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Web Magazine

High Holidays and Ramadan

Issue 191: September 12, 2006

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In a year when Ramadan and Rosh Hashanah begin on



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consecutive days, a leading Jewish Renewal rabbi reflects on the commonalities between the two holidays.

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Breaking Bread--Three Ways

By Aliyah Shahid and Jonathan Zarkower

It's Friday night and the warm, moist dough feels familiar as it seeps through my fingers. Jonny is preparing a second batch, skillfully mixing the water, yeast, flour, sugar, salt, oil and egg. If only my parents could see me now--a half-Christian, half-Muslim girl preparing challah bread for Sabbath.

As I place each smaller braid on top of a large braid, Jonny helps me tuck in the ends underneath the bottom layers. Ironically, as we prepare the Sabbath dinner, the music of choice is Munir Bashir, a traditional Iraqi oud player.



Two years ago, I would have never imagined being in a relationship such as this. With a Christian Korean mother and a Muslim Pakistani father, growing up was difficult--and confusing--at times. I abhorred Sundays because Sunday was deemed "religion day" in the Shahid household. Every week, my sister and I were forced to first attend a church for Korean/Christianity classes, followed by the mosque for Arabic/Islam classes. Sometimes, we felt ostracized because we didn't look like all of the other kids. Now, I identify with both religions, but as a child I felt torn between two worlds, neither

of which I knew anything about.

I never thought I'd date a Jewish boy. After all, why make my life more confusing? When I was younger, I didn't realize (as I often pleaded with my parents not to make me go to Sunday school) that my multicultural background would prepare me to appreciate and accept those unlike me.

Jonny's religious upbringing was not so different from mine. Being half-Christian and half-Jewish, he faced internal conflicts as well. Like me, he identifies with both religions, although it took him time to come to this conclusion. In fourth grade, his parents enrolled him in a Catholic elementary school where he was discouraged from participating in Catholic practices. Because he wasn't baptized, his teacher told him he was guilty of original sin. Because Jewish descent is passed maternally according to traditional Judaism, he also felt unaccepted in his father's Conservative synagogue.

We met in elementary school in our hometown of Toledo, Ohio. After reuniting 14 years later during winter break, we started dating. Two years have since passed. In this time, through

exploring our differences, we have found that religious faith actually plays a greater role in our lives. Although no one religion takes precedence, through each other (namely our differences), we learn something new about ourselves--and our faiths--everyday.

Holidays can be stressful, especially for us. Think dreidels and sweet dates (used to break the fast during Ramadan), both neatly wrapped under a brightly lit Christmas tree. In spite of all the hassle, we love to celebrate; in fact, we have found that the different holidays actually complement each other.



During Ramadan, Jonny will often take part in the fasting ritual. During Rosh Hashanah and on the eve of Yom Kippur, I'll devour the matzah-ball soup (and I'll even manage to stomach a few bites of gefilte fish). We both go to the mosque and synagogue for services and participate in prayers and hymns. It means a lot to me (likewise for him) that we partake in each other's rituals.

Jonny and I are both in school, so we're very busy. We still try to take the time to prepare special meals once a week. Oftentimes we will do our own version of Shabbat (Sabbath) dinner with tzimis, a traditional stew made with carrots, yayin (wine) and lechem (bread). We also have made Pakistani dishes and Korean dishes, paying tribute to my upbringing. It's not uncommon for us, later in the week, to eat leftovers from all three meals. It's actually quite special; we are repeating our parents' pattern in celebrating and cherishing multiple cultures at the same time.

Besides the Muslim and Jewish feasts, we have also had Christmas dinner twice a year--at each of our parents' homes. This past Christmas was special, as it marked the first holiday feast that had our two families gathered around the same table breaking bread together. Jonny's father articulated the sentiment beautifully when he said grace. If there was any scintilla of discomfort, it was assuaged by his prayer for peace among all of the children of Abraham, the patriarchal figure of all three religions. I think everyone at the table realized that we are not so much different, as we are the same.

Jonny's interest in my background has encouraged me to learn more about Islam and Christianity. Also, we have together learned a great deal more about Judaism. Maybe our relationship works because we don't strictly adhere to our religious doctrines, but I like to think that there's more to it.

Our experiences together have catalyzed a longing to branch out and explore other faiths as well. Just last week, we attended a Catholic mass and witnessed a baptism. We're also reading a book on Zen Buddhism. Next summer we are planning to take a trip to India and learn more about the Hindu tradition. I've found that different cultures have many similar values, common links, and shared principles. Faith is part of the human experience, and the more I learn about religion, the more I am realizing all religions are like similar vehicles that converge on the same path, all in the pursuit of inner peace.

As Jonny takes the bread out of the oven, its aroma fills the household. Warm. Familiar. Comforting. I like to think of the challah as a representation of the role that our faiths have played in our relationship. Like us, the braid is composed of three main strands: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. All the strands are woven together as a whole. Together we braid the bread. Together we break the bread.

What do *you* think?

[Join The Discussion](#)



Aliyah Shahid is a graduate student at Columbia University's School of Journalism. She is originally from Toledo, Ohio, and enjoys reading, running, and traveling. Jonathan Zarkower attends the New School University and is pursuing a degree in liberal studies. Also from Toledo, Ohio, he enjoys playing the bass, reading, and listening to music.

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Different Religions, Same Guilt

By Susan Katz

I was born on Yom Kippur, so the holiday has always held a particular fascination for me. When I was young, I would sit in shul and imagine my mother going into labor, hurrying out of the service, and driving herself to the hospital because my father was serving in Vietnam. My mother's doctor rushed my delivery as he felt it was auspicious to be born on Yom Kippur; however my mother was not convinced. "What does a non-Jew know from Jewish holidays?" she quipped.

I have never determined whether a Yom Kippur birthday holds any significance for Jews. Nonetheless, my mother appears to have had the world's shortest labor as I was born before sundown. While I find it hard to believe this whole tale, Yom Kippur is central to my personal mythology.

I especially cherish the Yom Kippur Kol Nidre service--the unique and melancholy song at the beginning of the service is the essence of the holiday for me. The most powerful Kol Nidre service I have attended was at Sherith Israel in San Francisco. The antique 1904 organ, accompanied by a stringed orchestra seated in the balcony box, so moved me that tears ran down my face throughout almost the entire service. My sister, concerned, kept glancing over, and I finally whispered, "allergies." I have always meant to take my Muslim husband to that service and perhaps someday that goal will be realized. For years I have pictured us sitting together in the balcony listening to that mournful tune. However, time, money, and lack of vacation days always seem to hinder our best efforts.

