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Encouraging Jewish Choices & A Welcoming Jewish Community

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### Jewish-Buddhist Relationships and Jubus

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# To Make One's Life a Blessing

**By Jonathan Chao Burnston**

I was not born Jewish, at least not according to traditional Jewish custom. My mother is Chinese and a practicing Buddhist, so I had to be converted to be considered a part of the Jewish faith. I had to have permission granted from a religious council to have a legitimate bris. However, from the moment after my mikvah until the time of my Bar Mitzvah, I was brought up in an unequivocally Jewish fashion.

As a child, I was perfectly content running around Hebrew school on Sundays, hearing of Jewish history and legends, and being guided down the path that would eventually lead to my adolescent coming of age. I grew and excelled in studies of Hebrew language and lore, reveling in my teachers' praise. When it came time to begin preparing for my Bar Mitzvah, I was well on my way to fulfilling my pre-determined role as part of the Jewish community.

It was at this time that questions began to arise in the back of my mind. Oncoming manhood and maturity led me to challenge previously accepted notions and prod at areas of ambiguity. By 13, I had already caught my first glimpses of intellectual writings and the teachings of other faiths. While troubled by philosophy and questions of religion, I nevertheless completed the preordained cycle and became a Bar Mitzvah.

As a teenager, my attention took a frustrated turn away from my childhood path. I brooded, and as so many do in our increasingly skeptical world, I questioned the concept of structured faith and the idea of a God-figure. Even more powerful were contradictions I found closer to home. Technicalities, such as the Jewish practice of refusing to bow, gave me undue trouble as they were in direct opposition to my mother's religious tradition and culture.

This darker time led to a spiritual reawakening in the twilight of my teenage years. The end of high school and my entrance into the world of college were marked by an opening of mind and a more free-range education than I had previously been afforded. I studied much of both Eastern and Western thought, and devoted a great deal of mental energy toward spirituality and the divine, particularly with regard to the belief systems of my mother and father.

The end result of all this was a blessing of peace and positivity born of one unmistakable realization: that human love is an intrinsic part of spiritual belief, that social action and worldly consciousness lie at the very foundations of both Jewish and Buddhist thought. I came to see that the heart and soul of both sides of my heritage, of both Judaism and Buddhism, were truly one and the same.

One can find this sentiment prevailing throughout the most fundamental teachings of both these schools of thought. I suppose the foremost example would lie in the idea of the mitzvah, or commandment. Mitzvot are commonly understood as good deeds, and are explicitly considered to be commandments from God. The most classic examples of mitzvot tie into the idea of social action. Comprised of "deeds of loving-kindness," their value lies in the doing and in benefiting others, rather than in gratitude or recognition. Here the Buddhist reflection is exact; "loving kindness" is emphasized throughout Buddhist teachings (verbatim, in fact), and is taught to be cultivated whenever possible.

Compassion, an empathy and understanding of the plight of our fellow beings, is considered to be the primary Buddhist virtue. As of late I have been doing my best to internalize this virtue and exercise it to the best of my ability. Since I started working at my campus' coffee shop/eatery, I have made it a habit to bring leftover sandwiches to homeless people in the local area. I'm not sure if this is Buddhist compassion coming out through me, or a Jewish sense of tikkun olam, helping to repair the world. To be honest, I don't think there is much of a difference; either way, they are pretty much the same thing.

Following this line of thought, the mindset behind deeds of loving-kindness is also something shared by the Buddhist and the Jew. In Buddhism, universal consciousness, as manifested in individual consciousness, represents man's connection to the divine; it simultaneously makes us an individual and a part of the greater whole. I find this to be quite an interesting idea. "Universal consciousness" is a basic way of expressing many concepts of divinity. Meanwhile, keeping all those around us in mind as we go about our lives is a natural way of tapping into that connection.

This is intimately related to the strong Jewish sense of community. There is an undeniable sense of unity within the Jewish faith. More subtly, this also relates to the idea of the unity and the unifying quality of God. My university rabbi once said of the ancient claim, "God is One," that it is really in recognition of a spiritual oneness throughout all existence. I could not agree more. Truly, what is the idea of God but an affirmation of all life and existence, a something where there was nothing, a persistent assertion, a resounding BOOM throughout the cosmos, acclaiming All as being All and not None. And therefore what is the most righteous act, if not to serve that affirmation of life with yet more affirmations, with social consciousness, positivity, and positive action.

A final commonality between Judaism and Buddhism deserves mention before I conclude. In both faiths, righteous learning and belief are *nothing* without life application. Whether it be Jewish or Buddhist, the holy life is incomplete without bringing blessings into the world, and specifically to others. To this end, I leave you with a favorite quote: I have always been struck by Debbie Friedman's words in her version of the Mi Shebarach, where she asks God to "help us find the courage, to make our lives a blessing." In today's day and age, one would be hard-pressed to come up with a more pious prayer.

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**Jonathan Chao Burnston is a 22-year-old Chinese Jew who recently completed his undergraduate education at Tufts University, with concentrations in philosophy and Chinese language and culture. He currently resides in Beijing, China, where he is slowly settling into a lifestyle spread across 500 years, from his back-alley courtyard neighborhood to his consulting job in the 30-story building up the avenue.**



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# Momo and Matzoh: Our Tibetan-Jewish Marriage

By Julia Gutman

Our first encounter was based on misunderstanding. I had stayed to help clean up after a Buddhist prayer meeting I had attended in Queens. Young Tibetans, speaking Tibetan, Nepali and Hindi (none of which I knew at the time), came in for the secular Tibetan fundraising after-party. I had never met any Tibetans besides monastics, so I stayed to see secular Tibetan culture.

