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# Web Magazine

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Issue 194: October 24, 2006

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## Lessons from Three Interfaith Families

By Sarah Litvin

Alison O'Donnell and her boyfriend Nick were determined to discuss the taboo subject of their differing faiths and religious backgrounds before they became engaged. They enrolled in a session of Yours, Mine and Ours, a program offered by the [Reform Movement in the Greater Boston area](#), to help understand more about the issues they were facing. They were nervous about a possible conversion agenda, but were soon put at ease. In their first class, Joyce Schwartz, the facilitator, said upfront, "this is about trying to understand what *you* want to do as a couple, it's not about trying to make you more Jewish." O'Donnell believes that the class setting--in a "library-ish" office building--supported this "non-threatening" message.

Further along in the life cycle, Jodi and Stuart Jackson were comfortable in their secular life when their 4-year-old son began asking to bring home the rituals he learned at his preschool at the Kansas City Jewish Community Center (the Jacksons had sent him there since it was the best in the area). Since neither Jodi nor Stuart felt connected to religion, the Jacksons were uncomfortable bringing these rituals into their home. Looking for a way to balance their own beliefs with those their son was learning in school, the Jacksons contacted Tamara Lawson-Schuster, the outreach coordinator for the JCC, who directed them to a panel discussion where interfaith couples described their issues and choices. This panel was part of the [Genesis program](#) offered by the JCC "to help interfaith couples and their loved ones address areas of concern in their relationships and to explore and understand their relationship to Judaism and the Jewish community." The Jacksons were impressed with the panel, and decided to enroll in Genesis themselves.

"For us, the program was perfect," says Jodi. [The facilitators] were not there to say you should be Jewish or not be Jewish, but that kids need a religious identity and you need to work out what that is going to be."

Susan Tivol, the facilitator, "challenged and welcomed" both Jodi and Stuart, and the program introduced Stuart (the non-Jewish partner) to the Jewish community so that he became more comfortable with it, says Jodi.

"Judaism is a bonus for our family," Jodi says. "We didn't think it was an imperative addition, but we have all found meaning in the ritual and community."

Claire and Alan Krusch were already parents of school-aged children when Claire decided to attend the Introduction to Judaism class at their synagogue, [Temple Beth El](#) in Charlotte, North Carolina. A non-Jew committed to raising Jewish children, Claire wanted "a social network of

people in similar situations" to help support and teach each other. Before taking the course, Claire says she felt like she had "a neon sign attached to my forehead saying 'non-Jew.'" But she says that Stephanie DePaolo (Beth El's interfaith and outreach coordinator) and the two rabbis who helped with the course were "accepting and embracing and they made us feel it is OK not to understand." Claire found Introduction to Judaism so useful and fulfilling, that she is now in the midst of another Beth El outreach program, a prelude to conversion program called Making Our Judaism Official, or MOJO.

Outreach professionals and participants agree that comfort and communication are the key attributes of successful outreach programs and experiences. Building a strong relationship of mutual respect with the facilitator or other program participants tends to help couples feel comfortable talking about personal beliefs. One of Jodi's favorite aspects of the Genesis program was when participants split up into small groups where two couples would discuss their experiences and challenges. She and Stuart have stayed in touch with another couple they met during one of these intimate discussions. "We just wish there were more class reunions!" Jodi says.

Jodi, Allison, and Claire all say that the key factor in the success of an outreach program is not in the program structure, but in participants' attitudes. In order to succeed, Jodi says you must "allow yourself to be open and challenged." Allison highlights the need to be "committed to focusing on the relationship, not just the wedding," while Claire thinks you must be "willing to ask your ignorant questions."

The experiences of the O'Donnells, Kruschs, and Jacksons illustrate how outreach programs to interfaith couples can help couples seeking various kinds of guidance at different stages in life--whether pre-engagement, after a child is born, or when the kids are a little older. Each couple left their program with a clearer sense of what role they want religion to play in their personal and family lives, and an understanding of how their and their partner's opinions and beliefs differ.

Even now, many years later, Yours, Mine, and Ours, Introduction to Judaism, and Genesis are more than just vivid memories for Allison, Claire, and Jodi. These programs continue to shape the couples' religious lives and relationships.

For information on how to find an outreach program in *your* area, visit [Connections In Your Area](#).



**Sarah Litvin was the 2006 summer editorial intern for InterfaithFamily.com. She is a senior majoring in Jewish Studies and History at Oberlin College, and a resident of Newton, Massachusetts.**

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# The Woman Who Helped a Methodist Join a Synagogue

**By Pam Chernoff**

My future inquisitor is now 15 months old. As of a week ago, she excitedly shouts "Bat, Bat" when I say, "Tonight's Shabbat (the Sabbath)."

What she means--you'll just have to take my word for this--is "Grape juice? I love grape juice!"

It's a start. Religion boiled down into a weekly sip of juice. As for the deep questions that will come later, I guess I'm as ready as I'll ever be.

It isn't easy being a Jewish mother when you're a Methodist.

But happily, when the tough question that pops out of my daughter Sarah's mouth isn't on one of my mental note cards of important information to impart, and I've managed to confuse or upset her, Dawn Kepler will have a ready response--or at least some reassurance--and I'll get off the phone feeling like maybe I'm not such a bad mom after all.

Dawn runs [Building Jewish Bridges](#), the interfaith program of the Jewish Federation of the Greater East Bay--the area across the Bay Bridge from San Francisco that spans Oakland, Berkeley, and points north and south. Thanks to her, those mental note cards have spaces for different answers for different ages. They also have a reminder to listen closely, and a notation that it's OK for me to answer, "What do *you* think?" Another says, "Forgive yourself."

Those note cards got there through numerous trips to interfaith programs organized by Dawn--a panel of parents talking about how they were raising their kids, an eight-week couples' discussion group, a program that featured the grown or almost-grown children of interfaith couples, another program about preserving your own traditions as the non-Jewish parent in a Jewish household, three years of attending an interfaith havurah she got off the ground.