As the years go by, I become more entrenched in my career and my life, and I have to admit that High Holiday services have gone by the wayside. Every year I intend to attend them, but because I do not belong to a synagogue it becomes a burden and an expense to secure tickets. Only one synagogue in San Francisco offers free High Holiday services; however, the free service is in a separate location from the service for the regular congregants. I feel like a charity case attending. Then, once we had tickets, we would have to take a vacation day from work in order to attend services.

When I first married my husband, the thought of Ramadan brought anxiety and dread. I imagined fasting, early- and late-hour eating, special foods, and prayer mats. When I finally asked him what rituals he performs for the holiday, he flippantly said, "I try not to hit the bars." Later, I learned that Ramadan brought the same tremendous guilt to my husband that I had experienced about missing Yom Kippur services. While my husband always intends to fast, he only does so once or

twice in the month. He wants to go to the mosque for services but finds it unwelcoming, and in today's political climate he is nervous about attending too often. As much as I want to go with my husband to the mosque, I cannot abide the gender segregation. Recently, the largest San Francisco mosque, Masjid Darussalam, removed the wall separator, but women are still required to sit behind the men.

During our first Ramadan together I decided to encourage my husband's religious practice by throwing a Ramadan break-fast dinner at our home. We planned an extensive Indian menu (my husband was born and raised in India) and opted for authenticity--moving the furniture out of our living room and setting up pillows on the floor. We lined the room with candles and as the sun set and the food reheated, our guests arrived. As we ate the food that my husband and I had lovingly prepared the night before, my friends peppered him with questions about the holiday, Islam and the Bay Area Ummah (Muslim community). He and his friends explained the life of a secular Muslim and my friends and I gained a new understanding--that not all Muslims are Orthodox. Non-practicing Muslims feel just as conflicted about their lack of faith or expression thereof as do non-practicing Jews.

Today, as we approach the next High Holidays season, we are bonded in our faith, mutual lapses and our desire to let go of the guilt. While we both have strong religious identities, we do not let others define how we should express our religious beliefs. I no longer mention Ramadan unless my husband does and while my parents will never let me forget that it's Yom Kippur, we're happy enough to celebrate my birthday. Well, sort of.

What do you think?

[Join The Discussion](#)



Susan Katz lives in Oakland, California, with her husband Manzoor. In the three years that they have been happily married, Ms. Katz has become an expert in kosher Indian cooking.

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"A Good Muslim Wife"

By Deborah Semel

This morning, while Harun was still asleep, I set the table with tomatoes, olives, feta cheese and a loaf of good, fresh Turkish bread. If it were up to me, I'd just have a cup of coffee and a simit, the Turkish version of a New York bagel, but sharing a traditional Turkish breakfast on Harun's day off is a minor adjustment I have made for the sake of peace and harmony within our intercultural, interfaith relationship.

Harun is a Muslim Kurd from Adana; I am a New York Jew who came to Turkey to paint the Cappadocian landscape and then stayed because I had no good reason to leave. Despite our radically different backgrounds, both our lifestyles and our outlooks on life are remarkably similar, with food our only noticeable area of conflict. Like most Turks, Harun exhibits an incredible ethnocentrism when it comes to food, whereas for me, my "kosher-style" upbringing has long been displaced by the multicultural cuisine of New York City. After numerous unsuccessful attempts at trying to broaden Harun's palate--we nearly split up over a mustard vinaigrette--I came to accept that the menu in our house was going to be strictly Turkish, at which point our food fights ceased.

It wasn't food, but the combination of food and fasting that make up Ramazan (Turkish name for Ramadan), the month-long Muslim holiday, that truly put our relationship to the test. Ramazan added a religious element to what had been strictly a cultural difference. While Harun was at work, it became my job to prepare for iftar, the evening meal that breaks the day-long fast. I did so just like "a good Muslim wife." The only problem was that I wasn't.

I didn't fast, but I ate very little during the day, both out of a sense of solidarity and because we would be eating a big meal together in the evening. I thought about how I had fasted for Yom Kippur when I was growing up, and how much more commitment it must take to extend that one day into one month. But while I was rather proud of how I was holding up in the kitchen for my first Ramazan, for Harun every night something was "just not right." He began rushing home from work in a panic, and together we would frantically fumble over a pot of stew, trying to get it to the table at the exact moment that the iftar cannon boomed, announcing the breaking of the fast in the traditional Turkish manner.

After about a week of this nightly stress, it became apparent to me that Harun's reactions to any difficulties or culinary deviations from a traditional iftar meal were grounded in something far deeper than just the stubbornness of the Turkish palate. What was "not right" in the kitchen was *me*. After our first year of living together, our first Ramazan had brought home to Harun the

shocking realization that he and I were never going to raise "a nice Muslim family" together because of the simple fact that I was Jewish.

Regardless of everything else we shared, we both understood that, try as I might, I would not understand the essence of what the holiday meant to Harun. I don't think I could have even if I had been a Turkish Jew rather than an American Jew, in which case I would have grown up in an overwhelmingly Muslim environment, but still without any pressures to maintain "a traditional Muslim home." At the same time, Harun has never had the opportunity to explore how he would fit into a Jewish environment because we don't have one, and the insularity of the Jewish community in Turkey has kept me from seeking one out.

Although I am primarily secular, I have celebrated Jewish holidays twice in 12 years of living in Turkey, and in both cases, the gatherings were organized by American Jews. A Passover seder was a major disappointment: 20 or so temporarily displaced Jews with an equal number of different ways of conducting a seder, our "common" religion unable to bring us together emotionally. It made me miss my family. On the other hand, I felt right at home at a Hanukkah party that was a mix of Turks, Americans, Jews and non-Jews, all crammed together in a small apartment, with too much food, too much noise, kids running up and down, a new baby being passed around, lighting the candles--it made me wonder why I hadn't made contact with the Turkish Jewish community before. I suppose that part of the reason is because, as a secular individual, I would have felt awkward seeking out a religious community.

Coming to terms with the fact that Harun and I would not be raising "a stereotypically nice Jewish family" or maintaining "a traditional Jewish home" has not been a problem for me, largely because I have almost always lived in an environment where Jews are a minority. As a result, I have not been bombarded with images of how I should behave as a Jew, and my immediate family has accepted the fact that my relationship to Judaism has more to do with family and culture than it does with religion. By contrast, Turkey is nearly 100 percent Muslim, so, whether it is in the media or in the marketplace, there are constant reminders about the "appropriate" way for "a good Muslim" to observe the Ramazan holiday. Outside of the most Westernized neighborhoods in Istanbul, Ankara or Izmir, not fasting for Ramazan is not seen as a personal choice, but as a major deviation from the norm.

