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[RESOURCE PAGES](#)

[CURRENT WEB MAGAZINE ISSUE](#)

[ARTICLE ARCHIVE](#)

[CONNECTIONS IN YOUR AREA](#)

[BLOGS](#)

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[Print entire issue](#)

Web Magazine

Dealing with Interfaith Identity

Issue 193: October 10, 2006

FEATURED ARTICLES



How I Programmed My Life

By Sarah R. Heilbronner

After a series of internal struggles, the child of a Jewish dad and Christian mom decided a Jewish life is worth the effort.

[Read More](#)

What Would Superman Do?

By Jason Bortnick

Raised without a religion, a young child of interfaith parents found God in art, literature and superheroes.

[Read More](#)



An Interfaith Child Thinks about His (Hypothetical) Interfaith Children

By Josh Fischel

If you grow up in an interfaith home, does it matter what religion your kids are?

[Read More](#)

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

More Articles on Interfaith Identity

Mixed Blessings: A Religious Journey That Has Led Nowhere

By Jennifer L. Gordon



Raised with both, she ended up with nothing.

[Untitled](#)



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Password:

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By Maya Gottfried



She was ready to discover her Jewish identity, until a rabbi's wife told her she wasn't a Jew.

[JDate Here I Come...](#)

By Rachel Sarah



Matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match... and make sure he doesn't mind my mother wasn't Jewish.

[Interfaith Doesn't Mean Having to Say Goodbye to My Jewish Heritage](#)

By Joanne Catz Hartman



Will your child be "mixed up with the blending of things"?

From Our Article Archive



[How My Italian-American Catholic Mother Strengthened My Jewish Identity: Lessons in Inter marriage](#)

By Eric Lesser

Religion and culture aren't mutually exclusive properties.

News

[Study Finds Surprising Facts about Children of Mixed Marriages](#)

By Alexandra J. Wall

They're not as religious as the children of two Jewish parents, but they want to transmit their Jewish identity to their children.

Arts and Entertainment



[Shmoozin' with... Lauren Storm](#)

By Gerri Miller

The star of *Flight 29 Down* talks about getting beat up at Catholic school for having a Jewish mom.



[A Jewish, Chinese and Gay Movie Explores Several Identities](#)

By Oliver B. Pollak

For Justin Lo, the son of a Jewish mother and a Chinese father, making *The Conrad Boys* was a family affair.

[Printer Fr](#)



How I Programmed My Life

By Sarah R. Heilbronner

I once took a computer science course, one which was particularly difficult for me, having had no experience in programming. I vividly remember spending many a frustrating night working out bugs, attempting to move through the seemingly unsolvable puzzle of the task at hand. One night, a teaching assistant in the computer lab helped me as I worked through a piece of code. As I made slow progress and became increasingly aggravated, he remarked calmly, "This is good. The more frustrated you are right now, the better you'll feel when you finally figure out the answer."

At the time, this response struck me as delusional, perhaps even masochistic: it is not the case that pleasure is only what we feel when pain subsides ("Why are you hitting your head on that wall?" "Because it feels so good when I stop"). Nevertheless, in the end, he was right. When I finally completed that assignment, my satisfaction was far greater than it would have been had I encountered no difficulties in the process.

Why bring up this tale of computing woe and elation? I think it speaks to the nature of human motivation toward complex and uncertain tasks. Had the assignment been an exceptionally simple one ("Turn your computer on.") or an obviously meaningless one ("Learn to quickly type the alphabet in reverse order."), my response at completion would surely have been different. My task was neither. I knew that completing the assignment would both teach me something and yield a (mildly amusing) functional finished product, something worth having. That type of goal justifies the intimidating amount of effort that must go into achieving it.

Surely few goals are more "worth the effort" than a coherent moral and religious philosophy. Understanding which things in life are most important, knowing where to turn for moral or ethical help, feeling connected with one's fellow human beings and perhaps even with the divine, these are our universal strivings, our deliberate aims. Given their importance, why would I not be willing, even eager, to struggle for them? I labored diligently in the pursuit of a computer programming goal--why would the same not be the case for my faith and ideals?

Most people, religious and secular alike, probably grapple with their worldview at various points in life. However, the strivings of a young person who has grown up inside a particular ideological community will have a flavor different from my own. Throughout my childhood, I encountered competing ideologies, Jewish and Christian (and the many strains within each), all of which claimed truth for their own. With a Jewish father and a Christian mother, my extended family represented a broad swath of America's religions. Moreover, though in late childhood our household accepted a generally Reform Jewish practice, we lived in an overwhelmingly Christian

community. With a church on nearly every street corner, the community took Christianity as a given. People were curious about Judaism (I was often asked whether Jews believe in God), but saw it as distinctly foreign.

Emerging from this environment, I take no practice or ideology for granted; my religious life is not routinized. Every year, I fast on Yom Kippur. It is a conscious choice. Likewise, each week, attending Shabbat services is a conscious choice, and each day, acknowledging that I am Jewish is a conscious choice. Sometimes repetition leads to a certain degree of ease, but never yet to the point of unconscious habit.

Complicating observances and acceptance of Jewish ideology even further is the fact that, with each addition, I risk distancing myself from portions of my family and my community. For example, if I cannot eat in my family's home or in the homes of those I grew up with because I observe strict kosher laws, have I made myself a better person? Thus, the inevitable conclusion: more observance is not necessarily better, and the ideal probably exists somewhere in the balance.

As for the case of the dietary laws, I do not keep kosher, though I follow the Passover restrictions and feel a little funny when I occasionally eat pork. I want to be able to fully interact with my family and the (non-Jewish) community, and that will mean eating with them. The subtlety of this viewpoint likely offends the halakhically observant (those who strictly observe Jewish law) and the stridently secular alike. Without question, strict adherence to a single ideology has its appeal. While committing oneself to that ideology may not be an easy decision, the coherence to be found within the single framework, the already-present answers to questions you have yet to ask, these are comforting and even useful thoughts. Nevertheless, they are not the only viable routes. I personally relish the struggle for balance that comes with the pull of multiple religious traditions within my own life. Surely there is also something beautiful about the conscious deliberation before each act, about the internal struggle that accompanies each religious decision. Then, when some kind of harmony is reached, the rewards are abundant.