In the almost four years I've lived in the East Bay, I've seen Dawn work her magic in settings large and small. She isn't a psychotherapist, but like any good counselor she meets people where they are, gives them a safe space to figure out what they really need, and helps them to get where they need to go. It isn't easy. Regardless of the partners' backgrounds, religion is fraught with issues of identity, loyalty to one's heritage, and hopes for one's children. But I've seen people leave programs she's run looking like the weight of the world had been taken off their shoulders.

Her main points are simple but difficult. Make choices. Follow up on them. Figure out what values are most important to you. Teach them to your children.

When my husband Joel and I started attending Dawn's programs, we were questioning *how* more than *what*. We had decided to raise a Jewish family before we got married, but we needed help figuring out exactly what that would mean in practice. When we joined the couples' discussion group at the end of 2003 we were looking as much for social connections as for help in figuring out how to conduct our religious life as a family.

We knew the children we didn't yet have would be Jewish, and we had started to look for a synagogue.

But as the eight-week session progressed, Dawn helped me articulate something I hadn't yet realized I needed--to find a way to be my unambiguously Christian self in a Jewish community. Not because I wanted to try to change anyone, but because I'm fully capable of feeling so self-conscious about being different that I try to hide. Joel and I were both certain that we wanted to find a synagogue that would be ours as a family, not just somewhere that he conducted his religious life while I conducted mine elsewhere. We were looking for community.

I wish I could point to a moment of epiphany--I've certainly been present for the moment when the clouds part for others--but instead what I got was a creeping certainty that I could choose to be comfortable being different and see where it took me.

It has taken me into the arms of a loving, diverse, small congregation where it's impossible to be anonymous, and where although I am aware of being different, I'm not sheepish about it. It has helped me be confident enough to roll up my sleeves and ask that most powerful of questions: "How can I help?" Some of the answers to that question have surprised me.

Every year around the High Holidays, Dawn writes a thank you note to the rabbi who, much to her surprise, told her in a meeting with the congregation's president that she'd agreed to coordinate interfaith programs. She's not the only one who's grateful.

Thank you, Dawn. I'll be calling you when Sarah starts asking questions about religion. But before that, I'll call to ask if you've heard the one about the Methodist mom who's about to start teaching Jewish Sunday school.



**Pam Chernoff lives in Pinole, California. She is a part-time project director at a nonprofit research organization and the rest of the time is a stay-at-home mom.**



## The Road Taken

**By Hedi Molnar**

A joke my husband and I tell is that we attended interfaith groups for so long because we always failed the course. In other words: we couldn't come to an agreement on how to raise our children religiously.

We joined our first interfaith group shortly before we became parents in 1995. I saw an ad for a couples group at the 92nd Street Y, in New York City, where we then lived. My husband, who is Roman Catholic, agreed to attend after he had contacted the archdiocese and not found any services for interfaith families.

For us, what's most important in interfaith groups is the other participants. Among the 10 or so couples in that 92nd Street Y group, we were the only pair already married. However, numerous weddings were imminent. The group members quickly developed into supportive peers and shared many hopes and frustrations about intermarriage... as well as frustration with our leader, who often arrived late and had difficulty remembering our names and stories. But, the group was cohesive, and for a time we organized social events (planned by group members) and even a weekend at the beach together. A decade later, we still exchange holiday cards and occasional calls with two of the families.

When we moved to New Jersey in 1996 with our one-year old daughter, we found the Pathways program. There we met couples in situations like our own and have remained in each other's social circles for nearly 10 years. In Pathways we also found dedicated staff and caring professional support for our family. The program's openly stated mission was to encourage families to raise their children Jewishly; no surprise, as the program was supported by the Jewish federation. However, the nonjudgmental atmosphere at meetings encouraged participants of any religion to speak freely.

The couples' meetings at Pathways were led by the administrator and a social worker. We had a core group that attended meetings, usually held monthly, for about three years. Often, we discussed holiday rituals for Jews and Christians--and it usually resulted in the Christmas tree question: to have or not to have, if you were trying to raise Jewish children. So much discussed was the tree issue that when it was inevitably raised, there were groans in the room. But the tree, besides a Christmas tradition, is a symbol of complex interfaith issues.

Another common theme was: winners and losers. If a single faith was chosen for the children, then the other spouse had to cope with the loss of their religion in the family. Our group's social

worker often spoke, with great sensitivity, of the importance of giving children a religious identity in one faith while balancing respect for the beliefs of the other parent. As we progressed in our journey I became increasingly tenacious about having our daughter, who was adopted in China, raised Jewishly. Factors, I believe, that helped sway my husband were that the Jewish people are a minority facing potential extinction and the lack, attributable to the Holocaust, of any descendants in my maternal family.

Listening and responding to the frustrations expressed by other people in the group helped us to tolerate and seek to resolve our own situation. The couples who stayed the longest in the group were those who are trying to raise Jewish children. We still celebrate Jewish holidays and lifecycle events, like a recent Bar Mitzvah, with some of those families.

Pathways enrollment was never huge--few families, I've observed, are willing to grapple with interfaith issues in an open forum. For us, the discussions, especially in the couples' group, inevitably led to more heated and emotional conversations on the ride home! However, my husband is always open to learning and in our years attending interfaith groups, I believe he never found Judaism to undermine his Catholic beliefs.

As our older daughter approached school age my husband and I decided to enter Pathway's family program, which gave us a chance to learn about Judaism as a family. We met on Sundays, once or twice a month, and if a family chose they could attend for two years.

While the children learned about holidays through crafts and stories, the parents often talked with guest speakers. Several rabbis came to speak about various holidays and the history of the Jewish people, and we were visited by Jewish educators. We had the chance to learn about Judaism and to ask questions. Gaining familiarity with the Jewish religion definitely helped us to make the decision to raise our children in the faith. We also met with couples who had made the interfaith journey and now had grown children, adding another perspective on our situation.

The family program met at a Reform temple and the rabbi introduced us to the sanctuary, even unrolling the Torah (sacred scroll) across the laps of the children. At Sukkot the rabbi invited us to his home to help assemble the sukkah (outdoor structure) where his family would have meals during the holiday. After the sukkah was built, we learned about rituals for the holiday: waving the lulav (palm branch) and smelling the fragrant etrog (citrus fruit), followed by a dinner of festive foods. All of our senses were engaged in learning about Judaism.