I believe that we are better off the more we observe diversity in society, the more we are reminded of the fact that we have choices, in all aspects of our lives, from whom we pick for partners to how we observe the religions of our birth. Concepts such as "nice Jewish families" or "good Muslim wife" are ones that the individuals taking on these roles should be able to define for themselves.

Still, the difficulties we face in defining our own traditions and practices against those defined by others is, whether spoken or spoken, one of the main reasons Harun and I are not rushing to marry and have children. Forget about the precariousness of our own financial situation, not to mention the sorry state of the world in general--we're just accustomed to our life together as it is--largely free from conflict. If we do decide to raise a family together, we will have to negotiate the complexities of choosing which traditions to make our own.

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



Deborah Semel was born in New York and has lived in Turkey since 1994. Trained as a visual artist, she exhibits in both the United States and Turkey and writes a weekly column on arts and culture for the *Turkish Daily News*. You can e-mail her at yerlesim_tr@yahoo.com.

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When Ramadan and Rosh Hashanah Meet

By Rabbi Arthur Waskow

This fall, the Muslim and Jewish sacred months of Ramadan and Tishrei (holy month of the High Holidays: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkot) will converge. Families that have both Muslim and Jewish members might draw on the spiritual focus of these intertwined sacred seasons to renew the Spirit in their own lives and to bring their communities of origin closer together.

Both Ramadan and Tishrei are lunar months that begin with the new moon. Since Jews decided long ago to accept astronomers' calculations of that moment of the new moon arriving, while the Muslim community requires a physical sighting of the barely visible moon, the dates are sometimes a day or so different: This year, Tishrei will begin with Rosh Hashanah on the evening of September 22; Ramadan, probably the evening of September 23.

The confluence of these months comes in rare bunches: Three years in a row the sacred months line up, and then not for another 30 years. That is because the two sacred calendars dance in a complex rhythm with each other. Muslims adhere to a purely lunar calendar, so that Ramadan "moves" across the solar year through all the different seasons. Jews prefer to celebrate the solar year as well as the lunar one. They fit the moon into the sun by adding an entire thirteenth lunar month seven times in every nineteen years.

Muslims observe Ramadan, the month of the revelation of the Koran, by fasting from sunrise to sunset everyday, having an iftar (break-fast) meal after sunset, and turning their attention to God and to works of compassion for the poor. Close to the end comes Lailat al Qadr (27 Ramadan, October 20), the Night of Power. It marks the night in which God first revealed the Koran to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Some Muslims spend that whole night in prayer or in reciting the Koran. And Lailat al Qadr is considered a good time to ask for forgiveness.

As Ramadan ends and the next month begins, there is the Break-fast Festival, Eid al-Fitr. In Morocco, for 1,000 years the Jewish community has brought the Muslim community the first food for Eid Al-Fitr. That tradition might be enriched in America by bringing members of the two communities together to share a celebration feast. (Conversely, Moroccan Muslims brought Jews the first bread for the night after the last day of Pesach. This "ninth day" became an add-on festival called Maimouna, "Prosperity.")

Meanwhile, in their High Holiday observances, Jews are also turning their minds and hearts to God, to repentance (teshuvah, "turning") and to forgiveness--both seeking and granting it. Since

Tishrei is considered the seventh month, counting from the spring, this "Shabbat" month recapitulates an entire lifecycle in miniature: Rosh Hashanah, the birthtime of the moon and traditionally the anniversary of the creation of the human race, a time in which Jews feel "reborn"; then an encounter of each newborn person with the awesome Other, through the 26-hour fast of Yom Kippur--an expression of deep reconnection with God; then the harvest of a full life in the full moon of Sukkot; and on to Sh'mini Atzeret/Simchat Torah, the hidden renewal-time of seeding the future, praying for an on-time start to the revivifying rainy season, and both finishing and beginning the reading of the Torah (portions of which are read each Sabbath.

Jewish-Muslim families could certainly join each other in the spiritual focus of the month. Together they might read some crucial passages of Torah and Koran:

For instance, from the Koran they might read Sura 2: 127-128, as Abraham and Ishmael together build the sacred Kaaba in Mecca and pray that God teach their descendants how to surrender to The One. They might discuss how they feel this prayer resounding in them and in their lives.

And perhaps they might read Genesis 25: 7-11, where Isaac and Ishmael, the sons of Abraham who become the forebears of the two traditions, come together to bury him and then to live together at the Well of the Living One Who Sees Me. How do they imagine the conversation of these two brothers at their father' grave? What message would they hand down to their descendants?

Together the families might listen to the Rosh Hashanah shofar, an echo of the ram's horn that in both traditions caught the ram in a thicket and thus made possible its substitution for the offering of Abraham's son to God.

Together they might fast from sunrise to sunset throughout the month, and for the full 26-hour fast of Yom Kippur, joining each evening with each other and occasionally with guests to break the fast and share the sense of their journey through the month.

Perhaps, in a generation where there is a great deal of tension between the two communities, they could become a focus point of connection by inviting a dozen friends of both traditions to eat with them. Such an evening could be a time when everyone present could tell the others the story of an important turning point in their own lives and of their spiritual journeys. (For a guide to making such gatherings a time of healing, see the book I co-authored with world-renowned Benedictine nun Joan Chittister and the Sufi Muslim scholar/teacher Murshid Saadi Shakur Chisti (Neil Douglas-Klotz), *The Tent of Abraham: Stories of Hope and Peace for Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, and the website www.tentofabraham.org.)

Together they could build a fragile, leafy, leaky sukkah (wooden hut built to celebrate the Jewish holiday of Sukkot), sleep under it at least one night, and learn from its openness to reconnect with the earth that shelters all humanity.

Together they could weave the threads of connection that might reach out beyond their own family to begin to heal the separations that haunt the families of Abraham.

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



Rabbi Arthur Waskow is director of [The Shalom Center](#), the author of [Godwrestling](#), [Round 2: Ancient Wisdom, Future Paths](#), and co-author of *The Tent of Abraham*.

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Different, Yet the Same: The Journey into an Unfamiliar House of Worship

By Melissa Feldman

When I was young, my family and I went to synagogue fairly regularly. I especially looked forward to the first Friday night of each month for "Family Services," which included special songs and events that actively engaged kids in Judaism. Holidays and milestones also summoned us to synagogue. I remember vividly, for example, the High Holidays of my youth when together as a family we would attend services, asking God to grant us atonement for our sins and to inscribe our loved ones in the Book of Life for the upcoming year. Indeed, the synagogue was for me a place to be with my family and, in the midst of my community, practice my religion.