After all, the satisfaction felt at the successful completion of a programming assignment pales in comparison to this, my knowledge that I am building, piece-by-piece, a religious framework for life.



Sarah R. Heilbronner is a student at Harvard University.

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What Would Superman Do?

By Jason Bortnick

This question has been posed to me; "Has your interfaith heritage been more of a positive or a negative for you, and why?" I must say that I know it has had both a negative and positive effect so far in my life.

My father was a secular Jew, angry at the war (World War II); unforgiving of the Holocaust to the point of total, irreparable separation from God. He lost a faith which was tenuous at best. My mother was an Irish Catholic. As a little girl she asked the priest, "Do animals go to heaven?" The priest chose to tell her that they don't. And he lost her there and then. She would never return to organized religion.

Raised as I was in a very moral and compassionate family, there could be no mistaking the presence of something greater than us, than my parents, at work through them. They didn't see it at the time but they were showing me God constantly. God was of no faith or gender but I saw Him in the Charlie Chaplin films my father took me to when I was five. God was in the warm unconditional love of my mother. God was in and around everything I did until I was taken out of the warm cocoon of parental protection and thrown into the inevitable, public school. It was there that my own brand of faith would be tested and tested again. This testing has never ended.



When I was 4 years old my Auntie Margaret made for me a complete Superman suit. A poster-size photo of me standing with clenched fists at my hips hangs in my father's room. He, Superman, would be my idea of God--an idea that never left me and helped me course through the roughest waters of my life. By the time I was 6 years old and *Superman: The Movie* came out with Christopher Reeve, I knew that if I hadn't seen God, I had seen the best notion of him the Western world could manufacture.

Superman. He was unflinching in compassion, honor, strength and loyalty. To this day I still ask myself, "What would Superman do?" Not what would Jesus do. Not what would King David do. It gave me hope that people would believe in the purity of Superman. The simplicity. No one I knew was religious. Some friends did go to church occasionally. The few Jews I did meet were quite secular. God, as creator, wasn't an issue in the Bortnick house. So my faith that people believed in something as uncomplicated as Superman was my proof that God was here and

watching and didn't mind that some people, some children like me, had to learn ethics, honor, decency, compassion and faith from a pop icon.

My father played Beethoven's Ninth Symphony when I was 10 years old. He didn't know (or he might have) that I found God in it. God's language. God himself was in that symphony and I listened to it hundreds of times that year.

I had to find God in art and I did. My father had no idea that he was giving spiritual teachings to me through Arthur Miller, or Beethoven, or the Japanese prints that hung in our living room; but that is where I found God. God simply was not attached to any faith and the only way to see Him was in the wake of His own creations. This was a most positive effect. Art, great art, is God.

The positives of my parents' "faithless" house far outweighed the negatives in the long run. I did have to endure an inordinate amount of anti-Semitism as a child, and a Jewish upbringing would have helped. I wanted one. I asked my father for one. But he wouldn't set foot in temple out of pure laziness. He didn't see the importance of believing because he was so angry with God. I only had to look to Charlie Chaplin, Groucho Marx, or *On the Waterfront* and, of course, Superman, to see the works of God. My God had a sense of humor. He wasn't responsible for the Holocaust. God wasn't responsible for the kids who bullied me for being a Jew--not caring that it was my father that was the Jew. I was just a kid.

When I have children they will be raised as Jews. This is in honor of my father and perhaps to make up for the gap of faith in the family line. I don't believe God sent his son to us. I have studied Jesus Christ but see him as a prophet, not a messiah.

In the end, my interfaithness was positive because God's works, his people, became my faith. No rules or dogma, save my father's stern words, "Be a mensch!" That is all I've ever tried to be.

And my search for God goes on.



Jason Bortnick is a 34-year-old filmmaker who lives in Vancouver, British Columbia.

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An Interfaith Child Thinks about His (Hypothetical) Interfaith Children

By Josh Fischel

Lately, I'd been of the mind that there's no such thing as being interfaith. One can be raised by people of divergent or lockstep beliefs, but if you include the influences of teachers, coaches, and friends, then pretty much everyone is raised in an interfaith situation anyway. It underscores that old adage: "I am a unique individual, just like everybody else." After all, few of us derived from interfaith couplings adopt a new religion fused from those of our parents. Even though my dad is not, I am Jewish. Even though I'm not particularly observant, I'm still Jewish. In the same way that wizards can have both wizard and muggle parents without a reduction in wand prowess due to genetic blending, I'm just as Jewish as my rabbi. Thus, to ask whether my interfaithitude has been a positive or negative experience seemed to me kind of an awkward question to begin with.

Since being born Jewish, I've become a bar mitzvah, I've taught Hebrew to third graders at Sunday school, and I've been to Israel. I've also worked at an Episcopal boarding school, a barely Protestant day school and a formerly Protestant summer camp. I suppose that being from an interfaith family has taught me that my identity can't really be besmirched by taking part in other traditions and celebrations. In fact, that's where this whole column was basically going--how the best thing about being raised in an interfaith family is being given a greater sense of tolerance and acceptance of unfamiliar practices and people.

Then, however, things got complicated by the girlfriend.

I've been going out with her for about two and a half years now, and even though we're not engaged and have no stated plans to be, she pretty determinedly caught the bouquet at the last wedding we were at, and our conversations occasionally ramble kind of abstractly to the future. You know, *Where could you see yourself living?* is a veil for *Where should we live together.* And discussions about religion tend, I think, towards providing cover for the real question: *What will we do about the kids' religion?* It's not an easy question for me. Just because I'm Jewish doesn't mean I can really imagine persuading my girlfriend that she should be Jewish, too (I can't imagine *wanting* to do that, either). Plus, I could take or leave imposing religion on my own children. All those early wake-ups on Sunday, the forced march (in nice clothing, no less) to services, the expensive coming-of-age celebration--it all seems like more trouble than I'd like to deal with. On the other hand, I'm not very comfortable with these theoretical kids thinking Jesus is their savior.

