Compared to my friend Faye, I have it easy. When Faye's mother found out she had a boyfriend, her first question was, "What's his last name?" His name, a German one, might as well have been Goebbels for the reaction it caused. Based upon this single fact, Faye's mother refused to meet Karl until they moved in together, and then only did so grudgingly. Faye's aunt said that she would sit shiva (go into mourning) if Faye married this non-Jew with a German name. Aunt and mother agreed that Faye would be doing Hitler's work for him should she, God forbid, decide to have children with a gentile.

To say that Faye is angered by her family's reaction is an understatement. She feels deeply mistrusted, has distanced herself from her mother and worries that if she married Karl her family might not even attend the wedding. When Faye gets upset by her family's ranting, she and Karl talk through all the potential pitfalls of their interfaith relationship. In the end, they realize that they share the same ideals; it is her family that polarizes the situation.

Unlike Faye's Jewish family, my in-laws have been able to put aside our religious differences in order to get to know me as a person. While they wish that I was interested in converting, they support my choices and appreciate that I take part in their traditions.

My family's questioning, while occasionally overwhelming, has ultimately been helpful. Their queries allowed Zack and me to examine potential sticking points in our relationship before we became mired in them. By addressing their concerns, Zack and I have found consensus about what is important to us religiously speaking, as opposed to what is important to our families.

The support we receive from both of our families eases the strain of being in an interfaith relationship but does not entirely remove it. Is there a battle with the in-laws lurking in the wings if we decide to have children? Like Faye and Karl, Zack and I are able to turn to each other when such issues arise. Ultimately, we are the ones in the relationship, not our parents. We are the ones who have to make the decisions. And with love and communication, we can overcome our religious differences and thrive.

To read about her husband's experience with anti-intermarriage attitudes, see [Opening Yourself to Danger](#).

What do you think?

[Join The Discussion](#)

Madhavi Kushner is a biologist who has worked as a forensic ichthyologist, traveled



around the world with her new husband and dissected too many fish to count. She hopes to get a Ph.D. in something fishy while living in Wellington, New Zealand.

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An Email Conversation between Father and Daughter

By Gail Wertheimer

I love being Jewish. I grew up in a Conservative home. My family kept kosher, went to synagogue every week, and celebrated all of the Jewish holidays. I even went to a Hebrew day school until high school. I never dated a guy that wasn't Jewish until I met my husband. What a jolt to my family! I'm happy to say that even though we had to overcome many obstacles through my dating and marriage, we are still a very close family.

My dad is one of those people who equate intermarriage with assimilation. So when I became pregnant with our first son, it was only natural that his strong feelings would reach the surface again. I sent my dad a few articles that I read on *InterfaithFamily.com* that supported the view that families of interfaith relationships can successfully raise their children Jewish--which is a decision that my husband and I had made before we got married. Although I thought these articles might alleviate some of my father's anxieties, I don't think sending them worked very well. What it did do was open up an email conversation between us that I'd like to share. It is an example of the love between a father and daughter who see things very differently but are still respectful of each other.

Too many times I hear stories of children and parents or grandparents completely cutting off their relationships with their loved ones because of differences in opinions regarding their interfaith choices. This is very sad. I hope that by sharing my letter to my father, you can see that it isn't necessary to break relations with family members who don't agree with your own personal choices. With enough love, patience, understanding and dialogue, hopefully you, too, can work things through, or at least come to the understanding that you think and feel differently.

Dear Dad,

This email dialog has turned into what probably needed to be a telephone conversation, but I will try to respond to some of your concerns. First, I want to say that I know your heart is in the right place. However, you are coming on very strong and I know that it is because you love me so much.

Please believe me that I know how you feel about Mark not being Jewish and why you feel the way you do. Mark understands this, too. Unfortunately, (or perhaps fortunately for us), Mark and I don't feel exactly the way you do. Do you remember when Grandma told you that the WTC

bombing happened because God was punishing the USA for being immoral? She really believed that it was God's doing, and you didn't agree fundamentally. It doesn't make her right and you wrong (or vice versa), it makes you two people who think differently about God's actions. In parallel, you and I think differently about my relationship and future with Mark and our children.