Less than five miles away, every Sunday throughout the years of his childhood, John, his parents, two brothers, and three sisters went to church together. They sat in the pews, knelt before Jesus on the cross, and said the Our Father prayer side-by-side. As a family, they also went to church to share in milestone events, such as First Communions and Confirmations, and to observe holidays such as Easter and Christmas. Similar to what my synagogue meant to me, time spent in church taught John that his house of worship was a place for spending time with his family and for practicing the rituals of his religion with his community.

John and I are no longer little children experiencing our respective religions separately across town. In fact, we met and fell in love during high school, where at first we thought that our different religions would be a barrier to us getting married someday. Yet, through a lot of love and mutual respect, our relationship has endured, and we eventually married. With a foundation built on shared values that stress the importance of family, we have found many commonalities in our upbringings. However, while we have observed each other's holidays in our families' homes through the years, neither of us had regularly ventured into the other's house of worship.

For me, two events--John's niece's christening and his brother's Catholic wedding Mass--required my entrance into John's church as we neared our wedding date. In a house of worship unfamiliar to me, I learned that being the only Jew at a church could be a somewhat awkward experience. While of course I could relate to the happiness that the family felt at these milestone events, I found myself feeling out of place as the only person who was seated in the pews while everyone else was kneeling and then again when it seemed as if everyone in the congregation but me walked up to the altar to receive communion. I also felt painfully uncomfortable with the church's décor. I had not anticipated, for example, the lifelike figure of Jesus Christ, with blood trickling from his torso, hanging on a large cross above the altar.

With these initial feelings of unease, I began to wonder if I would find an element of the Catholic service that would resonate with me. Then, during a component of the Catholic wedding Mass, everyone in the congregation began turning to his or her neighbor to express wishes of goodwill and peace. I quickly understood the beauty of this custom, during which those in attendance voiced kindness and compassion to others. Recognizing that this custom represented common values that I as a Jew shared with those inside the church, I happily returned wishes of goodwill and peace to those congregants next to me.

Soon after my visits to John's church, John had his first experience at my synagogue. During the year of our engagement, I wanted to have him share the High Holidays with my family and me, and we therefore invited him to join us for Kol Nidre services--a most solemn but important evening on the Jewish calendar. Of course, as the evening approached, I wondered how John would feel coming to our synagogue for the first time. While I hoped that he would be able to find an element of the Jewish service that would resonate with him, I worried that he would feel like a stranger as I had felt during my first experiences in a church. Further, would he struggle to understand the structure of the service? Most certainly, he would not understand the Hebrew components, but would he also struggle to relate to those in English? And, how would members of the congregation relate to him--would they see him as an outsider, or welcome him into the congregation as a supporter of our religion? What were the rules, anyway? Should he wear a tallis (prayer shawl)? A yarmulke (skull cap)? To complicate matters, not even my parents knew how to advise John on what would be appropriate.

When my family, John, and I arrived at the synagogue on that Kol Nidre evening, we approached the bin of yarmulkes and racks with prayer shawls set outside of the entrance to the sanctuary. After some discussion, we agreed that it would be appropriate for him to wear a yarmulke out of respect, but that it would not be appropriate for him to wear a tallis, which our synagogue requires of Jewish men. This meant, of course, that John was one of the few men in the synagogue that night without a prayer shawl wrapped around his shoulders, and he felt rather conspicuous as an outsider. In addition to this, he found the service difficult to follow. To John, who had no previous knowledge of how the service should flow, it appeared that the congregants talked amongst themselves at various intervals in the service when he had expected the service to be more formally structured, as he was used to in his church.

Despite these differences and feelings of unfamiliarity, John was still able to find components of the service that he could relate to. The rabbi's sermon, which challenged congregants to refrain from saying ill words about others in the coming year, contained universal values and examples that John could certainly understand and empathize with. In addition, the repentance and renewal themes resonated with him and allowed him time to reflect inwardly about his past and his future.

And so, our journey into each other's houses of worship yielded an important lesson for us both--a lesson that will undoubtedly resurface as we continue our journey together. While differences between our respective religions are blatantly evident and often overwhelming, glorious similarities in our religions also exist. Indeed, as we were raised across town in our separate houses of worship, we each learned the important messages of goodwill, kindness, reflection, and family harmony; and these are the messages we bring to the house we have created as husband and wife.

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



Melissa Feldman is a senior business consultant and information technology project manager in New York City where she also attends New York University's Stern School of Business in pursuit of her Master's of Business Administration Degree. Melissa, a feature columnist for the New York University Stern Opportunity (the student newspaper of the Stern School), resides in Manhattan with her husband, John Desjardins.

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The High Holidays: New Year, New Traditions

by Jim Keen

When we were first married, the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were like an immersion course in Jewish culture and faith for me. Being Protestant, everything was new and strange. However, 15 years later, I am much more comfortable with them. In fact, now that my wife and I have children, we have developed our own traditions that continue to evolve as our daughters get older.

With every New Year, we look for ways to enrich the experience for Gabby and Molly. Having younger children, we usually attend the kid or "folk" service at our synagogue for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It is shorter and more fun, appealing to both children--and Protestant dads. As an added bonus, Gabby sings in the youth choir. Nothing against the adult service, but I understand this one a bit better. Our rabbi does a wonderful job with the kids. He is very engaging, and our daughters always seem to grasp the concept of his sermon. It gives us a great topic to think about and discuss with our girls throughout the day.

Last year, after a lunch break, we decided to go as a family to a Tashlich service for the first time. Tashlich is where Jews throw breadcrumbs into a body of water to symbolically cast away their sins and resolve to do better in the coming year.

We congregated with other members of our temple at Island Park in Ann Arbor. In the middle of the river, this beautiful little island is home to many ducks. Casting the crumbs--Honey Nut Cheerios in our case since it was all we had--into the water, we talked about ways that we can be better people in the coming year. While my nine-year-old understood the symbolism, I think that my six-year-old simply enjoyed feeding the ducks waiting downstream. My wife and I talked about how we would try to be better listeners with our daughters; the girls said that they would try to share more with each other. Our kids also promised to try not to tease each other as much. Even though they normally get along, I could see a slight look of guilt passing across their faces. We talked about how even good people make mistakes. The important thing is that we know right from wrong and try to improve ourselves every year.