Pathways gave us a framework for understanding Jewish beliefs and rituals: We "practiced" Shabbat (Sabbath) candle lighting and prayers and held "mock" Passover seders (ritual dinners) with specially prepared family haggadot (books that tell the story of Passover) at our table. The Pathways haggadah is great for young children and we used it for years at our Passover table.

So, in a warm and supportive atmosphere we learned about Judaism and slowly, incrementally, decided to raise our daughter (we had one child then) Jewishly.

After our two years with Pathways and a moving graduation ceremony, we began to consider joining a synagogue. We knew of a Reform temple in our area that welcomed interfaith families and attended an open house for prospective members. My husband talked with the temple president and the rabbi to learn about the congregation. Seeing my enthusiasm, coupled with the

fact that the religious school was about to begin for the year, my husband agreed to the temple membership. Despite his wariness, I reasoned with him that we needed to continue Rachel's religious education. As a family, we had already brought Judaism into our home and synagogue membership was the next step in the journey.

We joined Temple Ner Tamid (eternal light) in Bloomfield, N.J., when our older daughter, who is now almost 12, was in first grade. At the time, I don't think either of us realized how much the synagogue would become a part of our lives.

Our synagogue has many interfaith families, multiracial families and Jews-by-choice; we are interfaith and our two daughters were adopted in China. Since we joined, about five years ago, my husband has become increasingly comfortable at services and temple events. This Rosh Hashanah he took our five-year old daughter to the Tot Service on his own, and I went to the Youth Service with our older daughter.

For me, Pathways awakened my Jewishness. After not knowing--literally--an aleph from a bet (Hebrew alphabet) all my life, a Pathways teacher encouraged me to learn the language of our prayers. She even gave me a set of self-teaching books which set me on the path... Some four years later I had an adult Bat Mitzvah and continue to deepen my understanding and love of Judaism.

Sadly, Pathways was dismantled by the Jewish federation in our area. I don't know where our family would be now religiously without the years of interfaith support, wide-open ears and Jewish teaching we had in Pathways.

From generation to generation: With the longtime support of a meaningful outreach program, we are following the road of Jewish belief taken by my ancestors and walking toward our daughter Rachel's Bat Mitzvah in 2008.



**Hedi Molnar, a writer and editor, lives in New Jersey with her husband and two daughters. Her family belongs to Temple Ner Tamid in Bloomfield, N.J.**

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# When "Half-Jews" Marry Jews

**By Alexandra J. Wall**

The first time Paul Bosky heard "Shalom Aleichem"--the song that greets the Sabbath angels--around the Sabbath table, tears came to his eyes.

"When I heard the Hebrew, it was as if it harkened to something in me on a cellular level," he said.

Paul, whose mother is Jewish but who was raised Unitarian Universalist, did not set out to meet a Jewish woman.

Neither did David Zonana, who despite having an Egyptian Jewish father and a Protestant mother, was raised with a little bit of both, but more of neither. Yet he met and married Joanne Miller, a strongly identified Jewish woman.

"My parents didn't look to religion to govern their lives or teach their children," he said.

Before he met his wife, Zonana considered Judaism an interesting part of his cultural background. Even though Joanne isn't very religious, he realized that Judaism is important to her.

"I was comfortable with it because I had a family background," he said. "And once I met Joanne's parents and the rabbi, I got a sense of why it was important to them. It was an easy decision."

David and Joanne were in the same Introduction to Judaism class as Paul and I, one of two couples who consist of one full Jew and one "half-Jew."

What's interesting about these two couples is that both Joanne and I--who met on an Israel trip when we were 15--definitely preferred to marry Jewish men. And we did, it's just that they are partially Jewish in background, but did not identify as Jews prior to meeting us.

Like me, Joanne also became a bat mitzvah, attended summer camp and spent time in Israel.

"I couldn't see raising children not Jewish," she said.

As Rabbi Jane Litman pointed out in the Intro class we took, David and Paul are among the first generation of "half-Jews" to come of age, since their parents were among the first generation of Jews to intermarry in significant numbers.

"I've had my eye on the so-called 'half-Jew' phenomenon for about 10 years now," said the rabbi, recognizing that that phrase is inherently problematic.

"And what's interesting about our class was that we had two people in that situation who chose to marry full Jews. This is happening a lot, and it's a little under the radar of demographers. They tend to indicate there's so much marrying out, and they tend to miss that point, that someone with mixed heritage is marrying someone fully Jewish, and their kids will be extremely Jewish-identified yet have a bit of mixed heritage. This is worth looking at for the Jewish community."

Rabbi Jane has a reputation as being open-minded, and she performs many interfaith marriages. But in so doing, she said she sees more couples like us than one would think.

Noting that studies in the '70s said that children of intermarriage would most likely not be Jewish, she said this is simply not true.

While her experience is purely anecdotal, she said she sees many such "half-Jews" making Jewish choices.

"A lot of them make an identity for themselves as partially Jewish, or they fall in love with Jews or other half-Jews, and then end up as totally part of a Jewish community and being nothing other than Jewish," she said. "They're either with someone both of whose parents are Jewish or who is another half-Jew, and they end up with a rabbi marrying them. That's a choice toward Judaism."

Rabbi Jane also noted that even though it is the mother who, according to Jewish law, is the one who determines whether the child is Jewish or not, many with Jewish fathers end up identifying strongly as Jews because if they have a Jewish last name, other people make that assumption about them.

"In many ways, that's even more of a powerful experience, if all their lives they have been externally identified as Jews," she said. "That's really a shaping experience, and I think it pushes them in that direction. It becomes part of their reality even if they're raised in another faith. It's an attachment that eventually begs for a question, and then the question begs for an answer."

The rabbi takes a different approach to intermarriage than most of her colleagues.

"I think intermarriage isn't as big a problem as other rabbis [think]. If we can't support mixed couples then we're going to have a hard time making it."

Speaking of her own congregation, [Temple Beth El](#) in Berkeley, Calif., she said, "We're filled with mixed families, and I think a Jewish community can thrive and grow with members who are born Jewish and those who choose it and allies and beloveds of Jews. This is the challenge and joy of living in a diverse and free society."