I know that Mark being knowledgeable and observant of Jewish culture and mores doesn't make him Jewish. But it would be silly to think that being Jewish (in name only), without knowledge or practice, is more effective in passing on the religion than it is for people who are not Jewish but committed to raising their children Jewish. I am certain that our children will have more of a Jewish identity than many of my Jewish friends' kids. Both Mark and I share our desire for our children to have a strong Jewish identity.

In your last email, you stated, "My concern is that Mark will be the father of your children. If he is not Jewish, I believe it is a horrific example for your children. Please understand that I know that Mark is a moral and good individual but I believe that without Mark being Jewish, we are jeopardizing the faith of your children. I want your genes to be passed on to future Jewish generations. I would like that to have a very high probability."

Your concern above is understandable, but perhaps not completely fair. Please remember that according to Jewish law, our children will be Jewish since I am Jewish, and I am their mother! In my opinion, Mark, being born to a different faith (and who now doesn't follow that faith), will not be a "horrific" example for our children. In reality, my genes will be passed on to future Jewish generations as long as my son marries a Jewish woman and they raise their kids following Jewish law. In this regard, whatever Mark's religious affiliation may be, my son's decision is ultimately out of my control. If we have a daughter the second time around, we are guaranteed that her children will be Jewish simply since she will mother them as I have mine. I am not missing your point. I want our kids to be Jewish, too. Of course it would be "easier" for all involved if Mark converted, but I don't want him to do it for the wrong reasons. I want him to do it if/when he wants to do it and not because he feels pressured into it.

I also think that it is possible for Mark to study Torah and enjoy Sabbath worship without converting. His commitment right now regarding Judaism is to me, our future children, and our extended family, and he shows his commitment in the way in which we live our daily lives. Together we keep a kosher home, we go to synagogue, we celebrate only Jewish holidays in our home, and we will be raising our children Jewish.

I am very sad that you feel so much pain. I feel bad that I can't help you feel more secure about my decisions. I think that the difficulties you "see" in the future are your personal fears for what could happen, but neither you nor anyone else has a crystal ball. I believe that the best way to be a good influence is to live by example--not to preach or dictate what to do or how to live. It is neither in your control nor in your best interest to do so. So hopefully, we will all live long past the point where you can see for yourself and enjoy your Jewish grandchildren regardless of Mark's decision to convert or not.

Dad, I really appreciate your expression of love to us both and I genuinely feel it. I am copying Mom on this email, not because I want her to back me up, but because I would like to share this conversation with her so that she is aware of what came out of sending you some articles. Who would have thought it would have unleashed so much! And since I'm not doing such a good job at

addressing your concerns, maybe she will be able to help alleviate some of them.

I love you too, Dad.

Gail



Gail Wertheimer is an independent consultant with thirteen+ years of management experience in marketing, localization, and business development, with particular expertise in the international arena. Gail graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology and a Master's degree in Communication from Cornell University. Gail lives in Framingham, Massachusetts, with her husband and eighteen-month-old son. This article was an entry in the InterfaithFamily.com Network's Essay Contest, "We're Interfaith Families... Connecting with Jewish Life."

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When We First Discover Our Religious and Cultural Differences

by Jim Keen

Excerpted and adapted from *Inside Intermarriage* by Jim Keen (URJ Press, New York, 2001). All rights reserved.

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Do you remember when you saw your significant other for the first time? Your heart may have skipped a beat. You may have suddenly forgotten how to speak intelligibly. You may have even walked into a brick wall without noticing. Chances are, if you're Christian, you were only hoping that she'd agree to go out with you. Chances are, if you're Jewish, you were also hoping that she'd turn out to be Jewish too.

As an eighteen-year-old Protestant, making my way through my first year of college, I found out fairly quickly that interfaith dating wasn't going to be a piece of cake (as if any kind of dating is?). As a Christian, I had no idea what I was getting in to. My first clue came from just normal conversation. There were some very nice girls who liked to talk to me but whose conversation was sprinkled with Hebrew or Yiddish words that were unfamiliar to me.