If it was a difficult concept for them to understand, I found it equally difficult to explain: be good, but it's OK if you are not perfect. Where was my parenting manual when I needed it? But that's what I have come to love about the High Holidays--they give us a specified time as a family to reflect each year. We all stay home from work and school on these days. When we are not at

services, we spend time together as a family and think about ways to make the world and ourselves better. Last year, our family decided that we'd like to give more time and money to help the homeless families in Ann Arbor.

After making the ducks fat with our Honey Nut Cheerios, we drove over to the rabbi's home for his annual open house. This was also a first. It was great talking with friends as well as temple board members and staff. Meanwhile, our daughters and their religious school classmates spent the whole time eating brownies and swinging on the rabbi's swing set. The girls were having such a good time, it was hard getting them to leave.

In contrast to Rosh Hashanah, our family has well-established traditions for Yom Kippur. For Kol Nidre (the eve of Yom Kippur), Bonnie and I attend the adult service. The kids usually go to childcare in the temple's basement or stay at home with a sitter. To mark the end of the holiday, we have been breaking the fast at our friends Staci and Bill's house for the past eight years. There, we enjoy a large spread of delicious food with five or six other families. All of the kids spend the whole time eating brownies and swinging. I'm definitely seeing a pattern here. As a long-standing family tradition, we look forward to this break-fast every year. I'm sure that the Tashlich service and rabbi's open house also will become similar traditions for us for many New Years to come.

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](#), was just published by the URJ Press. 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.

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Make-Ahead Recipes for Yom Kippur

By Linda Morel

NEW YORK, July 11 (JTA) --On Yom Kippur eve, the emphasis, as it should be, is on getting to Kol Nidre services on time. Sometimes little thought is given to this very important meal whose menu should be in perfect balance to ready people for the fast ahead. Ideally, dinner on Yom Kippur eve should be hearty but light, nourishing but satisfying, tasty but not too luxurious. The challenge is daunting at a time when school and fall activities have just begun, and the Jewish calendar is so full.

I recall one year when I was still peeling potatoes an hour before eight people were expected for dinner on eruv Yom Kippur. I panicked, fearing that we'd never get to Kol Nidre services on time.

Fortunately my husband always comes to the rescue whenever I'm in a jam. He microwaved the potatoes, threw together a salad and broke into a sweat basting the chicken.

I set the table, barking orders, as our nine-year-old daughter scampered to her room to avoid my tension. I swore I'd never do that again.

Since then, I've given much thought to organizing this special dinner to save time, lower stress and serve foods that will facilitate a meaningful fast.

With Yom Kippur beginning this year on a Sunday night, people who observe the Sabbath have additional considerations. If possible, they should complete the bulk of their organizing and food preparation by Thursday, leaving Friday free to focus on Shabbat cooking. After Friday evening, their next opportunity to address the Yom Kippur eve meal is Sunday morning, when the countdown begins.

Although I'm embarrassed to admit it, I've solved this dilemma by imitating a staple of women's magazines--the make-ahead menu. The day after Rosh Hashanah, while I'm sipping coffee and drizzling honey over a piece of challah, I start planning for Yom Kippur eve. I fine-tune my menu and compose a shopping list.

On each of the following days, I prepare a dish and freeze it, or I make most of the steps in the directions, refrigerating foods until I'm ready to proceed.

On the day of Yom Kippur eve, I have only a few last-minute touches to handle. I glide into the holiday with a sense of serenity, a far cry from the frenzied person I used to be.

For peace of mind, I now serve the same menu every Yom Kippur eve. It meets my most important criteria: healthy, appealing and easy to execute. This menu can be expanded to include additional dishes, but it's filling enough to stand alone.

Inspired by Greek Jews, who often partake in stewed chicken and tomatoes before the Yom Kippur fast, I created [my own version](#) of this traditional dish. The chicken is sauteed and then poached in plum tomatoes, which simmer into a sauce that moistens the chicken. However, this dish is fairly bland and doesn't cause undue thirst the next day.

The ample tomato sauce calls for a bed of rice. Throughout the world, chicken and rice are served on Yom Kippur eve, because they are filling and easy to digest. However, many people, particularly when pressed for time, have difficulty finessing rice, which needs some tender loving care. They end up with a sticky ball of starch, rather than a pot of fluffy rice. [My recipe](#), relying on a bit of olive oil, comes out perfectly every time.

[Roasted autumn root vegetables](#) are a medley of seasonal produce flash-cooked at a high temperature. You can prepare this dish three days in advance, finishing it quickly just minutes before serving dinner.

Filled with dried fruits, flakes of oatmeal and a dollop of honey, [baked stuffed apples](#) are not an indulgent dessert. For that reason, it's a nutritious and appropriate way to end the pre-fast meal.

When it comes to Yom Kippur eve, my motto is to do as much as possible as soon as it's feasible. On the morning after Rosh Hashanah, finalize your Yom Kippur eve guest list. Decide what you want to serve. Select which linens you will place on the table. White is traditional on Yom Kippur. If you're using the tablecloth and napkins from Rosh Hashanah meals, make sure they're washed and ironed or back from the dry cleaner on time.

If you're expecting a crowd, you may have to expand your dining table. Know in advance how many leaves you'll require. If you need a folding table, make sure it's clean and in good condition. If you have to borrow a table and chairs from a family member or friend, organize this well in advance.

I suggest setting the table after breakfast that morning. Eat lunch in your kitchen or on the living room coffee table. To make life easy, order a pizza.

Although it goes against my creative nature to be repetitive, under certain circumstances, it makes sense.

On Yom Kippur eve, I'm a big proponent of the pre-set menu, one you can follow year after year. Select a combination of recipes you can manage. Of course you can make reasonable substitutions, such as casseroles or other make-ahead dishes. But with so much going on, Yom Kippur eve is not the time to strike a new course or leave things to chance. It's the time to be methodical and calm, to guide yourself and your family into a peaceful fast.

[POACHED CHICKEN BREASTS AND TOMATOES](#)

3 Tbsp. olive oil, or more if needed

1 large onion, diced
 Salt to taste
 4 whole chicken breasts, (bone in, skin on) cut in half (8 pieces in all)
 8 fresh plum tomatoes, diced
 28-ounce can peeled plum tomatoes

1. Drizzle oil into a large pot. Saute onion until translucent, for about a minute or two. Remove and reserve.
2. Lightly salt chicken breasts. Divide chicken breasts into 2 batches. In the pot, saute top and bottom of chicken breasts, adding more olive oil if chicken sticks to pot. Reserve first batch of chicken breasts while sauteing the second batch.
3. Returning onions and all 8 chicken pieces to the pot, add fresh and canned tomatoes, including liquid from can. With a fork, crush canned tomatoes and break into clumps.
4. Simmer on a low flame for 40 minutes, until chicken breasts are cooked through. Serve immediately with Foolproof Rice.