Additionally, she said, an infusion of non-Jewish blood mixing with the insular Jewish community is a good thing. "I've buried two babies who died of Jewish genetic diseases," she said. "I think marriage to people who aren't born Jewish is a good opportunity to broaden the gene pool."

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# Welcoming Synagogue Led Me to Judaism

By Lawrence MacDonald

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Special to WJW

My first step along the path to becoming a Jew was when I met Hannah Moore, the beautiful Jewish woman who later became my wife. But the decisive moment, the moment without which I would not today be a proud member of the Jewish people, came years later, when I entered the sanctuary of Temple Rodef Shalom in Falls Church, Virginia.

It was Purim, 13 years after I met Hannah, and seven years after we were married. We had recently moved to Arlington, Virginia, after years of living in Asia. Hannah had enrolled our three-year-old daughter in the TRS nursery school. As we stepped into the sanctuary, Rabbis Lazlo Berkowitz and Amy Schwartzman, dressed in white aprons and tall white bakers' hats, were running around the bima, shouting, laughing and throwing balls of hamantashen dough at each other and the congregation, as part of the annual Purim spiel.

I knew a bit about Judaism from reading and conversations with Hannah. But I knew nothing about Purim and was quite unprepared for the exuberant manner in which Rabbi Berkowitz, a survivor of Auschwitz, conveyed to scores of delighted children the core values of Jewish survival in the face of murderous oppression.

Soon I was joining Hannah and our kids at Tot Shabbat, then at regular services, and eventually at the High Holy Days services. The beauty of the liturgy and the warmth of the congregation made me begin to wish I were a part of the Jewish people. But I was not ready to admit that I was considering conversion, not to myself and certainly not to Hannah or the rabbi.

The tipping point came with an invitation to an "Ask the Rabbi" session for intermarried couples organized by the temple's outreach committee. About a dozen couples were present. "Rabbi," I said, "Hannah has told me that her father used to bless her on Shabbat. Could I as a non-Jew say this blessing?"

"Well," said the rabbi. "It is very good to bless your children, and you could find some other blessing that you would like to say, or you could write a blessing that expresses your feelings."

"That's not my question," I said. "Could I, as a non-Jew, say the same blessing that Hannah's

father recited?" (I had no idea that the blessing was about "carrying forward the life of our people," and could thus have meaning only if recited by a Jew.)

Rabbi Berkowitz repeated his polite answer. Sensing that I was on to something important, I repeated my question a third time. "Could I, as a non-Jew, say the same blessing over our children that my wife's father recited for her?"

At my third question, the rabbi's answer changed. "I think you better come see me," he replied.

I realized then, and with increasing clarity later, that the rabbi had discerned in me something that I myself had yet to recognize: an incipient desire to become a practicing Jew. I not only wanted to recite the Shabbat blessing over the children, I also wanted to lead our family seder. I wanted to be a part of the marvelous community I glimpsed. I wanted to be a Jew.

The rabbi suggested that I enroll in an Introduction to Judaism class organized by Washington-area Reform temples, supplemented by occasional meetings with him. My studies begun, suddenly I was able to tell myself and others that I was "considering" conversion.

Long story short: Eighteen months later I had a conversion ceremony, complete with an appearance before a beit din, religious court, and a dipping in the mikvah, ritual pool; two years after that I had a bar mitzvah ceremony, chanting Torah and sharing my thoughts about becoming a Jew with assembled members of the congregation.

Like other members of TRS, I'm still learning, working to become a better Jew. But I feel fully accepted as a member of our community, and am proud to be an active participant in the Jewish education of our children. During my studies for conversion, I told the rabbi I was worried that I might not be fully accepted because MacDonald is not a Jewish name. "Don't worry," he said. "It will be."

What changed? Why seven years after I married Hannah did I finally embark on becoming a Jew? In Asia--we lived in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Beijing, Korea and Manila--the small congregations were ill-equipped to welcome outsiders. Each year Hannah would attend the High Holy Days services at a local synagogue, then visit again in December to obtain candles for her chanukiah.

The members, she told me, were unsure what to make of a young, transient American Jewish woman. There were certainly no outreach programs, no "ask the Rabbi" sessions for intermarried families.

Without such programs, my interest in becoming a Jew lay dormant. Today, I know it was there all the time, waiting to be awakened by the warm welcome that I received at Temple Rodef Shalom.

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**Lawrence MacDonald, director of communications and policy at the Center for Global Development, a Washington, D.C., think tank, lives in Arlington with his wife, Hannah Moore, and their two children, Muriel and Isaac.**



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# This Baby Naming Won't Be The Same

By Julie Wiener

Reprinted with permission from [The Jewish Week](#).

When my older daughter, Ellie, was about a month old, I took her to a meeting with Rabbi Josh Simon to plan her naming ceremony.

In the rabbi's crowded, tiny office at the Actors Temple in Manhattan, I carefully unpacked Ellie from the Baby Bjorn carrier, and just as I was showing her off, she let forth one of those noisy, explosive bowel movements that infants do on a fairly regular basis.

Rabbi Josh was amused.

"Perhaps this is her first commentary on Judaism and rabbinic authority," he suggested, smiling at the challenges this rebellious future congregant might pose. A career changer who had originally been a journalist and rock musician, Rabbi Josh was fond of rebels, questioners and those on the fringes, and it was one of the many things I liked about him.

I'd met the rabbi a few months earlier while working on an article, and I'd taken an instant shine to him. With an earring in one ear, black hipster glasses and a colorful Bukharan yarmulke, he didn't look like your typical rabbi. He was friendly and there was something refreshingly genuine about him; he lacked the political smoothness so many rabbis possess, particularly when they speak to the media.

Like many rabbis I'd interviewed, Rabbi Josh urged me to come for services and to consider joining his congregation. Usually I politely declined such invitations, but this time I agreed, even though the temple wasn't particularly convenient to my Queens apartment.

I felt like Rabbi Josh was a kindred spirit somehow. Was it because we were both somewhat moody journalists? Was it because he seemed, like me, to be attracted to Judaism, yet wasn't entirely convinced it had all the answers? During one conversation with my husband Joe and me, he referred to the deity as "God, or whoever."