In our most recent discussion, the girlfriend was talking about how Christian values have been

useful to her as a guide for how to live life. She named traits like honesty and civility, things that I responded a child could learn in any number of non-religious settings. Frankly, I continued, I'd rather a kid figure out that it's good to be good on his own, rather than doing it under the threat of God's wrath. In fact, what I really want to do with children of mine, while everyone else is going to Sunday school, is take the whole family and do some service of our own: rake leaves for an elderly neighbor, build something for the community, or help out at a soup kitchen. I figure we'd be walking the walk instead of just talking the talk that way, empowering the tykes to give for no reason other than that it's the right thing to do, to serve those who need help.

As I was saying all this, though, it struck me that I was contradicting the beginning of this column. That is, I want to actually *be interfaith*--I want to reach the goals of organized religion through an atypical process. I want to light menorahs and sing Christmas carols without any pangs of guilt from my conscience. I kind of do that now, I suppose, but I still do it as a Jew. If one of my kids' friends asks him what religion he is--years from now, you understand--I want my kid to have to pause. Then, even if it's too dorky for an elementary school student to say, I want him to think, "I'm raised to believe in myself."



Josh Fischel is working towards a Master's degree in Public Policy from the University of Michigan. His writing has appeared in *Bean Soup* and *The Believer*, and on *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* and *Monkeybicycle*.

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Mixed Blessings: A Religious Journey That Has Led Nowhere

By Jennifer L. Gordon

On August 18, 1974, a Jewish man from South Philadelphia married a Southern Baptist woman from a small town in North Carolina. From that marriage two daughters were born. They were told that they were Jewish *and* Christian and that neither religion was better than the other. They were raised to celebrate every holiday, but received no religious schooling at all, only the opportunity to spend the religious holidays with friends and family of different faiths.

Both the maternal and paternal grandparents supported the decision of the couple and tried to help their grandchildren identify with their religion as much as possible. Due to the fact that the couple resided in suburban Philadelphia where they had many Jewish relatives, the children were exposed more to the Jewish religion. They spent more Jewish holidays, such as seders on Passover, lighting the Hanukkah candles and receiving gifts, and breaking the fast on Yom Kippur, around their extended family as well as their grandparents. The only Christian holidays they took part in were stockings/gifts and a Christmas tree in December and Easter baskets in the spring.

Twenty-eight years later, I, the eldest daughter, have mixed feelings about religion in general. My mother has continued her religious practice by joining an Episcopalian church. My father only practices on religious holidays, but has never joined a temple. Being told we could choose our own religious path when we became "adults," neither my sister nor I have done so. When asked what religion I am, I say Jewish and Southern Baptist. Of course, that always gets funny looks and/or a series of follow-up questions. I don't know if I could ever identify with one religion or the other at this stage of my life, which leads me to ask the question, did my parents make the correct decision by not choosing one religion or the other for my sister and me?

My mother once told me that if they had settled in North Carolina, she would have taken my sister and me to church on a regular basis. But, since we stayed in Pennsylvania, she felt uncomfortable doing so being so close to my father's family. Although I can't say I believe Jesus Christ is the savior, would having been raised in the Christian religion have changed my attitude about that? Would I have resented my mother for making that choice for me without my input? And, although I do enjoy all of the Jewish holidays I take part in, I cannot read or speak Hebrew and don't believe everything the Torah has to say. Had my paternal grandparents had more say, I may very well have received a Jewish education, very possibly out of their pockets. Would I have then resented them for "forcing" me to choose that path?

While in elementary school, I had one other classmate that was from an interfaith family. His parents were divorced and his mother was Jewish while his father was Christian. He told me at one point of our educational career that I wasn't really Jewish because my mother wasn't. It was the first and only time anyone ever told me that. At the time, I didn't think much of it and for some reason I didn't come home and ask my parents if that were true or not. I now realize that he was probably fed that information due to his family situation, but it still makes me wonder if there are people who believe that theory to be true. I really don't think I believe that and it certainly didn't change my opinion of my true Jewishness/non-Jewishness in any way.

For many years I said that when I became an "adult" I would most likely choose the religion of my future spouse because although I thought it to be cool at the time to be able to take part in both religions and celebrate all of the holidays, I didn't want my children to have to choose their religion one day. Then for a while after my teenager years, I thought I would choose the Jewish religion because I enjoyed the holidays and was willing to take the classes involved and then take part in a Bat Mitzvah to show my faith in that religion. I'm really not sure why I said or thought that, possibly because I felt closer to my paternal grandparents for most of my life . . .

At this point, I cannot truly say that I feel any connection to the Jewish religion or to any of the Christian denominations. I don't feel like either parent tried to sway me one way or the other. I don't feel more Jewish or more Christian than I did while growing up: All I feel is more confused. I often feel resentment toward my peers who were raised in one religion or the other, who got a religious education and today can relate to something spiritual while I never may be able to.

Due to all of this, religion has become a part of my life that causes more grief and confusion than peace and comfort.



Jennifer Gordon was born outside Philadelphia in 1977. She was raised in an interfaith family by a Jewish father and Southern Baptist mother. Although she has a secondary education degree, she is currently working as an office manager.

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Untitled

Maya Gottfried

Maya Gottfried's "Untitled" is excerpted from [*Half/Life: Jew-Ish Tales from Interfaith Homes*](#), by Laurel Snyder, Soft Skull Press, 2006.

I don't remember how old I was. Maybe 10. And I was sitting beside my grandmother in the red brick house that belonged to my uncle and aunt in Queens, N.Y. It had become a tradition for members of my father's side of the family to gather there for Passover Seders. My aunt had all of the qualities of a stellar hostess, and seemed to enjoy preparing the house and cooking for us all, but also--she was the only one willing to do so.

The elephant in the room was that my uncle had suffered from a debilitating mental illness for years and she, my aunt, was the one who had taken care of him. My father tended to approach conversations with my uncle precariously, fearful of prompting an aggressive response. I remember one time sitting across a corner from my uncle at the Seder table, as a teenager, and bringing up a paper I had written for school on President Nixon's psychological make-up. It included an analysis of how early traumas may have affected the President's personality and actions in later years. My uncle grew stern, rapidly shifting into a state of anger and frustration I had never seen before, saying that he, Nixon, "was a very, very bad man." He grew extremely agitated, made me nervous.