MAKE-AHEAD METHOD: Once chicken breasts are cooked through, bring to room temperature. Transfer to a plastic container and freeze. The day you're serving them, defrost completely. Transfer to a large pot. Heat until sauce bubbles and chicken is warm inside. Serve with Foolproof Rice.

Yield: 8 servings

FOOLPROOF RICE

2 Tbsp. olive oil
 2 cups of any commercial rice, such as Carolina or Uncle Ben's. (Avoid minute rice or fast cooking rice.)
 4 cups of canned chicken broth
 Salt to taste, optional

1. Drizzle oil into medium-sized saucepan, rotating pan so oil evenly coats the bottom.
2. Place pan on medium flame. Add rice and stir. Continue stirring for 2 minutes, or until rice appears almost translucent. Each grain should be coated with oil.
3. Add chicken broth and, if desired, a small amount of salt. Cover pot and simmer on a low flame. Stir rice every 5 minutes to make sure it's not sticking to the pot and that the broth is simmering gently, not boiling. Continue until all water is absorbed, about 20 to 30 minutes.
4. Remove pan from heat. Let rice rest in a covered pot for 2 minutes. Transfer to a bowl and serve immediately.

Yield: 6 cups of rice; 8 servings

ROASTED AUTUMN ROOT VEGETABLES

No-stick vegetable spray
 6 carrots
 6 parsnips
 2 medium-sized sweet potatoes or yams, peeled and cut into 1-inch chunks
 20 round red or Yukon C potatoes, miniatures

2 beets, peeled and cut into 1-inch chunks
 1 medium onion, peeled and diced
 Kosher salt to taste
 4 Tbsp. apple cider vinegar
 4 Tbsp. olive oil, or more, if needed

1. Preheat oven to 450 degrees F. Coat a 10x15 inch baking dish with nonstick spray.
2. Peel carrots and parsnips. Cut into 2-inch long sticks.
3. Place carrots, parsnips, sweet potatoes, miniature potatoes, beets and onion in baking dish.
4. Season lightly with salt. Drizzle vinegar and 4 Tbsp. olive oil on vegetables. Gently mix with a wooden or plastic spoon.
5. Roast vegetables for 1 hour, stirring and turning vegetables every 10 minutes so they roast evenly. If they start sticking to the pan, add more oil and stir.
6. Vegetables are ready when they are soft inside and brown on the outside. Serve immediately.

MAKE AHEAD METHOD:

Up to three days in advance, prepare vegetables through step #4. Place vegetables in a preheated oven for 45 minutes, stirring every 10 minutes and adding more olive oil, if needed. Remove pan from oven and bring vegetables to room temperature. Refrigerate. On the afternoon of Yom Kippur eve, bring to room temperature. Before serving, place in a 450 degree F. oven and roast for 15 minutes, until vegetables are browned and warmed through. Stir every 3 minutes to avoid burning.

Yield: 8 servings

BAKED STUFFED APPLES

Nonstick vegetable spray
 8 medium baking apples, such as Cortland, Gala, Braeburn or Fuji.
 15 dried apricots
 12 pitted dates
 12 dried figs
 4 tsp. uncooked oatmeal (not quick or instant oats)
 2 tsp. honey
 2 tsp. fresh lemon juice
 1 tsp. cinnamon

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Coat a 9x13 inch baking pan with no-stick vegetable spray.
2. With a knife, using a circular motion, core apples by cutting away the seeds and fibrous parts. Go slowly so you don't hurt yourself. Cut 3/4 of the way down the apple. Don't penetrate the skin at the bottom of the apple. Discard seeds and core.
3. Place apples in baking pan. Microwave for 5 minutes. Reserve.
4. Cut apricots, dates and figs into quarters. In a medium bowl, combine them with remaining ingredients and mix well. Spoon mixture into the center of apples, and press down to stuff with as much filling as possible.
5. Lightly coat a sheet of aluminum foil with nonstick spray. Loosely tent foil over apples. Bake for 30 minutes, or until apples soften.

6. Remove foil and bake for 5 minutes. Skins may pucker. Cool for 10 minutes and serve.

MAKE-AHEAD METHOD:

Prepare through step #5 up to three days ahead. Bring apples to room temperature. Cover and refrigerate. Three hours before dinner, return to room temperature. Before serving, microwave for 3 minutes. Warm in a 350 degree oven for 5 minutes.

Yield: 8 servings



Linda Morel is a freelance writer living in New York.

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Understanding the High Holy Days: A Primer for Non-Jewish Partners

By Rabbi Jonathan Kraus

"Why are Rosh Hashanah and especially Yom Kippur so important to my Jewish partner? He almost never attends services the rest of the year, isn't observant and doesn't even know what he believes about God. Yet, at this time of year, he insists on attending services. What's the big deal with these holidays?"

There are both "official" and "unofficial" answers to these questions. Perhaps not surprisingly, the unofficial explanations are often the more significant ones. The official answers (to which I'll return shortly) speak in terms like judgement, sin, repentance, life and death. The unofficial answers have something to do with the complicated puzzle of American Jewish identity.

For many Jews in this country, attending High Holy Day services (particularly, the first evening service of Yom Kippur) is a way of affirming that we still are part of the Jewish people. Finding our way to a synagogue during these days is a way of demonstrating that we haven't yielded to assimilation, haven't broken the ancient chain of the Jewish people's survival and continuity. Being with our people at services says that no matter how far we may have drifted from active involvement with the Jewish religion, we're still proud to be Jews. We still belong. We still care about being Jewish--even if we're not very religious and are not sure how we feel about the content of those services. Many times, our participation also says that we're still connected with the values of parents and grandparents, for whom our attendance (or absence!) is a very powerful symbol.

Notice that these "unofficial" answers have little to do with theology or even with the religious significance of the prayers and rituals. That's because for many American Jews, their "Jewishness" is not first and foremost a matter of religion. Many American Jews will tell you that their Jewish identity is primarily ethnic or cultural or communal. They speak about Jewish holiday customs or Jewish ethical values or a feeling of connection they associate with being Jewish that seems, to them, to be somewhat separate from the Jewish religion. While I take issue with that perspective, I'll save my objections for another time. What's important for understanding this High Holy Day commitment is that in the mind of your loved one, the urgency of attending services may not be primarily about the religious significance of the ritual.