When I first saw my future husband--who didn't look Tibetan to me as he looked and dressed differently from the rest of the crowd--I saw an opportunity to talk to someone using one of the languages I knew: I assumed he was Japanese and I wanted to practice my Japanese with him. He assumed I was Israeli, and that like many Israelis he had met, I was interested in Buddhism and had stumbled upon a secular Tibetan get-together by accident. He spoke to me out of compassion for "the only white girl in the room." But once we exchanged a few phrases, in limited Japanese and then fluent English, it became clear the world was not as we'd assumed.



Already a New Yorker for a decade when we met, my non-Jewish husband was somewhat intrigued by Jewish life. As he puts it, whether you take the subway or a taxi, you know if it is a Jewish holiday--the trains and taxis are rather empty on those days, and there are fewer beautiful women around. Also, you spot an Orthodox Jewish man in the black and white "uniform" buying a coffee at Dunkin Donuts and think: "Wow, is Dunkin Donuts kosher?"

Our relationship works for many reasons (knocking on wood here). We share values, a way of life, and perspective on life and beyond. We are not plagued by fears of hell, and we each mistrust proselytizing (sorry if that applies to you). We both grew up in exile. I was born in communist Ukraine (not a great milieu for a Jew). My husband was born in India, in exile from the communist Chinese occupation and genocide in Tibet. Neither of us has been to our true places of descent--the Middle East for me and Tibet for him. The fact that neither of us has been able to visit or live in those places makes us better able to relate to each other in our experiences of living in exile and as refugees, not fitting neatly into the social structures of Ukraine, India or America.

Even before we met, we each valued wisdom, compassion and mindfulness as the best paths in life, and share, unfortunately, a lack of knowledge regarding our roots. I feel like half a Jew because of my ignorance of Jewish religion and language. He wouldn't be able to comprehend a book in Tibetan, and his knowledge of Buddhism is sparse, cultural. We can trust and relate to each other, for good reasons (shared values) and bad (both feel like exiles and outsiders, and worry about the political existences of Israel and Tibet), despite our very different looks and the colors of our skin.

Cross-cultural marriages come with extra obstacles. One of my favorite words--"no"--is almost a taboo to my husband, both as an Asian and a Buddhist. Ethnically Jewish, I love debating and arguing; advanced planning is in my blood. My husband avoids what he calls "pre-planning" and "being forced to choose," as they make him feel trapped and lacking freedom. His most common response in lieu of "no" is "Let's think about it." It took him a while to believe that when people argue around the table, participating in and interrupting several conversations simultaneously, they are having a great time, sharing a Jewish dinner, and are not going to break into a fight. It took years before this Buddhist man who barely tasted any fish in his life came around to gefilte fish (a traditional Jewish dish of stuffed fish or fish cutlets).

So, from expression of affection to choice of words, it's been a winding road towards understanding between us: Normal behavior in his culture, my husband used to never show affection by hugging, holding hands, even in private, or sitting in close proximity to each other. Verbally, he also used to avoid discussing any personal feelings such as love or any negative feelings and thoughts.

On the other hand, we both agree a Jewish-Buddhist relationship is probably the easiest cross-cultural mix. Compared to other "mixed" couples, we can tolerate our cultural differences, and are open to the religious differences of our numerous Jewish relatives and Tibetan friends. The esoteric aspects of Judaism and Tibetan Buddhism are frighteningly similar. Both use the concepts of chakras/spheres and channels, have notions of mystical continuity, mystical power to change the world as to align it with its divine plan and true nature, and the power, ability and duty of people to effect such changes through practicing certain lifestyles and making conscious choices.

Most of my religious relatives have come to understand that the Buddha is far from being an idol. It is a sin, in fact, to think of a statue of the Buddha as the Buddha. Its function is to remind a practitioner of the concepts and ideas of Buddhism, not to idolize the object, which is but a label for our mind to grasp the ideas better.

Also, most Buddhists are vegetarian, quickly solving the problem of pork in the kitchen. Many of my relatives, like many other secular Jews, choose not to eat pork even though they do not keep kosher. And although Tibetan Buddhists are avid meat lovers (there is no other food in Tibet!), their preferred meat is beef (it's the closest to yak, and you can feed many people with the life of a single animal), with the proverbial chicken as a runner-up. Thus, the idea behind kosher food, i.e. having philosophies and restrictions governing the food one eats, is respected among Tibetan Buddhists.

In both our cultures, it is the woman's role to bind the family together, to run the household, not in terms of being a servant, but as a keeper of tradition and values. So far, even with my lack of cooking skills, my family (our daughter and two cats included) is happy, safe--woven together

like a cloth, with strands of different colors but all of the same strength.

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**Julia Gutman, M.A., a Barnard and Columbia graduate, works mainly in psychological research and teaching English as a Foreign Language. She currently lives in Manhattan with her husband, daughter and two cats.**

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# Moving Beyond Grief

**By Paulette Mann**

Through the years, I have heard people talk of faith. I always assumed that faith came from some form of religious practice. Although I feel a strong sense of Jewishness, I have never had formal Jewish education, nor do I consider myself religious. My sense of Jewishness is my love of family, liberalism, the scents and sounds of holiday celebrations, and the act of performing commandments or good deeds, called mitzvot, similar to stewardship in the Catholic religion, or Buddhahood in Buddhist practice. But for me Judaism was not something I practiced every day.

Two years ago my husband's sudden death made me wonder what questions would have been answered if I had had faith, and would that faith have comforted me?

Recently I watched a Larry King show about where we go after we die. On the panel were a Catholic priest, a rabbi, a born-again Christian and an atheist. There were no Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists. The atheist made the most sense to me. She said death is final. We have no proof of any afterlife.