I tried to segue the outburst into a lively Seder table debate but it was to no avail. His irritation had reached a tableau that seemed to last for long painful minutes. My father explained later that Nixon was one of the focal points of my uncle's earlier psychosis, and that I had condemned myself by inadvertently broaching a topic that fueled the depths of his confusion and anger. In all honesty, I didn't mind the conversation so much, and still feel as if perhaps it allowed him a moment to vent his frustrations. None of us knew that a few years later I'd be diagnosed with the same illness.

At this particular Passover, my grandmother mentioned that soon I would have a Bat Mitzvah. It sounded so lush and promising to me. I'm sure she believed it was true when she said it. Certainly a rite of passage, a line to cross between childhood and adulthood, was something we were entitled to as members of the human race. I was so enraptured by the idea of ceremony when I was young that when my parents told me that they were getting divorced I wondered if there would be a service, and of course, what I would wear. For my Bat Mitzvah celebration I pictured a huge room of round tables with white table cloths, robust flowers and golden light, and a thick crowd of people I barely knew dressed up in suits and fancy clothes.

It was a fantasy that stayed with me for a while, though I never got my Bat Mitzvah. I expected that when it was time to begin studying Hebrew my parents would organize my lessons and perhaps there would be a van full of other young Jewish girls and boys that I would ride in to go study whatever it was that you learned in order to pass into proper Jewish adulthood. Those plans were never made and I quietly let the opportunity pass as if it had always existed simply as a dream, completely disconnected from any kind of true reality. I attended all of my cousins' Bar Mitzvahs and enjoyed dressing up to celebrate their arrivals into adulthood. I don't so much remember the parties, but I do remember sitting silently in the synagogue while my cousins spoke in Hebrew, and being chastised for taking a photograph with a flash.

But growing up half-Jewish, to me, was the best of both worlds. I enjoyed claiming the pair of religions as my identity not only because it gained me entrée into two very rich spiritual communities, but because it allowed me to defy stereotypes. Anyone who pinned me as a typical "goy" was instantly deflected by my possession of three Jewish grandparents. Anyone who made a disparaging generalization about the Jewish population in my presence was quickly reminded of my roots. I enjoyed existing as a walking barometer of religious intolerance. Although the majority of my biological make-up was composed of Jewish genes, I had a decidedly gentile appearance. The pinnacle of my service as a human spiritual litmus test came when I was sitting in the room of a young man I was dating in college, who had lived in Germany for a number of years. With me were two friends, both 100 percent genetically Jewish. The subject of Judaism came up and I mentioned that I was half-Jewish. Joe, my boyfriend, freaked out. "You are not Jewish." I assured him that I was, and mentioned that I thought he knew that. I was certain I had told him. He was astounded.

For all of my enthusiasm about being half-Jewish, a little piece of poison in the depths of my conscience reminded me that I did not truly understand the meanings behind my claimed dual religious identities. I knew that although I had the genetic pedigree of a half-breed, I didn't truly have knowledge of the meanings of either faith. This filament of self-doubt grew and finally erupted in unison with my first manic episode. Following a very disruptive and disturbing few months-long crash course in mental illness, I returned to identifying as a half and halvesy.

My guilt for claiming two faiths without having knowledge of their roots, however, stayed with me. One particular Passover a Jewish friend of mine, whom I was working with, brought up her plans for the holiday. I mentioned that I hadn't been invited to any Seders that year. She insisted that I should have a place to go and continued to arrange for me to attend a dinner at a friend's home, a Rebbetzin, or Rabbi's wife. I was nervous and excited. What better way to learn about a faith than to honor a high holy day at the home of one of the religion's leaders. I rushed out of my apartment in Brooklyn immersed in a state of fear and concentrated anticipation. As I reached the deli on the corner I realized I had misplaced the address of the Rebbetzin. I searched frantically through my bag but it was to no avail.

What little I knew about the Jewish faith reminded me that the Rabbi and Rebbetzin would probably not answer the phone if I tried to call. I resigned myself to returning home. I was disappointed and only slightly relieved, the way that you are assuaged when a job interview is postponed, when you're eager to be hired for the position.

On the heels of a hefty apology to the Rebbetzin, I was invited to attend another Passover dinner, a few nights following. I had no idea that Passover continued for more than two nights. Already, I

thought, I was learning more about the Jewish religion. I felt as if I were finally following a path I had laid for myself years before.

I don't know what possessed me to wear a sleeveless dress to the Passover meal. I believe it was the only nice dress I owned that was clean. It was brown linen and had belonged to my grandmother. I called the friend who had arranged for the dinner and asked if she thought it was OK for me to wear it. She assured me that it was. Upon arrival at the Rebbetzin's, however, I was asked to don a shawl when it was time for the meal to be served. I had arrived early. This gave me time to chat with the Rebbetzin before the other guests arrived and I was grateful.

We sat facing each other on a couch in the couple's living room. It was a large apartment on the upper west side of Manhattan. Since I lived in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and was not in the habit of venturing too far from home, it had been no small feat for me to travel there. But like any trip that requires effort, it granted me more of a sense of accomplishment upon arrival at my destination. I felt a huge sense of warmth towards the Rebbetzin as we discussed my life and family. She smiled and asked me questions. "My mother is Christian and my father is Jewish," I told her. "You're not Jewish," she said, without a glimmer of kindness. "Well, I'm half-Jewish," I responded, eager to regain her affection. "You're not Jewish," She stated again, bluntly.

A number of young people arrived and I followed them as we conducted what I understood to be a ritual cleansing in the kitchen. At certain moments during the night someone or other would coach me on what I was supposed to be doing or saying. I kept imagining what I would write in the email I planned to send to a friend following the event; trying to remember the details so I could describe them properly; the wording of the phrases that took me aback and the intricacies of the stories those sitting around me were recounting for the Rabbi. Finally it was over. I descended the stairs with the rest of the guests, instead of taking the elevator, out of respect to their religion. I no longer felt half-Jewish. I felt like nothing. I chatted with one of the women in the group as we walked down Broadway and then stopped to go into a Dunkin' Donuts for coffee. I asked her if she wanted to come. "I can't," she said "Kosher..." I turned and went in. When I described the evening's events to the woman who had organized my invitation she replied, "I didn't know your mother wasn't Jewish."