Nonetheless, if you will be joining your partner to sit through an unusually long and crowded synagogue service, you might want to know a little more about what to expect and what the ritual

means officially. For most Jews, the term, "High Holy Days" is the title given to a period of ten days that stretch between the holy day of Rosh Hashanah--which means, literally, "head of the year"--and Yom Kippur--the day of atonement. Both holy days have their earliest roots in the Hebrew Bible (see, for instance, Leviticus 23:23-32), though the name Rosh Hashanah was not used until significantly later in Jewish history.

Rosh Hashanah ushers in the Jewish new year and with it a period of profound self-examination and repentance. It is, therefore, a day of joyous celebration balanced against a humbling and solemn consideration of how well (or poorly) we have used the gift of the previous year. Tradition teaches that God judges each of us individually and our community as a whole on Rosh Hashanah. Tradition also teaches that the result of God's judgement will be a matter of life and death (either figurative or literal, depending on your theological orientation). Our prayers, songs and rituals, therefore, focus on confessing the ways in which we've gone astray, asking forgiveness for occasions on which we've missed the mark, and committing ourselves to acts of repentance (Hebrew word: t'shuvah).

Note that we go through this process collectively. We ask for forgiveness and repent almost exclusively in the first person plural! This use of "we" versus "I" reflects Judaism's emphasis on community. Our first concern is how well the Jewish community as a whole has fulfilled its covenant (sacred agreement) with God. Our first responsibility is to live in such a way that we help the community be the kind of holy people God has challenged us to become. Of course, our Rosh Hashanah observances also celebrate the possibility of a new beginning that comes with the new year--God's gift to us if we engage in this cleansing process with sincerity.

Some distinctive observances to watch and listen for on Rosh Hashanah: the extensive ritual for sounding of the shofar (ram's horn) during the morning service, which is mandated by the Torah and serves as a deeply moving call to renewed awareness and action; eating apples and honey for a sweet year, and greeting others by expressing the hope that they will be judged for a good year (in Hebrew, it's "Shanah tovah."). Depending on the congregation you join, you also may participate in Tashlich--an outdoor, afternoon ceremony in which we symbolically cast away our sins by throwing bread crumbs (or other, less traditional things such as little stones) into a body of water.

Yom Kippur begins in the evening 10 days later. Its mood is one of deep solemnity, contrition and humility. According to tradition, the judgments begun on Rosh Hashanah are sealed and finalized on Yom Kippur. Because Leviticus (23:27) instructs that self-affliction should be part of this day dedicated to repentance, most Jews will observe a complete fast for at least part of the day. In fact, many Jews will spend almost the entire day at the synagogue (from sundown to sundown) engaged in fasting, prayer, reflection and repentance. The observance ends with the setting of the sun, a final sounding of the shofar--dramatically marking the end of this intensely spiritual day and as a reminder of ancient practice in the Jerusalem Temple--and then, gatherings to break the fast together.

The heart of Yom Kippur observances is its liturgy. The opening, evening service centers around an ancient formula known as Kol Nidre. Kol Nidre is actually an ancient legal formula that absolves us of vows and oaths we may take between this Yom Kippur and the next one. I suspect that the prayer is revered as much for its haunting and powerful music as for its somewhat complicated message.

While Yom Kippur services may vary somewhat from synagogue to synagogue, all will center around communal confessions and introspection, requests for forgiveness and the effort to obtain perspective on our present lives by placing them in the context of the past. More specifically, synagogues hold a special Yizkor, or memorial, Service to honor loved ones who have died and to gain important insight from both their lives and deaths. Many synagogues also honor the martyrs of the Jewish people throughout history and, again, seek to learn important lessons from the humbling example of their sacrifices. Then, as Yom Kippur draws to a close, the observance concludes with the Neilah, or locking, service--a final chance to repent before the symbolic gates of repentance are closed and locked to us.

Of course, there are many interesting and important details for which I haven't had room here. I also realize that the details I have provided may raise as many questions as they answer. If you are interested in doing further reading, two of my favorite starting places are: [The Jewish Holidays](#) by Michael Strassfeld and [Seasons of Our Joy](#) by Arthur Waskow. For now, let me be one of the first to wish you a year that is healthy, happy and fulfilling. Shanah Tovah!

Jonathan Kraus is Rabbi of Beth El Temple Center in Belmont, MA.

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Six Tips for Interfaith Families Facing the High Holidays

By **InterfaithFamily.com**

This document is also available in an easy-to-distribute [PDF](#) and [Word](#) formats.

1. Since family meals are universal, inviting in-laws and their families to join in the holiday meals can serve to focus on the commonalities of your traditions. Over time, these gatherings become part of the year's cycle of the extended family. They become familiar. Try to cook traditional foods eaten on that holiday. If you don't have recipes, you can find them on the Internet. Or you can invite close friends, both Jewish and/or non-Jewish.
2. Try to involve each member of your family in the holiday. On Rosh Hashanah, you can begin new family traditions by discussing as a family how to make the year a better one, how you as a family want to grow. Come up with three or four ways you can attain your goals. On Yom Kippur, you can talk about how you as a family have "missed the mark" and what you can do to repair any wounds.
3. If your spouse doesn't like to attend temple with you, try to create a group for others in your situation. Set up a certain area in the synagogue where you can all sit together. The seating area could also welcome widowed, divorced or single members of the temple. Another option is to join a "havurah" (informal study and worship group) that will sit together.
4. If your spouse would go to temple but doesn't understand how the service is put together, why certain prayers are said, and what the Hebrew means, ask your rabbi to hold a special learning service for people in that situation (which could also include Jewish members). At that special service, the rabbi can explain the different elements in the service, the Hebrew, and the overall goal, and also answer questions.
5. If you are the Jewish partner, remember that your spouse may be feeling uncomfortable with the traditions, the synagogue and all your family members. So, pay attention to your partner, explain as much as possible to him/her, and appreciate your spouse's willingness to participate.
6. If you don't usually attend synagogue and your partner can't understand why you want to now, you can explain that for many Jews in this country, attending High Holiday services (particularly the first evening service of Yom Kippur) is a way of affirming that we still are part of the Jewish people. We still care about being Jewish--even if we're not very religious and are not sure how we

feel about the content of those services. For many American Jews, Jewish identity is primarily ethnic, cultural or communal, as opposed to religious.

InterfaithFamily.com empowers interfaith families to make Jewish choices for themselves and their children, and encourages the Jewish community to welcome interfaith families. Through our website, our advocacy membership association the InterfaithFamily.com Network, and other programs, we provide useful educational information, connect interfaith families to local Jewish communities, build community, and advocate for inclusive attitudes, policies and practices.