While talking with a therapist in dealing with my grief, we discussed where I thought my husband was. She, being extremely spiritual, told me he was in the next room and that I was focusing on the physical loss and not feeling the never-ending energy of our love. But for me he was not in the next room, and I was totally lost in the darkness and the silence of being alone. Grief became my never-ending shadow. My answer to her was the same as the atheist's: Death is the end. I also realized I would never get over my husband's death, but I would get through my journey with the help of devoted family and friends.

My husband's death was the end of my life as I knew it. It was the end of my future as I wanted to live it. What the atheist also stated was that one should always try and live a full life and be kind to yourself and others. One way of being kind to myself was to explore the attraction I had always felt towards Buddhism. Buddhists believe that heaven and hell are not places, but states of mind, and that grieving is a state of hell. Attaining Buddhahood is the exalted feeling of happiness and an enlightened state of mind. Given my level of grief, that sounded very appealing.

Buddhist faith is a process and a journey towards inner peace and happiness. I explored the Soka Gakkai International, which was formed to support practitioners of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. This form of Buddhism consists of two parts--practice for ourselves and practice for others. Practice for ourselves is chanting, and practice for others is giving compassion in helping others make improvements in their lives that also benefit us: When we help others overcome their

problems, our own lives are expanded. As I learned more I realized I was already living according to these Buddhist principles. Although my mother was not a religious woman, she lived her life in community service and passed that commitment on to me. So much of Buddhist philosophy was a part of me from early on.

The three basics in applying Buddhism in one's life are faith, practice, and study. A milestone after beginning practice is receiving the Gohonzon (object of devotion). The Gohonzon is a paper scroll that you enshrine in your home in an altar, and written down the middle is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Chanting this is believed to allow people to directly tap their enlightened nature and is the primary practice of SGI members. Although the deepest meaning of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is revealed only through its practice, the literal meaning breaks down like this: Nam (devotion), the action of practicing Buddhism; myoho (mystic law), the essential law of the universe and its phenomenal manifestations; renga (lotus), the simultaneity of cause and effect; kyo (Buddha's teaching), all phenomena. The Gohonzon can be received at any time and represents your commitment to the practice.\*

In Buddhism one strives to attain a state of freedom and unshakable happiness while creating harmony with others, and so with a very open mind I went to several SGI meetings and found many new treasured friends. I was so impressed with the sincerity of the members and the beautiful mix of so many colors and diverse backgrounds that it only enhanced my curiosity. Many of the members have practiced for over 25 years. Those born into the practice are called Fortune Babies.

I started chanting and soon after felt empowered, because through the words my grief started to soften. I felt I could either stay in the state of hell and grieve forever or move forward. I chanted for what needed to happen in my life at that time, in order to move beyond my acute sadness. I sold my home in the suburbs and my car, and found another apartment in a big city and recreated my life. I was fortunate to have treasured family and friends close to me--one son, his wife and my granddaughter--and to have been invited to spend several wonderful months visiting my other son, his wife and my two grandsons. Also, new Buddhist friends and mentors, Chiara and Nancy, who now live within walking distance from me--attending planning, study and discussion meeting at members' homes is considered vital to the practice--have been devoted to helping me realize my potential to attain a happy state again.

I began to find a sense of comfort in chanting and realized that while some religions teach faith, it can come at any time in one's life. I once read that faith is believing in something that cannot be validated. Daisaku Ikeda, President of SGI, said, "Faith manifests itself in daily life." My faith came from unexpected places and was validated for me. Family and friends reinforced my faith in others and most important was the faith I discovered within myself to move forward in this most bountiful, yet profoundly sad journey to attain joy again . . .

\*Some of the explanations of Buddhism in this article were based on information found in *The Winning Life, an Introduction to Buddhist Practice*, published by World Tribune Press, and the *World Tribune* newspaper.



**Paulette Mann is finishing a novel with a co-author and trying to not live in the past, fear the future, but live in the moment.**

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# Smartmom: Meditating on My Jewish Identity

By Louise Crawford

Reprinted from [The Brooklyn Papers](#) with permission of the author.

The week before Rosh Hashanah, Smartmom was meditating in her bedroom. Her attempts to meditate at home are usually a comedy of errors and this was no exception. The fragrance of burning incense seems to attract her offspring like flies to honey.

The Oh So Feisty One tiptoed into the bedroom and assumed her very best lotus position and scrunched her eyes shut tight. After a minute or so:

"I'm bored," she said. "Is it okay if I bang your singing bowl really, really softly?"

Grrrrr. So much for Inner Peace. Then the phone rang. It was Groovy Grandpa reminding Smartmom about Rosh Hashanah dinner on Saturday.

Smartmom returned to the half-lotus position, her right hand resting on her left palm, but she had a hard time quieting her mind because of that Rosh Hashanah call. Should they go to shul? If so, which one?

The religion thing nags at Smartmom: Nag, nag, nag. Especially during the Jewish holidays.

It's not like she grew up religious or anything. Hers was a secular Jewish upbringing on the Upper West Side of Gaphattan. In other words, she was brought up by atheists, who were very committed to their Jewish heritage and their lox and bagels from Barney Greengrass on Sunday mornings.

Still, on the high holidays, something deeply personal and profound compels Smartmom to seek the sound of the shofar and the stirring melody of Kol Nidre.

When Smartmom was 10, her parents decided that she and her sister needed to go to Hebrew school--it was time to get some of that old-time religion. Just in case.

It seemed hypocritical, but it probably was a good experience, even if the future Smartmom thought it was dumb at the time.

Going to Hebrew school meant no more Sunday morning bike rides in Central Park, a cherished family ritual and one of the great pleasures of Smartmom's youth. Sitting in the basement of Congregation Rodef Sholom learning Hebrew, and discussing anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, was not.