I also liked that Rabbi Josh felt strongly about including intermarried and gay couples, and that he genuinely welcomed children. He didn't mind when kids made noise or ran around the sanctuary. At Shabbat services he always passed out colorful plush toy Torahs, baskets of maracas and other noisemakers for children to shake.

When Rabbi Josh and I began planning Ellie's naming ceremony--part of a Shabbat morning service that would be held the following spring--I assumed that she would grow up knowing Rabbi Josh, and it pleased me to think of my daughter enjoying a comfortable relationship from birth with a rabbi and a synagogue.

Ellie's naming ceremony was one of the Jewish high points of my life and certainly the most meaningful Shabbat service I have ever attended. Rabbi Josh sang and played the electric guitar, and our Jewish and non-Jewish friends and family filled the sanctuary. When I had an aliyah, joined by my husband and baby daughter, I felt for the first time like I belonged up on the bima.

I like to think that Shabbat morning was a high point for Rabbi Josh as well. A few weeks earlier, he'd learned that after years of trying, his wife was finally pregnant. The sanctuary, rarely anywhere near full on Shabbat morning, was bustling, with toddlers in the aisles and babies crawling on the steps of the bima.

My second daughter, Sophie is now the same age Ellie was when she first met Rabbi Josh, and I'm sad that, not only will there be no meeting with the rabbi about a naming ceremony, there will be no meeting with him at all. This month actually marks the first anniversary of Rabbi Josh's death from a brain tumor.

Diagnosed shortly after Ellie's naming ceremony, Rabbi Josh battled the cancer for almost a year and a half. During that time, his twin sons Dylan and Marley were born and he underwent an exhausting schedule of chemotherapy. For awhile, it looked like he would survive, and I'm ashamed to say that when it did, I took him and his services for granted. Assuming there would always be another Shabbat, that there would always be another time to be active in the synagogue or to get to know Rabbi Josh, I didn't show up for services very often. Day-to-day life and laziness got in the way, as did my reluctance to engage in shul politics.

When Rabbi Josh died in a hospice last August, he left behind a wife, infant sons and countless friends and admirers. My family's loss is trivial compared to the loss suffered by his loved ones, particularly the twins who will never know their father. Nonetheless, I will always be grateful to him for Ellie's beautiful naming ceremony, and I will also always regret that my family and I did not become better acquainted with him--and Judaism--when he was alive.

A year later, we are no longer members of the Actors Temple, and I'm still trying to figure out whether we're ready to pay dues and commit to attending services regularly somewhere else. I have organized occasional children's services and Jewish holiday parties in my local community, Jackson Heights, and am hoping that will eventually grow into something more established.

So Sophie's naming ceremony will be very different from Ellie's. Without a synagogue or a rabbi, the service will have more of a do-it-yourself feel, and in some ways that will be a good thing. Designing and facilitating my own ceremony feels a bit daunting, but will force me to learn more and feel more empowered--something I think Rabbi Josh would have approved of.

And maybe God, or whoever, would as well.

Special to *The Jewish Week*



**Julie Wiener's column on intermarried life appears the third week of the month in *The Jewish Week*. She can be reached at [julie.inthemix@gmail.com](mailto:julie.inthemix@gmail.com).**

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# He Never Gave Up on Anybody

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

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Egon Mayer will be remembered for many things, particularly his groundbreaking research on Jewish identity and on intermarriage, and his advocacy for outreach to interfaith families. Yet the thing for which he will be most remembered by those who knew him will be his *menschlichkeit*.

Mr. Mayer, a longtime scholar of American Jewish identity and a sociologist whose work will shape the policies of Jewish communal organizations for years to come, died last Friday of gall bladder cancer. He was 59.

Hundreds attended his funeral Sunday at the Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore in Plandome, L.I., and nearly a dozen people eulogized him. They all talked about his goodness.

Though Mr. Mayer had strong opinions, his gentle and diplomatic manner, combined with his slight Hungarian accent, gave him a kind of European courtliness.

"Egon was such a sweetheart," said Rela Mintz Geffen, president of Baltimore Hebrew University, who worked with him for 25 years and delivered one of the eulogies. "He had the great ability to bring together disparate points of view. He had grace."

Though Mr. Mayer was a sociologist immersed in data, he never lost sight of the fact that the numbers were about real people whose Jewish lives were full of inconsistency, texture and nuance.

He was invariably optimistic. While other sociologists were full of doom and gloom about the results of the 1990 and 2000 National Jewish Population Surveys, Mr. Mayer viewed the intermarriage rate as an opportunity rather than certain disaster.

"He cared about all Jews," Geffen said. "Being the child of Holocaust survivors, he felt strongly that he wanted to save every Jew possible and never gave up on anybody. Some people thought he was too lenient, too inclusive, in the way he would count people in" as members of the Jewish community, "but they didn't understand that this is what it came from."

Mr. Mayer was born in Switzerland and raised in Budapest, immigrating with his family to the

United States during the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. He attended the Toras Emes Kaminetzer yeshiva in Brooklyn, and then earned a bachelor's degree at Brooklyn College.

After earning a master's at The New School for Social Research and his doctorate at Rutgers, Mr. Mayer returned to Brooklyn College in 1970 to teach. He stayed at the school for more than 30 years, ultimately working as the chair of the sociology department.

His successor and longtime colleague Roberta Satow has kept a picture of Mr. Mayer on her desk since his cancer diagnosis in August. She looks at the photo when she thinks her tone might become too sharp.

"I sometimes tend to be too direct, but he was always very tactful and considerate," Satow said. "I look at it when I'm talking to someone to remind me to reconsider what I'm going to say."

Mr. Mayer's career was multifaceted though always focused on the well-being of the Jewish community. In the early years of his work as a sociologist, he focused on the Orthodox world. But by the late 1970s, his interest turned to intermarriage and conversion.

He worked as director of the Center for Jewish Studies at the City University of New York Graduate School, and as a head of the North American Jewish Data Bank, which "owned" the information from the 1990 NJPS at the time of its publication. Mr. Mayer also was a member of the National Technical Advisory Committees for the 1990 and 2000 surveys.