Sometimes it felt like this: "Hi, my name is Jennifer, and last week at my sister's bat mitzvah, I sprained my ankle while dancing the hora, and that made me get shmutz all over my dress when I fell into a plate of chopped liver, which made my uncles mad, not because I made a mess, but because there actually was chopped liver, because the simchah was supposed to be milchig."

My response: "Hi, my name is Jim. What's shmutz?"

Of course, nobody in real life actually talks like this, except for the comedian Jackie Mason, but it just emphasizes how foreign the culture was to me. Even a few Yiddish and Hebrew terms, sprinkled here and there, made me realize that I had a lot to learn.

As a still-wet-behind-the-ears freshman, a conversation like that seemed to be a hint that the person was looking only for Jewish guys to date. However, looking back on it today, I can see that it was just a cultural difference that I did not yet understand. It was just like that first September

when I was trying to figure out why a fourth of my dorm had gone home in the middle of the week. That's when my friend Jackie had to remind me that it was the Jewish High Holy Day of Rosh HaShanah. How would I know? It wasn't on my calendar.

Most of my Jewish dating edification came in college. Here I was, a freshman at the University of Michigan. The U of M gets a lot of its student body from all over the world. However, a good chunk of it comes from Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York. In particular, many are from Long Island, New York. Many students from this area of the country are Jewish. Was I looking for Jewish women to date? No. But, my chances of meeting Jewish women were now proportionally higher than they were in high school.

While many of the Jewish women I met were giving me what I felt was a subtle signal of "I'm Jewish, so back off" (of course, there couldn't have been any other reason they didn't want to go out with me), I knew that there were some who would take the attitude, "What harm could it do if we take one day at a time?" By the second term of freshman year I met a woman named Bonnie. Actually, I chucked a Nerf football at her as she walked by my dorm room door. She threw the ball back at me, I whipped it back at her, she ran down the hall with it, and our relationship had begun.

For the next week, before I got up the nerve to ask her out, we would bump into each other in the cafeteria. I didn't know that she was Jewish. I actually thought that she might be Italian. It didn't really matter to me. She was cute, so my brain went into caveman mode. "Me big strong he-man. You woman. Must have."

It worked. I didn't make too big of a fool out of myself. Bonnie liked me. We went out to see a mindless movie, and she still liked me. I don't even think she told me she was Jewish until our second or third date. She laughed when I told her that I thought she might be Italian. She informed me that the two cultures have a lot in common: family gatherings that revolve around food, talking with your hands, etc.

Of course, once we had unceremoniously informed each other what our religions were, it didn't take long to learn more specifics. Bonnie had grown up in the Conservative Movement of Judaism. She still felt that she belonged there. Some of her greatest memories were of getting together with her family for Passover and the High Holy Days. Being away at college for the first time ever, she also deeply looked forward to going back home to rekindle those feelings. She didn't keep kosher at the time, but her identity was strongly Jewish--religiously and culturally.

My story was very different. My grandpa Keen had grown up a Presbyterian in Oklahoma. As a young man, his prairie church once reprimanded him for attending a dance. So by the time he moved to Michigan in 1925, to become the university's head wrestling coach and to attend law school, he had found a different church to call home. That's how I was baptized a Methodist, instead of a Presbyterian. My family regularly went to services on Sundays, until we discovered hockey. My brother and I both played the sport. Unfortunately, and much to the chagrin of my mother, hockey games were scheduled on Sunday mornings.

Notwithstanding our decreasing attendance at Sunday school, my parents made sure that my brother, sister, and I never lost our faith in God. We always said our prayers at night, and we tried to go to church as often as we could after the hockey season was over. By the time I became a

freshman in college, I rarely went to services. Yet, even though I was out of touch with the church of my youth, I still believed in God. I still felt that Jesus was the Son of God. I still felt as Protestant as ever.