Smartmom dropped out after a year. Maybe that's why she's so ambivalent about going to synagogue: those Hebrew school Sundays really cut into bike riding time with dad.

Yet since childhood, Smartmom has yearned for a spiritual connection. For reasons she still doesn't fully understand, she longed to fast on Yom Kippur, to eat only matzoh during Passover, to see the Hanukkah candles glowing night after night.

This child of atheists had an inner Jewish self that bloomed all by itself.

Clearly, she was after a spiritual experience bigger than the Nova Scotia Lox counter at Zabar's. She wanted more. Something elusive. Something deeper than the day-to-day.

After Teen Spirit was born, Smartmom shopped for a synagogue or a Jewish community for her interfaith family to be part of. Nothing felt right. Nothing felt spiritual. Her quest eventually led to a private meditation practice.

Smartmom closed her eyes and breathed in and out gently through her nose. She heard the toilet flush in the bathroom. OSFO was playing "Heart and Soul" on the electric keyboard. A Third Street alley cat in heat was crying like a human child. Trying to meditate at home is a joke, she thought.

Despite her forays into Buddhism, Smartmom works hard to instill the ethics and values of Judaism in her inter-faith children; it is, she feels, essential that they understand what it means to be Jewish (even if no one seems to agree about what that means).

For Hanukkah, they light candles on a handcrafted, wrought-iron menorah from the Clay Pot; they read aloud Isaac Bashevis Singer's classic stories while non-Jewish Hepcat prepares delicious potato latkes.

On Passover, they sing a rollicking version of Dayenu during the Seder ceremony, and search for the hidden matzoh afterward--the finder even gets a little gelt.

Smartmom also feeds them plenty of lox and bagels from La Bagel Delight--a poor substitute for Barney Greengrass or Zabar's. Hepcat especially loves the lox and bagel part, but he nearly fainted the first time he saw gefilte fish.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Smartmom focused on her breath in an attempt to clear and quiet her racing mind.

It's been harder to find a way to meet the family's disparate spiritual longings. Hepcat and the Presbyterians parted company when he said, "If God made everything, who made God?" in Sunday school. Intellectually, he's an atheist. Emotionally, he's an animist.

Early on, Teen Spirit was interested in the big questions of Life and Death. Although he never liked going to synagogue and didn't want to get bar mitzvahed, he was crazy about the Broadway production of "Fiddler on the Roof" (with Alfred Molina, no less!).

After that, he learned enough Hebrew to say the basic Jewish prayers. And she gave him a copy of *The Jewish Book of Why* on his 13th birthday. Just in case.

The Oh So Feisty One, from a young age, seemed to believe in a higher power (Jewish or Presbyterian--it didn't seem to matter). As early as age 4, she'd put her hands together and pray, "Please, please, please God, get me a Kit doll and a pair of her beach pajamas from American Girl Place."

When OSFO started asking questions about death, Smartmom knew intuitively that she wanted to believe in heaven, a place where Smartmom would love and care for her forever and ever. As Smartmom affirmed OSFO's belief in heaven, she, too, felt comforted by the eternal power of love.

On her black meditation pillow, Smartmom returned to her breathing, trying to unclutter her mind. But that's about as easy as trying to straighten up Hepcat's desk (which she's not even allowed to do). Too. Much. Thinking. Should they go to Beth Elohim or Kolot Chayenu? Maybe they should try the children's service at the Park Slope Jewish Center.

There it is again: Nag, nag, nag. Even when she's meditating. It's true. She never joined a synagogue. She never makes reservations or gets tickets in advance for High Holiday services. Obviously, it's a commitment problem.

Smartmom's Orthodox friend, Yiddishe Mama, once said, "You have one foot in and one foot out because part of you does not want to let yourself believe in miracles."

Actually, Smartmom thinks she's still pissed off about missing those Central Park bike rides. Or maybe she just finds organized religion boring and irrelevant. So why, she wonders, does she always decide at the last minute to go to synagogue?

Last year on the eve of Yom Kippur, she Googled Kolot Chayenu and found out that the Kol Nidre service started at 7:30.

Smartmom and OSFO got there in warp speed and were lucky enough to find a seat in the last row. The service happens to be in a church, which is perfect for the inter-faith Smartmom clan. Someone takes pains to cover the crucifix with a beautiful handmade textile.

As usual, Smartmom felt part of--and not part of--the service (there's too much Hebrew she doesn't understand, and she doesn't know all the songs; she gets tired of standing up and sitting down). During the service, she closed her eyes and tried to meditate while listening to Kol Nidre, that haunting melody, on this most holy of Jewish nights.

The phone rang again. Smartmom knew she wasn't going to get any more meditating done. Who is it this time? Probably that religion thing. Nag. Nag. Nag.

This year Smartmom knows that she'll be racing off to Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur services--somewhere.

Maybe this year she'll accept that her quest to find a way to honor her Jewishness continues.

Maybe this year she'll accept that her meditation and her Judaism can exist together like cream cheese and lox on a poppy seed bagel. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Maybe this year she'll even pick up some tickets--in advance.



**Louise Crawford, a Park Slope, Brooklyn, mom, writes the column [Smartmom](#) for *The Brooklyn Papers* and also operates [Only the Blog Knows Brooklyn](#).**

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# At Auschwitz, Buddhist Meditation Set Me Free

By Perry Garfinkel

Reprinted from [j., the Jewish news weekly of northern California](#).

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*"I have learned two lessons in my life: first, there are no sufficient literary, psychological, or historical answers to human tragedy, only moral ones. Second, just as despair can come to one another only from other human beings, hope, too, can be given to one only by other human beings."*

-Elie Wiesel

It sounds like the set-up for a politically incorrect joke: Did you hear the one about the Jewish journalist who began his journey in the Buddha's footsteps in Poland?