He was founding director of the Jewish Outreach Institute, an organization focused on the needs of interfaith families. Mr. Mayer conducted many studies--most recently the American Jewish Identity Survey in 2001--about intermarriage, philanthropy and other aspects of Jewish identity. He authored many monographs and articles on those subjects, as well.

Mr. Mayer wrote two books, *From Suburb to Shtetl: The Jews of Boro Park* (1979) and *Love and Tradition: Marriage Between Jews and Christians* (1985) He also maintained a Web site, and was working on a book on Rudolf Kasztner, the rescuer of Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust whose negotiations with Adolf Eichmann permitted his parents, along with some 1,600 other Hungarian Jews, to buy their freedom.

Mr. Mayer, a man with modest comportment, a scholarly air and a twinkle in his eye, influenced many.

Ed Case, publisher of the Web magazine *InterfaithFamily.com*, traveled from his Boston home to be at the funeral.

"I'm intermarried myself and in the 1990s, when I looked to see if the Jewish community would be welcoming to my family, Egon was one of the only people in the Jewish communal world who seemed to be creating that," said Case. "Before I ever met him he had a very big impact on my life. When I met him it became more personal. He was a hero for me."

Satow said, "He was a role model for me as a human being, as a mensch. He was a role model to an awful lot of people."

Mr. Mayer even handled his months-long battle against painful abdominal cancer with remarkable grace, said his wife, Marsha Kramer Mayer, never indulging in self-pity.

Last Thursday, Marsha recalled, she was crying as she sat by his bedside. Half-teasingly, "Egon said, 'don't cry at my party.' And then he slipped into semi-consciousness," she said. He died the next day.

They met in 1986 when she answered his *New York* magazine personal ad. Marsha sent him a copy of an article that had been written about her in *The New York Times* Long Island section. In response, he sent her an article that had been written about him in *The Jewish Week*.

Their first date was Shabbat dinner at his house, Marsha recalls. The following Tuesday, he gave her the first of many poems that he wrote for her.

Though they faced challenges--they both had school-age children, they lived in different communities and came from much different Jewish backgrounds--"right away, we knew it was serious," she said.

"I suppose it's strange that it's not grief, but right now my main feeling is that I'm lucky that I had 18 years with him," Marsha said. "It was a joy every minute I was with him."

Mr. Mayer is also survived by a daughter, Daphne; two stepdaughters, Rena Fox and Danielle Kramer; his mother, Hedy, of Borough Park; and a brother, George, of Staten Island.



**Debra Nussbaum Cohen is a staff writer for the *New York Jewish Week*.**

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# Interfaith Couples Find Solace in JCCSF Group

By Angela Priven

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Friday, September 29, 2006 - In her mid-20s, Gerelee Goltsev, a secular Russian Jewish childhood émigré, was growing more connected to the Jewish community and religion. But when she met Richard Howard at work, sparks flew and a deep connection formed, despite the fact that the two came from very different backgrounds--Richard was Catholic.

While some voices in the Jewish religion decry intermarriage as a loss to the Jewish community and turn their backs on Jews who have "betrayed the faith," more pragmatic members of the community have reacted by catering to this growing demographic. Their intention is to help intermarrying Jews hold onto their religion and figure out how to pass it down to their children.

"According to the 2004 Jewish Federation study, 56 percent of Jews are intermarrying. That number has been slowly creeping up since the first National Jewish Population Study came out in the 1980s," says Helena McMahon, a marriage and family therapist who has been leading discussion groups for interfaith couples at the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco for the last two years.

The JCCSF's [Interfaith Connection](#) began in 1986, as a reaction to the growing interfaith community in the Bay Area and was the first of its kind in the country. Twenty years later, the Reform Jewish community is catering to interfaith couples and families at their synagogues and institutions.

When McMahon took over as the head of Interfaith Connection she brought not only professional expertise, but also personal experience to her job. She's a Jew married to a Catholic. When she led her most recent interfaith discussion group, a class consisting of five Jewish and Catholic couples, she was a discussion leader with a participant's experience. She says that Jewish and Catholic couples comprise about 60 percent of the couples she sees at work.

"Jewish and Catholic cultures make an interesting combination. Within Judaism lie the roots of Catholicism, which creates an immediate familiarity for the Catholic partner. Catholics and Jews have a lot in common in terms of religious imagery, rituals and symbols, and they often complement one another in levels of expressiveness, styles of communication and political

viewpoints," McMahon says.

The couples who enroll in the JCCSF's seven-week interfaith discussion groups have typically just gotten engaged, married or pregnant and are anticipating tough marital issues, says McMahon. Many of the discussions are centered around how to raise children, and how to deal with holidays and extended family.

While the program is offered through a Jewish institution, McMahon is careful not to advocate for couples to choose Judaism, but rather to ask both partners to think about what religion means to them and the role it plays in their life. Sometimes marrying a partner outside of their faith can reinvigorate religious expression for either partner. Counterintuitively, interfaith relationships can be a catalyst for deepening personal spirituality.

The most important role of the discussion group, according to participants, is to connect people who feel isolated by their decision to marry outside their faith. The couples in the discussion groups often connect deeply after sharing their stories, fears and experiences. Goltsev's group has gotten together twice after their group sessions ended, to socialize and sustain the friendships formed.

"I think that one of the hardest things about being in an interfaith relationship is feeling alienated from your partner and community. Meeting other couples like us gave us a new community to fit into that were experiencing the issues we were," Goltsev says.

Howard, now Goltsev's fiancé, says that he learned a great deal about his own relationship from the experiences and stories of other couples.

Though no one left the group with all their questions about spirituality and values answered, they were happy to begin this dialogue in such a supportive, comfortable environment among a demographic of people who were just like them.

At a recent barbeque at Howard and Goltsev's house in Guerneville there were lots of jokes about what really brings the Jewish and the Catholic couples together.

"We share an intimate understanding of guilt," Howard chuckled.

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**Angela Priven is a correspondent for *j. the Jewish news weekly of northern California*.**

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# Circle of Friends: Non-Jewish Mothers of Jewish Children Set to Meet

By Jane Calem Rosen

Reprinted and adapted from *The Jewish Standard*.