That night launched a basic re-evaluation of my religious identity. Although more than half of my family were Jewish, I no longer felt accepted within that community. Reassurance from my father that I was indeed a halfsy did little to comfort me. I felt as though I had been perpetuating a lie about my identity, and I didn't want to be a liar. Suddenly I was no longer the best of both worlds. Suddenly I was nothing.

I very badly wanted to have a religious identity and the next logical move was to investigate the other side of my spiritual family tree. Following a short lived interest in an exploration of Wicca, I began to take a serious approach to Christianity. When you express a desire to become Christian, you are generally told by leaders in the church that the next step is to be baptized. And before you do this you are asked to read the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in the New Testament. No problem.

I read the gospels. What I took away from them, besides Jesus' teachings, was that Christ offered Judaism, refined. That was my interpretation. Great. Jesus was Jewish. I signed on.

I felt good about getting baptized. I supported Christianity at its core, even if I disagreed with some of the more popular interpretations, and it granted me the spiritual structure that I craved through a religion. There was a part of me that was frightened about being deemed a "crazy Christian" by friends and acquaintances, but it was a chance I was willing to take.

A handful of friends and my mother attended my baptism. My father declined but I didn't take offense. The great part was, as far as I saw it, I wasn't turning my back on either one of my parents' faiths. I was embracing both. I knew that my father couldn't understand that at the time, but it felt right to me, and that meant a lot.

A few months ago I was at dinner with my father in a bright restaurant on New York City's upper east side. He quietly asked me to cover up the cross I was wearing around my neck. He still insists that my descent from three Jewish grandparents grants me at least partial membership in the religion at large. And oddly, it feels good on some level that he wants me to stay within his faith. I wish he could understand and respect my decision even if he doesn't agree with it. But I can allow him his feelings.

In a way, I'm glad that someone Jewish, someone so important to both my uncertainty and my heritage, wants me on their side.



Maya Gottfried lives and works in Brooklyn, N.Y. She has written two books for children, [Last Night I Dreamed a Circus](#) (Knopf) and [Good Dog](#) (Knopf). She has also contributed to various online and print publications including [People Online](#), [Rockgrl](#) and [Flavorpill](#).

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JDate Here I Come...

By Rachel Sarah

I've decided to give online dating a chance--with a Jewish twist. After a string of blind dates and set-ups, I think that my problem might be that I am not searching among my people, so to speak. Although because of my mixed background (Catholic mom and Jewish dad), I feel like a single mom searching for her tribe.

Since becoming a single mom and sending my daughter to a Jewish preschool, I've been rediscovering my Jewish roots. Logging onto JDate seems like a good way to intermingle my renewed Jewish identity with dating. Maybe a shared cultural background is just my ticket to true love?

So, I'm going to log onto JDate, the well-known online Jewish dating site. A nice, hot, manly Jewish man might be just the ticket. The first thing I do is read its "Mazel Tov" section, scrolling through the hundreds of couples who met here and got married. Could that be me one day? I am skeptical.

Still, I go ahead and post an ad:

"I'm a 33-year-old single mom seeking a man who avoids drama and braids challah," I write.

"I insist that the man in our lives is drama and drug-free, open and honest, responsible and very fond of children," I go on. "My five-year-old daughter will be firm that the man in our lives can hide matzah and sing Zum Gali Gali," a traditional Jewish campfire song.

Of course, I feel a little sneaky. Should I say outright that I'm the child of an interfaith family? Because my mom is not Jewish, many Jews don't really see me as a true Jew. (Of course, Reform Judaism, in which I was raised, considers a person to be Jewish if either of her parents was Jewish and the child was raised Jewish. I had my Bat Mitvah. I went to Jewish camps every summer for a decade.)

But what if some of these men don't really consider me Jewish? What if they see me as a fraud?

My first date is with Guy, a 44-year-old human resources consultant, never-married. He lives with his dog and his username on JDate is "Shining_Armor." He's looking for a woman who truly wants to love and be loved, he says.

I'm a sucker for a good writer, and Guy is no exception. "I believe in love at first sight, yet I am grounded enough to pay my bills on time," his profile says.

He asks: "Are you able to let go of your grasp on the past and get lost in love?"

You bet I am.

When I arrive to the bar, there's a short chunky man standing in the front. Sure, he has short brown hair and brown eyes like his photo, but his cheeks are fat. And his pants are too long.

"Rachel!" he says, offering me his hand.

I shake it heartily. I mean business. But he takes mine like a wet washcloth. Not a good sign.

Still, talking is effortless; he could be my long lost Jewish cousin from Long Island. There's no heat, but there is comfort. But chemistry is a funny thing; my knees do not buzz, my heart doesn't skip. He's a nice guy, like plenty of the nice guys I've met during the last few years of dating. Nice. But I want more than nice.

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Over the next few weeks, I line up a few more dates. On paper, Jewish men are usually the perfect match for me. But where's the spark? So far, none of these men leads to a second date.

"Why Jewish?" my best friend, also Jewish and a single mom, wants to know.

Good question.

The truth is: I've never been particularly attracted to Jewish men. It's that cousin-thing.

But over the past few years, I've observed the Jewish fathers of my daughter's friends at her preschool, day in and day out. There's no doubt about it: these guys are dependable, they bring home the bacon. They are also thoughtful and intellectually stimulating.

But how about the Jewish piece?

I'm still trying to figure out if JDate is the best place for me. Sure it's important to share a common background and interests, or at least it's helpful, but what about those things you can't put a label on--the ability to be kind and respectful and true? To be a good listener and have a balanced attitude toward life?

When this letter arrives, however, I think that maybe JDate wasn't such a bad idea.

I too am single and find myself bemoaning the difficulty of meeting single Jewish women. So, I'm writing to you. I could tell you many things about me, but for now, I'll include a description from a female friend:

"Tall, athletic, good-looking with extraordinary wit. Has a huge heart and a good soul, owns

his own washing-machine (and home) and loves kids. Must learn to give himself a break once in a while. Don't let this one get away."

I won't let you go away.