Despite being firmly rooted in our faith, my family had never stressed that there was only one true religion. As kids, we would ask my parents about Judaism or Islam. My dad always quoted my grandfather as saying, "Who's to say which religion is correct? There are many ways to explain God. All of them should be Respected--except for those Lutherans." My grandpa Keen had a Mark Twain sense of humor.

Meeting Bonnie, I quickly discovered that many individuals from Jewish families have a strong desire to marry within their faith--more so than Christian families. A lot of this has to do with Jews being a minority. A lot of it has to do with the sheer tragedy of the Holocaust, still fresh in the minds of parents and grandparents. And much of it has to do with the fact that Judaism is both a culture and a belief system, whereas Christianity is primarily a belief system. You can be Jewish either religiously or culturally. You can be an atheist, but still strongly identify with Jewish culture and history. You can't be a Christian and not believe in God. You then become just American, or Scottish, or whatever your national heritage is.

It's not that Christians don't try to find other Christians to marry. Of course they do. Many Catholics may look for other Catholics to marry. Lutherans may look for other Lutherans. Greek Orthodox may seek other Greek Orthodox. What I didn't know, however, was that I was about to open Pandora's box. It never occurred to me that just dating could be a problem.

Whatever the backgrounds and circumstances, whatever the geographical origins, for some reason or another, Jews and Christians often find themselves falling in love. That's why you're reading this book. I hope I can straighten out some of this beautiful mess and show that the relationship does not have to end. People can work around their religious and cultural differences and live to tell about it. They may also find their lives exquisitely enhanced. How often do we get a chance to learn about, moreover, become a part of another culture? Many people view that as a chance to broaden their minds, build understanding, and breed tolerance. Intentionally or not, Bonnie and I were about to go down that path. But it would not be without struggle.

To read a review of [Inside Intermarriage](#), see [Can It Be Done? New Book Shows How Intermarriage Can Work](#). To hear Editor Ronnie Friedland's interview with Jim Keen, listen to [Q&A with Jim Keen, Author of Inside Intermarriage](#).



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.



Can It Be Done? New Book Shows How Intermarriage Can Work

By John M. Blumers

Review of *Inside Intermarriage* by Jim Keen (URJ Press, New York, 2001).

A 15% discount is available to InterfaithFamily.com subscribers if you purchase the book through the [URJ Press website](#). If you [sign up](#) today, you will receive the discount code in your confirmation email. If you are already a subscriber, visit [My Profile](#) for the discount code.

According to its dust jacket, Jim Keen's new book, *Inside Intermarriage: A Christian Partner's Perspective on Raising a Jewish Family*, is "the first and only book on intermarriage written from a Christian father's perspective." Even if there were others, Keen's book would stand out as a singular contribution to the ongoing discourse on intermarriage.

Keen's new book is more than just another resource for the intermarried; it is a deeply personal and engaging narrative that traces Keen's own journey to parenthood in an interfaith family. As a college freshman, Keen struggled to make sense of the Yiddish and Hebrew words that his future wife Bonnie slipped into conversations. Today, despite being a committed Protestant, Keen finds great satisfaction and spiritual fulfillment in raising his two Jewish daughters.

In the first three parts of *Inside Intermarriage*, Keen recounts experiences and emotions from each phase of his interfaith marriage. He details how he and Bonnie met, their carefree period of dating, their decision to marry, and the process of deciding to raise their children Jewish. He tells of breaking this news to his parents and of dealing with the disapproval of certain members of Bonnie's family. In the chapters devoted to parenting, Keen shows us how a Christian parent can play an essential role in the religious lives of Jewish children.

Intermarriage presents challenges not faced by same-faith couples. Keen, however, proves that these challenges are by no means insurmountable. As Jim and Bonnie confront various issues throughout the course of the book, a pattern emerges. We see how they, as a couple, have learned to address issues by first identifying what is spiritually most important, then discussing workable approaches or compromises, and, finally, communicating their decisions to their daughters and extended family. Nowhere is this process more clearly demonstrated than in Part IV of *Inside Intermarriage*, a section devoted to Christian and Jewish holidays.