The Buddha ("the awakened one") never stepped foot west of what is now India. What, then, on assignment for *National Geographic Magazine* supposedly tracing Buddhism's history, was I doing in Oswiecim, in the southwest corner of Poland?

It might make more sense knowing the German name by which Oswiecim is better recognized: Auschwitz. If the connection is still not evident, consider the first of Buddhism's so-called Four Noble Truths--that the human condition is rife with suffering. Where better (or worse, as the case may be) to stare into the face of horrific suffering of a magnitude that numbs the heart and paralyzes the brain? Where better, hopefully, to come to terms with it?

I had joined up with a Buddhist group that conducts annual Bearing Witness retreats at the Auschwitz/Birkenau concentration and death camps, now a memorial museum, as a way to gain a deeper understanding of suffering, and one's own reaction to it.

My worst nightmare was that just seeing the wooden watch towers, the barbed wire fences and the sadly iconic brick gateway would cause me unbearable suffering. I feared sitting cross-legged on

those infamous train tracks, silently meditating in the Soto Zen Buddhist tradition under a polluted, monotonic gray sky.

The nightmare was realized, and then some. But another "truth" slapped me harder in the face: the truth of my Polish heritage (my mother's parents were born in Poland). Being a Polish American was not something one boasted about when I was growing up. For most of my youth I thought "dumb Polack" was one word. It's a fact of my life I rarely acknowledge, but here there was nowhere to hide.

It hit hardest in a large chamber the Nazis called the Sauna, where prisoners were disinfected. Now the concrete flooring is covered with highly reflective tinted glass. Several exhibit walls display salvaged pictures: sepia tones of families whose prominent noses and high cheekbones reminded me of my own relatives.

We gathered in a semi-circle on the glass floor and sat facing a wall of such photos. We were each handed a different page with a list of names and simultaneously we read from our list.

"Israelevitch, Abraham. Israels, Salomon. Issakowitsch, Alexandre..." I naturally fell into a familiar Hebraic rhythm of incantation. One name overlapping the next, one voice harmonizing with another, all bouncing off the empty walls, a chorus of death.

A bell rang and we sat in silence, but the names still echoed in my ears. In the Soto tradition, you sit with eyes open, faced down. My stare landed on a reflected photo of a fair-haired woman in her 20s, clutching her two children. In her 20s, my mother too was a blonde beauty with a strong jaw and a distinctive nose, a Meryl Streep look-alike from the film *Sophie's Choice*.

Suddenly it dawned on me: We bear witness not only to those who died here but also to those who never got to live, the unborn children and those children's unborn children. History may have lost undiscovered medical cures, unwritten novels and unscored musical masterpieces, but I lost experiences, love, wisdom passed from generation to generation. I had no memories upon which to reflect.

Rather than get angrier or go numb, this time I felt an inexplicable release from it all. I had reached that path to forgiveness only when, in meditation, I was able to separate "me" from me. By staying focused on this moment, I could separate two experiences: what happened here and my reaction to what happened here. By simply bearing witness, without layering it with my feelings, my opinion, my reaction, my judgment, I saw that the Holocaust just happened. No blame. No sadness. No guilt. No anger.

That evening I told others on the retreat about my liberation from so many hellish thoughts and feelings. I was surprised but relieved that some nodded in agreement.

"I feel more alive here than anywhere else," confided Aleksandra, a 24-year-old photography student from Wroclaw, Poland. This was her second Bearing Witness retreat, she told me.

"How could you feel more alive?" I asked. "Surrounded by death at every step? How could that be?"

"I don't know," she replied. And she left it at that.

This answer perplexed and frustrated me. Was this a cop-out? Or was she practicing what Buddhists call the "don't-know mind"--that there are things we can never understand, that make sense only when we stop trying to understand them.

I don't know about the don't-know mind. I do know that I had three choices. One was to remain angry and vengeful, which only generates more pain. The second was to run and hide from those feelings--impossible! The third was to accept them as an incomprehensible part of the life spectrum. In that third way, I too could "feel more alive."

It was a difficult lesson--for a Jew, for a Pole, for a journalist who thinks he needs answers--and I honestly still haven't mastered it. For now, though, I assuage my suffering with the Buddha's own words: "Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned."

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Perry Garfinkel, a longtime contributor to [\*The New York Times\*](#) who is based on Martha's Vineyard, is the author of [\*Buddha or Bust: In Search of Truth, Meaning, Happiness and the Man Who Found Them All\*](#) (Harmony Books).

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# Our Interfaith Relationship

**By Steve Ettinger**

My wife and I have been in an interfaith relationship since we started dating eight years ago, having gotten married five years ago and had a child two years ago. I am Jewish and she is Buddhist/Shinto. Also, I am American and she is Japanese, making us an international as well as an interfaith couple. These differences have created certain unique issues for us, but these issues have actually strengthened our relationship, helping us learn more about each other and our backgrounds.

My wife, as a Buddhist/Shinto woman from Japan, does not have a very strong feeling for any religion in particular. She was raised with aspects of both Buddhism and Shintoism, as they are present in many different aspects of Japanese life. In Japan, weddings typically follow the Shinto custom, and funerals typically follow the Buddhist tradition. Japanese people traditionally visit Buddhist temples at the very end of the year and Shinto shrines at the very beginning of the new year. My wife feels no contradiction between the different religions, as she is able to weave the two traditions together in a way that respects both.