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**Rachel Sarah is the author of the forthcoming dating memoir, [Single Mom Seeking](#) (Seal Press/Avalon, 2006) and the singles columnist for San Francisco's**

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# How My Italian-American Catholic Mother Strengthened My Jewish Identity: Lessons in Intermarriage

**By Eric Lesser**

Interfaith marriage has always been a salient topic for my family. My mother, an Italian Catholic, grew up in lower Manhattan's Italian immigrant community. My father, an Eastern European Jew, grew up in an Orthodox family in Brooklyn. Needless to say, the holiday seasons used to be a very confusing time for me. I have memories as a child of my Italian grandmother, visiting for Christmas, helping make latkes for Hanukkah. She would mix in dabs of oregano and garlic with the potato pieces, insisting on frying everything in olive oil. When friends used to ask me if I was Jewish, I would answer "half-Jewish, half-Italian."

I often asked my mother why she decided to raise her children Jewish, and how exactly I could be Italian and Jewish at the same time. She explained to me her rationale: "Judaism is a culture and a religion. Italian is a culture, so you can be Jewish and Italian. To be raised Catholic and Jewish, however, is more difficult." I was converted to Judaism in a mikvah (ritual bath) when I was young, had a Bar Mitzvah, was active in my temple's youth group, and traveled to Israel with my college Hillel. But I've also maintained a strong pride in being Italian: eating traditional Italian food, listening to Italian music, participating in Catholic holidays with extended relatives, and carrying on my mother's Italian traditions and style. For both my parents, their culture and family history, an identity with relatives and old traditions, were the most important things to pass on to their children. As a result, while my sisters and I have been raised Jewish and my religion is Judaism, my cultural identity is both Jewish and Italian.

When I was young, this juxtaposition confused me. But as I've grown older, I've begun to consider it a source of strength. I've learned valuable lessons from both my Jewish and my Italian relatives. Being exposed to such different traditions and religions has given me a great deal of religious tolerance. Growing up in an interfaith family has made me very curious about other religions and how people use faith, family and culture as sources of identity. Most importantly, I've learned how related the values taught in seemingly different religions actually are. Both my sets of relatives share similar stories of immigration, hard work and love of family.

For me, Judaism is a sort of anchor. I am not religious in a traditional sense, but my Jewish identity is an essential part of who I am. I gain strength from the memory of a Jewish past and find pride in the cultural and historical perspective Judaism offers me. The stories of Moses, Eastern

European Jewry, and the founding of Israel are important parts of this identity.

It seems silly to pre-determine criteria for who we marry. The future is uncertain and paths in life continually change. As William Shakespeare said: "The course of true love never did run smooth." Although my future wife does not have to be Jewish, my Judaism is an integral part of who I am. True love would require that she, at the very least, will be able to appreciate and understand how important my Judaism and my Italian culture are.

When I was very young, I often challenged my Judaism. Interestingly, it was my Italian mother who often discussed with me the importance of Jewish identity. Although she isn't Jewish, her appreciation for what Judaism means, and her understanding of how it affected who my father is, strengthened my own sense of Jewish identity. I hope my wife would also be able to understand how my Jewish memory and love for the history and culture of the Jewish people color who I am and shape my life perspectives. In this regard, marrying someone who is Jewish would certainly help. But if my wife is willing to listen, learn and understand (as my mother did), that is all I would need.

It is important for my children to at least have the opportunity to experience many of the Jewish milestones I gained so much from. I'd like my children to have a Bar Mitzvah, to have the chance to go to Jewish summer camp and participate in Jewish youth groups, and to travel to Israel with their peers. Marrying a woman with an appreciation for these experiences is important to me. Most likely such a woman would be Jewish, but if not, it isn't a problem.

The high rate of intermarriage is a recurrent alarm call in the American Jewish community. Some statistics show that as many as 50 percent of Jewish marriages are interfaith. This statistic is often closely followed by rhetoric about the need to reduce intermarriage levels and encourage Jewish-only coupling. While this may be important, the emphasis may be misplaced. To avoid assimilation, American Jews must emphasize pride in being Jewish in a modern context. Focusing on creating families with a strong sense of Jewish identity and culture is what is important. If a spouse is not Jewish but is willing to embrace this, there shouldn't be a problem.



**Eric Lesser is the son of intermarried parents. He grew up in Longmeadow, Massachusetts. He is currently a second-year government major at Harvard University.**

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# Study Finds Surprising Facts about Children of Mixed Marriages

By Alexandra J. Wall

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August 4, 2006

How do young adult children of interfaith marriages feel about their Jewish identity? Do they identify as Jews, "half-Jews" or mixed? How do they feel about Israel? Do they care about finding a Jewish partner, or passing some kind of knowledge about Judaism on to their children?

These are questions that, until now, had been largely unanswered for Jewish demographers. But Ruth Decalo, senior director of programs and training at the Jewish Outreach Institute in New York, recently presented findings of an interfaith study to a small group of Jewish professionals at Congregation Sherith Israel in San Francisco. JOI has been a frequent presence in the Bay Area this past year, as it regularly consults with Jewish organizations to help make them more welcoming to the unaffiliated.

The news was both good and bad. While Decalo summarized the study by saying that most respondents did not have a sense of Jewish community and had a low sense of identification with Israel, they did identify with anti-Semitism, even if it was obtained through popular culture, such as viewing *Schindler's List* or reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* in high school.

A full 70 percent of those interviewed said their Jewish identity or dual identity was important to them, even if they didn't know exactly how to define that. Some 76 percent said they wanted to transmit Jewish identity to their children, even though 64 percent said that being with a Jewish partner was not important to them.

Among other findings:

- Jewish grandparents are often key in transmitting Jewish culture to young people;
- 70 percent of those interviewed identified as spiritual while fewer than 25 percent considered themselves religious;
- Israel can prove to be a controversial topic, and only 26 percent strongly identified with it;
- Those with one Jewish parent can often feel like the "other" among Jews with two Jewish parents;

- Fewer than 25 percent had had a bar or bat mitzvah, and of those who did, 90 percent considered themselves exclusively Jewish;
- Just over half, about 56 percent, said they attended Jewish cultural events;
- The study found that most children of interfaith parents knew that Jewish law goes by matrilineal descent, even if they do not know much about Judaism in general.

Decalo stressed that Jewish institutions need to create a more welcoming culture, because it takes a lot for a new person to walk in the door, and if they are not properly welcomed, chances are they will not return.