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A Novel Idea: Two Writers Talk about Their Interfaith Characters

By Marlena Thompson and Mark London Williams

Both Marlena Thompson and Mark London Williams have written books featuring a main character who is the child of an interfaith relationship. Thompson's [A Rare & Deadly Issue](#) (Pearl Street Publishing, 2004) is a murder mystery set in the antiquarian book world in Los Angeles. The main character is Jenny Maguire, the daughter of an Irish Catholic father and a Sephardic Jewish mother. When Jenny's co-workers begin to die in a spate of sudden accidents, she takes it upon herself to investigate the circumstances of their suspicious deaths.

Mark London Williams is the author of the Danger Boy series for young adults published by Candlewick Press. The central character of the series is 12-year-old Eli Sands, the son of a Jewish mother and an Episcopalian father. The first book, [Ancient Fire](#), is set in the not-so-distant future, 2019. In that book, Eli's physicist parents are in the midst of conducting time travel experiments when Eli's mother is blasted back in time. Eli discovers his own time-traveling abilities and soon finds himself at the Library of Alexandria in ancient Egypt. [Dragon Sword](#) takes place during World War II; [Trail of Bones](#) is set in Colonial America; and [City of Ruins](#) is set in ancient Jerusalem.

Mark: Marlena, is the plot of *A Rare & Deadly Issue* dependent on Jenny being of interfaith lineage? Was it critical before sitting down to write, or something you discovered along the way?

Marlena: Although Jenny's interfaith lineage was not critical to the plot, it was very much a part of her character. She is an antiquarian bookseller, so her life's work involves books and the stories they tell. If the Jewish people are often referred to as the people of the book, then the Irish should be called the people of the word, or rather, words, because the Irish are known for their gifts as both writers and storytellers.

Since Ireland (my favorite place to visit) and the Jewish people are both important to me, it seemed most fitting that Jenny should be a product of these two cultures. By having a character with an Irish heritage, I was also able to include a fair bit of indirect but interesting information about Irish literature--one of my favorite subjects.

Marlena: Mark, how important was it that Eli Sands, the hero of your Young Adult time travel series, be a product of an interfaith union?

Mark: I always assumed Eli was a bit of a mutt, just like me--Jewish mother, Episcopalian father, with traditions stretching back in both directions. I never considered what that might mean until

the second book, which revisits aspects of the Holocaust. Even then, though, religion was never as central a theme as it is in the fourth book, *City of Ruins*, due to be released this winter. In that book, the time travelers find themselves in the ruins of ancient Jerusalem, after another invasion and harrowing war.

Mark: Marlana, what, if anything, would have changed in your book if Jenny had been either completely Jewish or completely Catholic?

Marlena: It's difficult to answer how a character may have been different if he or she had been conceived otherwise. Jenny is who she is. I created a person with whom I felt comfortable--and who would have, as I do, both a visceral appreciation for books and a well-honed sense of history. Although *A Rare & Deadly Issue* is set in contemporary Los Angeles, it includes many historical references, as one might expect of a book set in an antiquarian bookshop. Jenny herself ascribes her affinity for history to her Judeo-Irish heritage. Her Irish family members still lament the Great Famine in Ireland that took place in 1848, and the Jewish members of the family still bemoan the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. I don't think Jenny would have been as complete a character had she been just one or the other.

Marlena: What if Eli had been all Protestant, or all Jewish--would that have made a difference?

Mark: Well, the fact he wasn't means he was capable of the kind of tolerance and "deep ecumenism" that marked my family when I was growing up (well, it still does). It also means he's able to ask questions that come from "outside" particular religious institutions or systems, as do his companions, the sentient dinosaur, Clyne, who is trying to make sense of mammal culture, and his friend Thea, who was rescued from the library at Alexandria in Book #1.

Marlena: What reaction are you expecting to *City of Ruins*, since in it, you delve into the Bible and even "feminize" it a bit with the expansion of the Huldah character, the relatively unknown female prophet?

Mark: I don't know. Is it a good sign if your books are well-known enough to get banned? That hasn't happened yet in the series, though the books have always been a mix of adventure, whimsy, and politics, too. Especially as Eli is growing into his own world view, and seeing how plainly crazy the so-called grown-ups have always been throughout history. I don't suppose fundamentalists of any stripe will cotton to it. I wonder if they'll even read it to begin with.

Marlena: Can you say something about what role religion has played in your life and has that changed over time?

Mark: Hmm... well, inasmuch as I'm a Sunday school teacher at Leo Baeck Temple (my 12th year there), and it's an implicit theme in the first three Danger Boy books, and explicit in the fourth, I'd say a rather large role, just in my day to day life.

But on the interfaith angle, I probably grew up more with secular Protestant traditions (Christmas, Easter), and we'd go to Unitarian church. I didn't start to explore my Jewish side until my teens, though those traditions resonated deeply with me (and there was, quite honestly, something about the fact the world had expended so much energy trying to snuff those traditions, that culture, out, that appealed to me then). My mom enrolled in Unitarian ministerial school (Starr King), and it was there I went to my first seder! (I have, in the years since, helped conduct them!)

Meanwhile, we continue to blend paths/observances in my family of origin: My parents now go to a liberal Episcopal congregation (my mom got my father to go back), I'm a Jewish Sunday school

teacher in L.A., my youngest sister trends Episcopal herself, and my middle sister tends to go to Jewish holiday observances where she lives, in Oregon.

My own style of Judaism tends to be Jewish Renewal-y, though the temple where I teach is Reform. My ex-wife is Jewish, too, though not so observant now, though we're both preparing for our oldest son (the inspiration for the Danger Boy books!) to go through his Bar Mitzvah year-- which just commenced with his 12th birthday!

And everybody in the extended family tends to celebrate everyone else's holidays with them, at least, on those occasions when we're all together!

Mark: Marlena, how would you answer that question?

Marlena: While organized religion has never played a significant role in my life, I've always been a believer. I've had a lifelong fascination with the belief systems of different religions, and taught courses in comparative religion and the Hebrew Bible (from a historical perspective) in a number of churches over the years. More recently, I find I am less interested in organized religions in general, even academically, and more interested in spiritual beliefs that transcend many religions, such as the possibility of an afterlife and reincarnation.



Mark London Williams lives in Los Angeles, where he writes articles, comics, plays, and Danger Boy books.



Marlena Thompson lives in northern Virginia and has just completed a book about another character with an interfaith heritage--her autistic daughter, Jenny.

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