When my wife began to attend synagogue services with me, she certainly felt the cultural differences, as people were praying in two foreign languages (Hebrew and English) with many ideas she did not understand. However, I believe her experience in Japan helped her to be able to look at another religion with a largely unbiased attitude. Even though the customs were new, she was able to look at her experience as part of a Jewish service not as something that threatened her or her identity, but as a way of learning about me and my background. We have been through the Jewish wedding ceremony together, a Jewish baby-naming ceremony for our daughter, many Passover seders, and countless High Holiday services, and she is always there by my side, supporting me in observing Jewish rituals. We were also fortunate to find a Reform synagogue in our community with a very supportive rabbi and congregation. My wife feels comfortable there and does not feel like she is being judged when she attends services. She knows that attending Jewish services is very important to me, and really appreciates that this is a vital part of my background.

I have not asked her to convert because, in the same way, I respect her background. She recites the Jewish prayers during services, sings the songs (which she loves), and endures the extra-long High Holiday services (which no one seems to love), but she is not what I would call a "true believer" in Judaism--I don't think she believes strongly in the idea of there being only one god. To be a "true believer" in my mind, a person must find something compelling about the religion itself, rather than believing just to please a person he/she is with. Judaism was not the religion she

was born into, nor was it a religion she would have chosen to practice had we not married. If she were drawn to Judaism naturally and would like to convert, I would, of course, encourage her, but that has to be a decision which she makes on her own; I don't want her to convert simply to please me because I am Jewish. For now, she will remain Buddhist/Shinto, an important part of her background, and that is perfectly fine with me, our families, our closest friends, and the community of worshipers at the synagogue we attend.

Another important aspect of her background is her organ-playing, and this has brought up another issue in our relationship. Currently, she plays organ at an Episcopal church three Sundays per month. I attend these services, showing support for her in her music. She does not have a problem listening to the service, as she doesn't find any contradictions with any of the values she was raised with. However, I don't always agree with what is said in the Episcopal service, as some of the references to Jews make me uncomfortable. I attend services, though, because it is important to her that I be there to listen to her playing. If I feel uncomfortable, I try to remember that I am an observer, not a participant, and my presence does not imply my belief in the content of the church service. I simply want to be able to support her in her music similar to the way in which she supports me by attending Jewish services. I want to recognize her unique talents and background, even if it occurs in an environment which includes ideas that are different (sometimes uncomfortably so) from the ones with which I was raised.

In short, we have been able to understand each other better through attending the other's religious services, but it has been our appreciation of one another as individuals that has allowed us to really see inside each other's souls. She knows the things that are important to me, like attending High Holiday and Passover services, and lovingly partakes in them. I know the things that are important to her, such as playing organ at church, and I make sure I am equally supportive. We are able to sustain and strengthen our relationship by using the other's backgrounds as an opportunity to really understand each other. I know there are many issues yet to come, such as the religious education of our daughter, but we are confident that if we work through these issues just as we have worked through the ones in the past, we can find a way to respect both of our traditions. With love, support, understanding, and good humor, I believe we can continue to carve out our own individual path in navigating through uncharted waters of our interfaith relationship.



**Steve Ettinger is a Jewish man who teaches music and lives in King City, California. He is married to Aya Ettinger, who he met when he taught English in Japan, and has a 3-year-old daughter, Kayla This article was an entry in the InterfaithFamily.com Network's Essay Contest, "We're Interfaith Families...Connecting with Jewish Life."**

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## Investment in Outreach Is Paying Dividends in Boston, Study Suggests

By Sue Fishkoff

SAN FRANCISCO, Nov. 12, 2006 (JTA)--The majority of children in interfaith households in Boston--almost 60 percent, far above the national average--are being raised as Jews.

That's one of the key findings of the [2005 Greater Boston Jewish Community Study](#), commissioned by the [Combined Jewish Philanthropies](#), the central planning and fund-raising arm of Boston's Jewish community, and carried out by Brandeis University's Steinhardt Social Research Institute.



Researchers interviewed 400 Jewish households by phone and an additional 1,400 individuals from a list provided by Jewish organizations. The margin of error differed by question.

Some local Jewish leaders say a key factor is the community's heavy investment in outreach programming--\$321,000 this year, almost 1.5 percent of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies' \$27 million campaign. Those funds are given to programs aimed at interfaith families and individuals considering

conversion run by the Jewish Community Center, Jewish Family Services, the Reform and Conservative movements and other agencies.

"There's no other way to explain it," said Ed Case, publisher and president of InterfaithFamily.com, a Boston-area nonprofit that encourages intermarried families to make Jewish choices.

The study's preliminary findings, announced last Friday, show strong growth of the Jewish community, which now stands at 265,500, or 9 percent of the total population. That figure includes 57,000 non-Jews living in Jewish households; indeed, the study found that half of area Jewish households involve an intermarriage. The number of non-Jewish adults in Jewish households has risen from 25,000 to 42,500 since 1995, the study found.

As increasing numbers of those interfaith families identify with the Jewish community, more and

more are raising their children Jewish. Institute director Leonard Saxe, the primary investigator on the study, called the 60 percent figure "exceptional."

In comparison, the National Jewish Population Study 2000-2001 reported that between 33 percent and 39 percent of children in interfaith households were being raised as Jews. The 2002 Jewish Community Study of New York put the figure at 30 percent in the New York area.

"When we first saw the 60 percent number, we said, 'that can't be true,'" said Gil Preuss, vice president for strategy and planning at Combined Jewish Philanthropies. But it made sense when he considered other figures: Some 37 percent of local intermarried families are members of synagogues, and more than 70 percent of the children who are being raised Jewish in intermarried families are receiving formal Jewish education.

The Boston study also reveals that 90 percent of local Jews "are connected in some way, even if it's just giving money" to Jewish organizations, Preuss continued.