The New York-based JOI interviewed a total of 90 men and women, ages 22 to 30, in San Francisco, Boston and Chicago (30 in each city). Participants were found by postings on Craigslist, and were compensated \$100 for their time. The totals were divided 60 percent female, 40 percent male, with the numbers of those with Jewish mothers and those with Jewish fathers about equal.

The study also found that while only 33 percent of this population considered itself exclusively Jewish, 76 percent celebrated Chanukah. And while 63 percent of the respondents from Boston celebrate Easter, only 23 percent of those from San Francisco do.

Generally, not much is known about this segment of the population, and for a long time Jewish demographers thought the children of mixed marriages were automatically lost to the Jewish people. But those at the Jewish Outreach Institute are finding those assumptions are not necessarily true.

JOI plans more follow-up discussions in the coming months. Information about the study can be found at JOI's Web site, [www.joi.org](http://www.joi.org).

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**Alexandra J. Wall is a staff writer for *j. the Jewish news weekly of northern California*.**

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## Shmoozin' with ... Lauren Storm

By Gerri Miller

This article was reprinted with permission from [JVibe](#), the magazine for Jewish teens.

If Lauren Storm looks familiar, it's no surprise. She's been all over TV recently, playing guest parts in sitcoms like *Malcolm in the Middle* and *Still Standing* and dramas like *24* and *CSI: Miami*. Now she's got her own gig playing one of the stranded castaways in the NBC/Discovery Kids series *Flight 29 Down*. Think *Lost*, but the actors are teens. In *JVibe's* exclusive interview, she talks about filming in Hawaii, getting beat up in high school and being raised Jewish in an interfaith family.



Photo by Deidhra Fahey

### Transforming Roles

**Your *Flight 29 Down* character, Taylor, is a rather spoiled prima donna. Do people think you're like that?**

I've read some of the message boards, and they think I'm annoying and stupid. It's very funny when people meet me and say I'm so different from Taylor. But that's what the character is supposed to be.

**You've filmed two seasons in Hawaii. What has that been like?**

My parents have a condo on the Big Island, so I've been going my whole life. But I'd never been to Oahu, and it's so different. The climate stays pretty much the same on the Big Island, sunny and warm, but on Oahu it changes minute to minute. The first season it was beautiful for the most part, but the second, it rained almost the entire time. I was sick all the time and bug-bitten. In a close-knit set like that, if one person gets sick, everybody does. I really felt for the crew. I could go under a

tent or to my dressing room, but they were out there, working hard.

**Do you think you would be able to handle a *Flight 29* situation?**

No, I think I'd have a week of freaking out, then despair and then total depression. I'd really miss my family. I'm really close with my parents, and not having them there and not having that feeling of security would kill me. If I have a major dilemma, the first thing I do is call my dad. He always

knows what to say and what I mean.

### **You've done a lot of TV guest roles. What are some of your favorites?**

The one I'm most proud of is *24*, two episodes, though I didn't work with Kiefer Sutherland. I was one of the four kids with anthrax in season three. *Malcolm in the Middle* was my first really big thing. I did the hour-long Super Bowl episode at Dodger Stadium where I played this super-angry, screaming girl. *CSI: Miami*, I was in the second season opener. I was a stuck-up rich girl, driving to the Keys with her boyfriend when a ship hits the bridge. A highway sign fell on the car; things were breaking everywhere. It was a small part, but so much fun. Most recently, I did a recurring role on *Still Standing*. My good friend Renee Olstead plays the daughter--we met years ago at a charity event and became good friends. I played a slut, and they gave me double Ds. It looked so silly on me--I'm only 5-foot-3! My mom, the lovely Jewish mother that she is, was standing there at the taping, yelling, "My God, look at Lauren's boobs!" Thanks, Mom!

### **Jewish and Blond?**

#### **Have you ever played a Jewish character?**

No. It's funny. [*Flight 29* co-star] Hallee Hirsh and I both auditioned for *Nip/Tuck* to play a Jewish girl getting a nose job, and she got it, and she's not Jewish. They looked at my picture and said, "You don't look Jewish. You have a tiny nose." It's all perception, I guess.

#### **Are people surprised to find out you're Jewish?**

Definitely. My dad is blond and blue-eyed, like me. He's German Lutheran and Mom's a German Jew. I was raised Jewish. We found a really happy medium in the family. He has attended temple with us, and we do some of the Christian holidays to honor my dad. We've made it work.

#### **How observant are you?**

Semi-observant. I did Sunday school. We celebrate the holidays. I like Passover because it's a feel-good holiday for me. I went to my friend Jessie's seder (her dad is Leonard Maltin), and I might join Jessie's temple. I don't know many Jews out here.

#### **You're from Chicago, right? Did you go to a Jewish school?**

The south suburbs. I actually went to a Catholic school--it was the best education in the area. That was hard, though. Catholic schoolgirls are brutal. I'd get beat up.

#### **For being Jewish?**

Partly. I was going to go to hell. I was a heathen. Plus, I was the smallest one and smart, so they picked on me. I told them exactly what I thought, and kids didn't like it. I had some good friends, but others were mean and cruel. But in the end it gave me character.

#### **Did you have a bat mitzvah?**

I didn't. I think I will have one later.

#### **Is it important for you to date Jewish guys?**

My mother is like, "Lauren, you need to find a nice Jewish boy." But not really--just as long as he treats me well and as long as the morals are there and the respect is there. I've had very little dating experience, but I'd like to date someone who is not an actor but understands the business. I work where I kiss other people. They have to understand that.

**Had you done any plays in Chicago?**

I was in *The Diary of Anne Frank* at my temple. I played Anne's German friend. It's such a sad story, but it really made me feel proud of who I am. I'm definitely proud of being Jewish, and I love to celebrate the holidays.

**Any desire to go to Israel?**

Definitely. Jessie and I are planning to do an Israel trip when we both have a chunk of time--the birthright trip. Things are kind of busy for both of us now.

**Staying in the Business****How did you get interested in acting?**

I was always really expressive and into performing. But I had a lot of confidence problems when I was younger, partly because of school. My mom decided to give me etiquette and modeling classes to build up my self-esteem a little bit. I did that for a while and then went to a convention in New York to meet agents and got invited to come to L.A.