October 12, 2006

Teaneck, New Jersey--When Jodee Fink shows up at the [Temple Emeth](#) library at 10 a.m. on Sunday, for the first meeting of the synagogue's program for non-Jewish mothers of Jewish children, she's hoping to find others like herself: a Catholic committed to raising her children as Jews. "I want to find other women I can relate to, people with whom I have a lot in common, to see how they are pursuing their own faith journeys while raising Jewish children," said Fink. The initial hour-long meeting, she said, will gauge interest within the community for a group of this sort and explore potential programming.

Temple Emeth's Rabbi Steven Sirbu believes the time is right for a local initiative supporting women he calls "an important part of the Jewish future."

"The core idea," he told *The Jewish Standard*, "is that non-Jewish mothers have religious and social needs. I hope that Temple Emeth will be seen as a place for anyone who is part of the Jewish community, and I see these women as part of the Jewish community. [The group's] primary function is that non-Jewish mothers understand they are supported in a synagogue context and can learn about the important roles they have in raising Jewish children."

Sirbu said he intends to support the group in any way he can, although he will take his cue from participants, waiting for them to identify needs and interests. He indicated that he will be responsive to the group's evolving dynamic, and invited the *Standard* to track the progress of the program. "Hopefully, in three to four months, the group will have a direction [plotted], and you can do a follow-up story," he said.

The genesis for the program, Sirbu explained, was a reinvigoration of the synagogue's Outreach Committee that has been taking place over the last year. This was one idea of several that the committee hopes to implement under its new chair, David Zatz, whose wife of 13 years is Presbyterian. While she has no interest in converting to Judaism, Kate Zatz has been the driving force, said her husband, behind the family's involvement at Temple Emeth, and they already have a date for 10-year-old Zoe's bat mitzvah. When the Zatzes met 15 years ago, Kate Zatz recalled,

she felt strongly that their children have one firm identity. Because their two faiths have the Five Books of Moses and the rest of the Hebrew Bible in common, Zatz said, she believed it would be logical for the household to follow Jewish practice.

Looking back, however, she realizes that she was "a little naïve about what it meant to [raise children] in a Jewish home. It's not just about the religion, but also about the culture, learning a new language, and the fact that they [the children] [are entitled to] dual citizenship [in the U.S. and in Israel] in their lives.

"Fortunately, you grow up with your children, and we're fortunate to be in a temple that offers a support system and opportunities to learn," said Zatz, a vice president of student development at SUNY-Rockland and chairman of the board of the American Public University System.

David Zatz, a private consultant in organizational development and survey research for business change who grew up attending a small Orthodox shul in Highland Park, is equally grateful to Temple Emeth and the Reform movement for making him and his family welcome in the Jewish community. Before they joined Temple Emeth about six years ago, he said, his experience with local congregations in other streams of Judaism was not positive. One rabbi, he said, suggested that he reconsider his marriage--"not a possibility."

"Rejection has not stemmed intermarriage," noted Zatz, expressing support for the Reform movement's commitment to outreach to the intermarried as a way to draw in such families "so that we won't lose as many as we used to [by rejecting them]."

Zatz and his committee have a busy schedule of events planned for the upcoming months, hoping to attract unaffiliated interfaith families along with those who already belong to Temple Emeth. He enumerated several events already on the calendar: "On Dec. 3, we're doing 'The Tree Thing,' a look at the Christmas tree conundrum; on Jan. 31, we'll hold 'Ritual for Beginners,' followed by a 'Taste of Judaism' in February. We'll also do something for Passover and Shavuot."

The group for non-Jewish mothers of Jewish children, he explained, is just one facet of this full-blown outreach effort, designed to create a homier, more intimate feeling of support for the many who he believes are out there and in need of this service. Referring to Jewish men married to non-Jewish women, whose children are not recognized as Jewish by Jewish law, Zatz contended, "There are such a large percentage of people marrying out. It's crazy to say to people, 'You're Jewish, but you're not allowed to pass it on to your children.'"

For more information about the program, call Temple Emeth at (201) 833-1322.



**Jane Calem Rosen is a staff writer for *The Jewish Standard*.**

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## *Sex, God, Christmas and Jews*

**By Faye Rapoport**

Review of [\*Sex, God, Christmas and Jews\*](#), by Gil Mann (On Line Marketing, Inc., 2006).

In 1997, former businessman, Jewish non-profit volunteer and author Gil Mann launched a discussion area of American Online titled "Judaism Today: Where Do I Fit In?" He posted an announcement that he would be collecting any mail he received for possible anonymous publication in a book. The result was an inundation of emails, from Jews and non-Jews alike, posing questions about Judaism, its laws and values, and its relevance in modern life. Mann featured some of the most poignant or thought-provoking emails in an online column along with his own responses, then invited additional feedback from readers.

*Sex, God, Christmas & Jews* is a compilation of many of these emails and responses, organized into chapters on Ethics, Spirituality and Peoplehood and approached from the author's own Jewish perspective. Anonymous voices in cyberspace ask questions about Jewish customs and religious laws, tell personal stories of confusion, pain and soul-searching or ask pointed questions about the relationship between Jews and non-Jewish individuals and communities. Can Jews donate their organs? Why is circumcision important in Jewish families? How can disenfranchised Jews return to their Jewish roots, or non-Jews interested in converting learn more? All of these questions and many more are examined. As Mann points out, the anonymity of cyberspace often frees individuals to ask questions or reveal feelings that they might not feel comfortable confronting in their daily lives or with their own friends and families.

An easy and quick read because of its email format and the friendly and conversational tone of Mann's responses, *Sex, God, Christmas & Jews* offers value to anyone who has basic questions about Judaism. He focuses especially on the relevance of Jewish customs and community in a modern, largely secular society, often consulting with rabbis to find accurate answers to theological questions. Mann, who does not declare a particular affiliation, expresses a strong attachment instead to the Jewish way of life and stresses the importance of not only its survival, but its ability to thrive in the modern world. Although he does not advocate for a specific level of observance, he stresses that Jewish values, principles and traditions can guide Jewish individuals and families in their daily lives. He also believes that Jewish institutions and organizations must reach out to Jews who feel alienated or rejected by certain traditions or past experiences and who might choose to return to Judaism if they could find new ways to connect.