Take Christmas for example, a holiday that is important to Jim. Yes, there is a tree in the Keen

household and Jim's family even accompanies him to Christmas services. Through deliberate and careful communication, however, Keen's daughters understand that Christmas is "Daddy's holiday." Jim and Bonnie explained it to them as follows, "It's like going to someone else's birthday party. It's not *your* birthday that's being celebrated . . . But it doesn't mean you're not allowed to have fun, too." By dealing directly with such issues, Keen keeps the traditions he values without compromising his daughters' religious identity. As Bonnie's stepmother once observed, "One day out of the year isn't going to make or break their Jewish identity. It's how you raise your kids the other 364 days that counts."

Having made the decision to raise their children Jewish, Keen and his wife work hard to instill a Jewish identity in their daughters. Keen has taken courses in Judaism, sits beside his family in synagogue, drives his daughters to religious school, and joins them in a host of activities at the local Jewish Community Center. Keen writes:

Perhaps, as an interfaith family, we have an advantage because we know we have to make a conscious effort. Yes, [our daughters] learn a lot about my religion, but at the same time, we go to great lengths to teach them about Judaism. They know that even though their mother and I are of two different religions, they are not of both religions, and they seem comfortable with who they are.

So why not convert to Judaism? Keen admits that it might have been "convenient" to do so since he and his family could then all practice the same religion. Yet, says Keen, "convenience is not why people should convert. It has to feel truly right. I don't feel that I can leave my religion."

Keen's writing is personal, conversational, good-humored, and, at times, laugh-out-loud funny. In the fifth and final part of his book, Keen shares his deepest feelings about intermarriage. Contrary to what some might expect, this is not a section about sacrifice or compromise. Rather, Keen writes enthusiastically about all that he has gained as the Christian father of Jewish children. He values all that he has learned about Judaism and Jewish culture. He cherishes the new and different perspectives he has gained by viewing the world "through Jewish eyes" and particularly his new appreciation of Jewish humor. Says Keen, "I'm a Christian who is fortunate enough to help raise a Jewish family. In my eyes, it's the best of both worlds."

Inside Intermarriage is ultimately a story of hope. Jim and Bonnie's story proves that a couple that is committed to each other and to open communication can gracefully overcome obstacles that might otherwise separate them. It is highly recommended reading for anyone whose life is touched, or is about to be touched, by intermarriage.

To read an excerpt from *Inside Intermarriage*, see [When We First Discover Our Religious and Cultural Differences](#). To hear Editor Ronnie Friedland's interview with Jim Keen, listen to [Q&A with Jim Keen, Author of Inside Intermarriage](#).

John Blumers is the Protestant father of two Jewish sons. He and his family reside in New Jersey.



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Q&A with Jim Keen, Author of *Inside Intermarriage*

Interviewed by Ronnie Friedland

To download an mp3 of the interview, click [here](#).

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Ronnie Friedland is the editor of *InterfaithFamily.com's* Web Magazine.

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Looking Beyond The Roadmap

By Julie Wiener

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Special to *The Jewish Week*.

I sometimes wonder whether leaders of the Conservative movement used to take their cue from Groucho Marx, operating on the assumption that no unaffiliated Jew would join "any club that would have me as a member."

I grew up a "non-practicing" Jew, and the few occasions that I visited Conservative synagogues were alienating; a cantor or rabbi seemed to drone on at the front in incomprehensible Hebrew, never bothering to tell anyone what page of the prayer book he was on. Congregants tended to ignore me once it became clear that I was firmly outside their Ramah/Schechter/USY circle.

In college, when I began exploring Judaism, I often encountered Orthodox Jews eager to make me more religious. While Orthodoxy did not appeal to me, I enjoyed the attention and the invitations to Shabbat dinners. In contrast, it always seemed to me that Conservative Judaism had much of Orthodoxy's hyper-attention to ritual observance, with none of its passion or desire to bring in newcomers. From the outside, Conservative synagogues and their members often looked self-righteous and unfriendly, unwilling to bother accommodating the needs of newcomers.