**What was your first job?**

I did a commercial for the WNBA and then *Grounded for Life*, in the first season.

**What's next for you?**

I'm working on a movie, *Together Again for the First Time*. It's a holiday movie about a blended family, and when we get together everybody clashes. I play the eccentric, hyper baby sister who's engaged to my older sister's ex-boyfriend. She doesn't know, and I decide to tell her by bringing him to the holiday dinner. Patty Duke plays my mom. It shoots in Utah, and it's the first location shoot I'm doing without my mother.

**Do you have showbiz role models?**

I really like Meryl Streep and Laura Linney. They're two very genuine actresses that do really wholesome, real work.

**What does it take to have long careers like they've had?**

A lot of people get famous because of hype--one minute in the spotlight, one minute out. I think to stay in, you really need to work on yourself and on your craft and always do good work, always work hard, and always be humble. Remember who you are and be grateful for your success, not think that you're God's gift to creation if you get a little bit of success. It's very lucky when people are successful in our industry and are able to support themselves over the years. I always have to remember who I am and where I came from.

**Off the Set****What other things do you do in your free time?**

Listen to friends like Renee and the Veronicas play music. I also listen to Rufus Wainwright and the Scissor Sisters.

**Do you live with your parents?**

I just bought a townhouse in Burbank, Calif. My mom goes back and forth to Chicago, but she's slowly letting go. I'm the only child. I'm 19, and I'm still in transition. Mom makes sure I get the

bills done on time. Hopefully in a year, I'll be able to say, "I'm fine on my own." Once I'm settled I may get a puppy.

### **Any fun summer plans?**

I really want to catch up on the independent films I missed. When we were filming *Flight 29 Down*, we were on the north shore of Oahu, and there were like two movie theaters. And I want to catch up on some of the classics like *The Grapes of Wrath*. I haven't read enough, and I want to do that. I'm also going to be a presenter at the Special Olympics in June.

### **Do you work out?**

I do a lot of Pilates, about an hour every morning. Big butts run in my family and I have to keep the big butt at bay so I exercise a lot. I make sure I eat right--I eat a lot of vegetables and white protein and water, no soda.

### **Are you into fashion?**

I keep the shopping trips to a bare minimum. My aunt works for Chanel, and she sends me stuff. I'd never spend \$600 for a purse!

### **Do you plan to go to college?**

I'm going to take a few classes, one or two at a time, to keep my mind stimulated. I've always been really good at math, and I love design. I've just always been fascinated by it, and I think it's something I could be good at. If I can't act for whatever reason, can't get a job, I'd have a degree in architecture. I'd have a backup in something I like. And my parents will kill me if I don't get a degree!

### **But they're supportive of your acting career?**

Yes. As loud as we are, we're a very close and supportive family.

### **What goals do you set for yourself?**

I really want to become more cultured and more knowledgeable as I get older. I think education is really key. And being so busy, it's hard to remember that. I'd like to be in a film that really pushes me. I've done things that are challenging, but I want something really hard that I really have to work at. That would be good for me.



**Gerri Miller writes and reports about celebrities, entertainment and lifestyle for many publications, including *Life & Style Weekly*, *Glamour*, *CosmoGirl* and *Muscle & Fitness*. She is always on the lookout for young Members of the Tribe to profile in *JVibe*.**

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## A Jewish, Chinese and Gay Movie Explores Several Identities

By Oliver B. Pollak

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JTA. June 20, 2006. *The Conrad Boys*, a gay Chinese-American Jewish film, was shown at Frameline, San Francisco's 30th annual International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Film Festival.

This film is the debut production of 24-year-old writer, star and director, Justin Lo.

Lo, in his first film, looks at 19-year-old Southern Californian Charlie Conrad, played by Lo, who following the death of his Chinese Catholic mother is confronted with the improbable responsibility of raising his eight-year-old brother. Sibling rivalry does not prepare Charlie to parent, yet he gives up attending Columbia University to care for Ben.



During this period, Conrad confronts the anxiety of coming out and exploring his gay identity. Enter Jordan, played by Nick Bartzan, a misanthropic, predatory plagiarist, who provides further angst for the audience.

Conrad's brother Ben, played by Boo Boo Stewart, is devastated by his mother's death and acts out at home in *Dungeons and Dragons*. At school his tension is expressed in pictures and breaking a classmate's nose, and in the dark hours it comes out in nightmares about vampires.

Meanwhile, the boys' remorseful, alcoholic Jewish father, Doug, played by Barry Shay, returns, dried out, after a six-year absence, to accept responsibility.

Doug goes to temple, fasts on Yom Kippur, atones and seeks redemption and peace by attempting to mend his relationship with his sons--a relationship that included child abuse during Doug's drunken rages. Charlie is almost intractably opposed to the father's return and involvement in their lives, but Ben is more impressionable and needy, and he and his father bond in a warm fashion.

*The Conrad Boys* voices hope for making the right decisions even after making some horrendous, hurtful wrong ones.

Lo started this project at 20. He spent two years writing it, five weeks shooting it and 11 months in post-production.

The low-budget indie film features Lo's grandmother, aunt, cousin, and companion Jose Ramirez among the extras. Chelsea Lo, Justin's sister, a USC Music and Business graduate, composed the score. Despite the reliance on family, the film displays a high degree of professionalism.



At the film festival, the audience lined up around the block of the aging Mission district Victoria theater. The main floor and balcony were sold out. The size of the audience dwarfed the New York Newfest premiere in early June.

The Q & A after the film revealed an appreciative and responsive audience, some moved to tears, some identifying with one character or another, all applauding the thoughtful intimacy.

It turns out the film is not 100 percent autobiographical. In real life, Lo has a loving Jewish mother and Chinese father, and a younger sister who all get along just fine. Lo crammed a UCLA Anthropology degree with some summer work at USC Film School and diversions at NYU Tisch School of Drama and Parson's School of Design into the his four-year undergraduate education. He is now working on a Master's degree in professional writing at USC.

This sensitive film explores the intertwined dilemmas of fatherhood, childhood, death, and spiritual and sexual identity. You don't have to be Jewish or gay to appreciate it.



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