All of this suggests a Jewish community that is vibrant and growing, in contrast to previous surveys that showed a drop-off in Jewish populations in the Northeast.

Saxe and Combined Jewish Philanthropies officials are loathe to draw direct links between increased Jewish affiliation among the intermarried and increased communal investment in outreach programming, but Preuss said, "We hope it had some impact. Clearly we've tried to make the Jewish community and the CJP warm and welcoming."

Other Jewish leaders are less hesitant.

"CJP is the only federation that has made a serious commitment for over 10 years to fund this," said Paula Brody, outreach director of the [Northeast Council of the Union for Reform Judaism](#), whose organization receives \$140,000 a year from the Combined Jewish Philanthropies for a wide variety of adult-education seminars and workshops aimed at interfaith couples and individuals considering conversion. "We offered these programs before the CJP funding, but it has enabled us to expand our offerings and advertise them in the secular press, so we can reach the unaffiliated."

Case says Boston's outreach investment rate is almost 10 times the national average given by Jewish federations, a figure the United Jewish Communities is unable to confirm.

"Boston has the most highly organized and best-funded outreach of any community, with San Francisco a close second," he said.

Preuss says the Combined Jewish Philanthropies used a 1995 Jewish communal study to redraw its strategic plan to encourage local synagogues and Jewish agencies to be more open and welcoming to the unaffiliated, particularly the intermarried. They increased funding for adult Jewish education, mainly run through synagogues, from \$3.6 million to \$6.4 million.

"It's an activist approach" to building Jewish identity, "connecting people in diverse ways to Jewish life," Preuss said. "That's how we see our purpose, not just to collect and distribute money."

Brody says her Reform outreach programs reach 600 to 750 non-Jews or interfaith couples every year, a number she compares to "a medium-sized congregation of unaffiliated people stepping into the Jewish community every year for the past 10 years."

One such couple is Nick and Amy O'Donnell. He's Catholic, she's Jewish, and four years ago, while they were dating, they took part in "Yours, Mine and Ours," a Reform outreach program for interfaith couples. The program "offered a place where we could work through the things that were important to us in an environment that wasn't trying to herd us in one direction or the other," said Nick, 31, noting that they were getting enough pressure from their families. By the end of the course, they'd decided to raise their children as Jews.

"Boston has sent a particular message of welcome, and the data shows that families are responding," Brody continued. "If you put resources in this area, you will get results. You will get affiliation." San Francisco's Jewish federation experienced similar results, according to planning director Karen Bluestone. That federation was one of the first in the nation to fund interfaith programming, she notes, following a 1986 Jewish communal study that revealed large numbers of intermarried families.

In the 20 years since, the Jewish population has more than doubled in the San Francisco Bay Area and intermarriage has increased, but increasing numbers of those interfaith households are identifying with the Jewish community.

A 2004 communal study showed that 40 percent of the children in interfaith households are receiving formal Jewish education, and 40 percent of the adults indicated that their interest in Judaism has increased in the past five years. The numbers are about the same for Jews and non-Jews, she said.

While Bluestone admits that "there's no causality in the data," she said she sees a correlation between increased outreach and increased Jewish identification.

"Due to the investments we've made since 1986 in outreach and training to be more welcoming to interfaith families, we've seen a rise in the number of interfaith families identifying as Jews and raising their children Jewishly," Bluestone said.

Saxe says his study in Boston could "change the debate about intermarriage." He noted gender differences: The children are raised Jewish in virtually every intermarriage where the woman is Jewish, but the figure is much lower when the Jewish partner is the man.

That suggests that Boston's Jewish community should focus both on providing better Jewish education to non-Jewish mothers and on finding more effective ways to engage Jewish boys and young men in Jewish life, so they don't "run from the bimah," or dais, after their bar mitzvahs, he said.

The findings also suggest that intermarriage, instead of having a negative effect on a given Jewish population, can lead to the reverse if more intermarried families affiliate with the Jewish community.

That's true in Boston, Brody noted, where most of the "Jewish population" increase since 1995 is

made up of intermarried households.

"What's remarkable is that these families see themselves not as where the Jewish partner has married out, but where the Christian partner has married in," she said.

Barry Shrage, president of Combined Jewish Philanthropies, says he hopes other Jewish federations will take their cue from Boston and San Francisco.

"Other communities are beginning to invest in outreach," he said--"perhaps not to the level we have, but people are beginning to understand that it's something that needs to be done."



**Sue Fishkoff is the West Coast correspondent for JTA. Formerly a features writer and New York correspondent for [The Jerusalem Post](#), her first book, [The Rebbe's Army: Inside the World of Chabad-Lubavitch](#) (Schocken, 2003), was named one of the best religion books of 2003 by [Publisher's Weekly](#).**

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## Outreach Miracle?

### A New Study Indicates That Boston's Support for Interfaith Families Is Paying Off--but Some Observers Are Skeptical

By Stewart Ain

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

November 17, 2006

A Boston study being touted this week by some as proof that outreach to intermarried couples results in an increased number of their children being raised as Jews is being questioned by others who suggest that such a conclusion might be fallacious or premature.

Commissioned by the [Combined Jewish Philanthropies](#), the [2005 Greater Boston Jewish Community Study](#) found that about 60 percent of children raised in intermarried households are being raised as Jews--about double the national average. Researchers from Brandeis University's Steinhardt Social Research Institute interviewed 400 Jewish households by phone and an additional 1,400 individuals from a list provided by Jewish organizations.

The study also found that virtually all interfaith families in which the mother is Jewish are raising their children as Jews.