Since marrying my Catholic husband eight years ago, I've bristled at the movement's approach to intermarriage: being at best unfriendly to gentile spouses unless they plan to convert immediately and slapping punitive measures on Jews who intermarry, including in many cases not allowing them to teach Hebrew school or serve in leadership positions.

And yet, I also find myself drawn to Conservative Judaism--at least the liberal wing of it. For years, I attended the alternative High Holy Day services at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Later, Joe and I joined a Conservative congregation in Hell's Kitchen, although--with electric guitar music on the bima Friday nights and a quirky rabbi from the nondenominational Academy for Jewish Religion--it was hardly a typical movement shul.

I like the authentic feeling Conservative services have--the traditional tunes, the Hebrew (as long as transliterations and translations are also available), the focus on substantive Jewish learning. And although I don't keep kosher or observe the rules of Shabbat, I like knowing that I will do so

when I am inside a Conservative synagogue.

So I've been closely following the movement's latest debates on intermarriage, particularly its recent announcements that outreach must be a greater priority. I applaud this shift, but I was disappointed by many aspects of "Al Ha-Derekh," the new "roadmap," unveiled at the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism [biennial in December](#).

Rather than the manifesto for inclusiveness or even the "encouragement" it purports to be offering, "Al Ha-Derekh" feels to me like a rulebook, with its detailed cataloging of what a non-Jew may and may not do in synagogue. Membership is off limits, but gentiles are allowed to pay dues. Numerous committees are verboten, but non-Jews are allowed to be "adjuncts" on committees like fundraising and "membership outreach to interfaith couples."

To read "Al Ha-Derekh," you would think that a mob of crusading gentile spouses was standing at the entrance of Conservative synagogues, poised to overrun the bima and plant a cross on the Ark. In reality, I think that most non-Jews are just as happy to play a low-key role in the synagogue community and are more concerned with feeling accepted than in challenging religious practices.

I hope Conservative synagogues look to a more appealing approach just under their noses: the Keruv (Outreach) Initiative launched over the past few years by Rabbi Charles Simon of the movement's own Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs. Instead of reiterating, as "Al Ha-Derekh" does in its opening, the tired rhetoric about only deigning to deal with intermarried couples after other options are exhausted, Rabbi Simon's writings--particularly his monograph, "The Role of the Supportive Non-Jewish Spouse in the Conservative/Masorti Movement"--are far more positive in tone. As Rabbi Simon's materials note repeatedly, stigmatizing intermarriage has simply not proven effective, and the movement needs to look beyond merely "reinforcing its boundaries."

Currently in 30 synagogues around the country--including two in Westchester and one in New Jersey--the Keruv Initiative encourages lay leaders and rabbis to facilitate discussions to talk through the issues that interfaith couples and their parents face in the synagogue and figure out ways to make the congregation more welcoming and sensitive.

At Shaarei Tikvah in Scarsdale, the initiative led to changing the by-laws so that non-Jewish spouses can become voting members, although the rabbi is given the authority to exclude them as needed from certain religious decisions. It has also spurred greater voluntarism and involvement among the interfaith families in the congregation. For example, one intermarried couple chaired a successful fundraising effort, while another spearheaded a program for babies and toddlers.

"My view is if you create opportunities for people to feel welcome, it's natural for them to want to do more," says Arthur Glauberman, who chaired the keruv effort and is now the synagogue president.

The changes have not gone unnoticed by Rob Seulowitz, a Congregationalist Protestant whose wife, Naomi, grew up in a traditional Conservative home. Shortly after the couple joined, Shaarei Tikvah began its keruv discussion groups, which helped the Seulowitzes become involved in the community and taught them that not only weren't they the only interfaith couple in the synagogue, but that virtually every congregant has family members who are intermarried.

"I'm never going to feel like a full member of the community because I haven't been bar mitzvahed and the ritual is still unfamiliar to me, but I like the rabbi and I like his sermons," Seulowitz said. "And I don't feel rejected by them, and that's really important."



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

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