For a Jewish partner in an interfaith relationship or family, the book provides an opportunity to explore different perspectives on Jewish laws and customs regarding such issues as maintaining a

Jewish home, raising Jewish children, the acceptance of interfaith families by synagogues and community members, or how converts (Mann likes the alternate term "Jews by Choice") are viewed by many Jews both theologically and in reality. The book also nudges the Jewish reader to do some soul-searching about his or her own heritage, Jewish education and choices about living--or not living--a Jewish-oriented life, and about such current issues as conflicts between the Jewish and African American communities and anti-Semitism in the world today.

For a non-Jewish partner or for young adults growing up in an interfaith home, the book offers insights into Jewish thinking on intermarriage and acceptance by Jewish parents and why such perspectives or traditions evolved, as well as more pragmatic questions such as whether or not a Christmas tree is acceptable in a Jewish home.

Although Mann's views might not always reflect the experience or opinions of the reader, he provides balance by getting opinions from rabbis from different affiliations and including emails that both agree with his responses and offer alternate perspectives. For example he declares: "I still fear anti-semitism, but I do not fear it from the vast majority of Americans." Yet he also features some heart-breaking emails that reveal anti-semitic behavior in America. Never is one perspective deemed correct over any other, although Mann summarizes his own opinions and suggestions at the end of each chapter.

Mann admits to being disturbed by the rising rate of intermarriage in America, especially as they relate to the rearing (or lack thereof) of Jewish children. Yet he also declares: "I believe our synagogues and other Jewish institutions need to find every possible way to make interfaith couples and their children a part of our community." It is this effort, he asserts, that will encourage interfaith families to participate in Jewish life and help strengthen Judaism today.

*Sex, God, Christmas & Jews* brings together a community of anonymous questioners and responders to explore many aspects of Jewish culture and life in modern times. The book concludes with a listing of books and online resources to help anyone learn more, as well as suggestions for Jewish leadership and institutions. The author's goal is to help make Judaism accessible and understood for Jews and non-Jews alike. In this he heartily succeeds.



**Faye Rapoport is a writer currently living in Waltham, Massachusetts. Her work has appeared such publications as [The Intermountain Jewish News](#), [The Jewish Chronicle](#), [The Rockland Review](#), [Animal Life](#), [The Chatham Courier](#) and [The New York Times](#).**

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# Daniel Pearl Documentary Fails to Live Up to Its Subject's Standards

By Michael Fox

By all accounts, Daniel Pearl was a first-rate journalist and a genuine mensch. Too bad someone of the same skill and stature wasn't asked to produce the HBO documentary about his life and death.

It's not that *The Journalist and the Jihadi: The Murder of Daniel Pearl* presents an unflattering picture of the Jewish reporter who was kidnapped and killed in Pakistan in early 2002. To the contrary, the film repeatedly cites his well-rounded upbringing, golden-boy potential and commitment to explaining the Arab world to *Wall Street Journal* readers in the West.



However, the tacky blend of true-crime story, heart-tugging hagiography and political thriller proffered here trivializes not only Pearl's death, but the enormous global tensions that led to it. This is a textbook example of pseudo-journalism that, presumably, Pearl himself would have found simplistic and compromised.

As a print journalist, of course, he might have had already had a low regard for television's handling of the news.

The most surprising aspect of the documentary, and arguably the most risky, is the way it plays up Pearl's Judaism from the outset. His father, who succeeded in computer science in Southern California, was Israeli. There's a clip of Pearl stomping the glass at his wedding to Marianne, a non-Jew born in Paris to Cuban and Dutch parents, and a clip of guests dancing the hora.

It soon becomes clear that *The Journalist and the Jihadi* highlights these rather unimportant bits primarily to heighten the comparison with "jihadi" Omar Sheikh, a Londoner who was radicalized by the deaths of Muslims during the Bosnian war. (It would be more relevant if Pearl was an observant Jew as an adult, but that seems not to have been the case.)

The weak thesis of the film is that Pearl and Sheik had so much in common that their intersection was not just tragic, but ironic. Both were smart, highly educated and had the potential for exceptional careers.

The events of 9/11, followed by the U.S. assault on Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, apparently made Sheikh even more militant. Pearl, meanwhile, now the *Journal's* bureau chief in India, went with Marianne to Pakistan to ferret out the financial connections between the 9/11 hijackers and radical Islamic groups.

Sheikh got wind of Pearl and masterminded the kidnapping, either to cut off his line of investigation or to embarrass President Musharraf by demonstrating the Pakistani government's inability to control the radical militants. As part of a scheme to divide the operation, and preserve secrecy, Sheikh then handed Pearl off to a different group of men.

The documentary suggests that Sheikh didn't know that Pearl was Jewish until he read the newspaper stories that appeared in the days after the reporter's disappearance. If true, it eliminates Pearl's Jewishness as the reason for his kidnapping.

But not his murder. *The Journalist and the Jihadi* alleges that once Pearl's identity became known, a different faction "bought" him, and executed him in an exceptionally brutal way.

Since much of this is either conjecture or was learned in the absence of cameras, narrator Christiane Amanpour is forced to supply a raft of crucial facts and assertions. To fill in the visuals that don't exist--Pearl's meeting with Sheikh at a restaurant, or the sending of an email, or cars driving by at night while Marianne waits anxiously for Daniel's return--filmmakers Ahmed A. Jamal and Ramesh Sharma stage recreations.

The truth may be out there, but this documentary can't quite put its finger on it. The only thing we know for sure is that Daniel Pearl was a journalist of exceptional ambition, initiative and tenacity. It was precisely those qualities that led to his death.

*The Journalist and the Jihadi: The Murder of Daniel Pearl* premiered Tuesday, Oct. 10 on HBO, coinciding with what would have been his 43rd birthday. But it will then be replayed frequently. Check your HBO schedule for specifics.



**Michael Fox is a San Francisco-based film critic and journalist.**

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