Some local Jewish leaders say a key reason for the high rates of Jewish identification among interfaith families is the community's heavy investment in outreach programming--\$321,000 this year, almost 1.5 percent of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies' \$27 million campaign. Those funds are given to programs aimed at interfaith families and individuals considering conversion run by the Jewish Community Center, Jewish Family Services, the Reform and Conservative movements and other agencies.

"There's no other way to explain it," said Ed Case, publisher and president of InterfaithFamily.com, a Boston-area nonprofit that encourages intermarried families to make Jewish choices.

But Rabbi Deborah Joselow, managing director of UJA-Federation of New York's Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal, stressed that only preliminary findings have been released so far and "we have to look at what's behind that number."

"We have to see what they have done in Boston and what they believe is responsible for that increase--what kind of programs they had and over what length of time and who their critical partners have been," she said.

"It was interesting to me that so many children were enrolled in one-day-a-week Hebrew schools," Rabbi Joselow added. "Some 23 percent of all children 6 to 17 are being educated [in such programs]. If you look at the National Jewish Population Study ... if you were enrolled in only a Sunday school it negatively impacts on your Jewish identity."

She said also that "you can't overlay" the outreach efforts of greater Boston, which has a Jewish population of 265,000, on New York's eight-county area of 1.4 million Jews. But Rabbi Joselow said she hoped "we can learn" from the study.

Leonard Saxe, the primary investigator for the study, called the 60 percent figure "exceptional." And the [Jewish Outreach Institute](#), which seeks to promote the Jewish community's embrace of intermarried Jews, said it was proof of its long-held belief that outreach to the intermarried pays off.

"I think it is indicative of what happens when an organized community acknowledges intermarriage and assigns its resources to that effort," said Rabbi Kerry Olitzky, the group's executive director. He added that although the dollars spent on outreach are very small compared with the Boston federation's overall budget, "it is still about 10 times the amount dedicated by other [Jewish] federations in America."

But sociologist Steven Cohen said his understanding of the study leads him to conclude that its results were not so unusual.

"The real issue is how you define a Jewish child," he said. "There are narrow definitions and broad definitions; both are valid. The Boston study chose to use a broad definition, thereby including children who have no religion and ... whose families undertake Jewish behavior. ... The National Jewish Population Survey got pretty much the same numbers [when using the same definition]."

Saxe disputed that, saying the study found that 30 percent of the children were raised with no religion but that about 60 percent were being raised as Jews.

"When we asked [intermarried parents] what they were doing to raise their kids as Jews, we found that just as many were getting a Hebrew school education as the inmarried families," Saxe said.

But Steven Bayme, national director of the Contemporary Jewish Life Department at the American Jewish Committee, said he would like to know the seriousness of the children of intermarried couples regarding their "Jewish connection" and whether that connection is "sustainable and will last them in terms of molding a Jewish identity."

"I'm concerned that the success of outreach activities to ensure Jewish grandchildren can only be measured over time," he said. "We have to see what happens to them as adults."

Both Cohen and Bayme are on the board of the Jewish In-Marriage Initiative, an organization

whose mission, according to its Web site, is "to encourage, sensitively and respectfully, Jews to marry Jews; conversion to Judaism as the desired outcome of an intermarriage; and parents of interfaith families, where conversion is not an option, to raise their children exclusively as Jews."

The Boston study, which showed an increase in the total number of Boston-area residents identifying as Jewish, also suggests that intermarriage, instead of having a negative effect on a given Jewish population, can lead to the reverse if more intermarried families affiliate with the Jewish community.

That's true in Boston, said Paula Brody, outreach director of the [Northeast Council of the Union for Reform Judaism](#), who noted that most of the "Jewish population" increase since 1995 is made up of intermarried households.

"What's remarkable is that these families see themselves not as where the Jewish partner has married out, but where the Christian partner has married in," she said.

Barry Shrage, president of Combined Jewish Philanthropies, says he hopes other Jewish federations will take their cue from Boston and San Francisco, another city whose federation is known for its support of outreach to the intermarried.

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**Stewart Ain is a staff writer for *The Jewish Week*.**

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# Engaging the Intermarried

By **Edmund Case and Kathy Kahn**

Reprinted with permission of [The Forward](#).

November 17, 2006

There is extraordinary news from [Boston's 2005 Jewish Community Study](#): 60% of its children in intermarried households are being raised as Jews, compared to the national rate of 33%. The significance of the 60% figure cannot be overstated. First, it should end the debate over the effectiveness of outreach. Second, every local Jewish community can duplicate Boston's pioneering approach to intermarriage--at a cost of just 1% of the community's annual spending.

Ever since the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey revealed that roughly half of Jews were marrying non-Jews, leading voices in the Jewish community have decried the threat of intermarriage. The real threat though was never from Jews marrying non-Jews; it was from those couples remaining distant from the Jewish community, failing to make Jewish choices in their lives and not raising their children as Jews. If only one-third of these families are raising Jewish children, as the 2000-01 NJPS found to be the case, there is a quantitative loss to the Jewish community.

If, however, more than half of interfaith families raise their children as Jews, our community will grow in size, to say nothing of being qualitatively enriched by enthusiastic new members. Indeed, Boston's Jewish community--which the study estimated has an intermarriage rate of 37%--has seen dramatic growth not in spite of intermarriage but because of the high proportion of children from such marriages being raised as Jews. What was once a threat has now become an opportunity.

Efforts to welcome and include interfaith families originated in 1978 with the Reform movement's then-revolutionary outreach program. Critics have pointed to the 33% rate of children from intermarried families being raised as Jews as evidence that outreach does not work. Steven M. Cohen, the noted sociologist of American Jewry, said last year that outreach has produced "at best, small and fleeting results." Cohen went on to say, "One could argue that more expanded and more energetic efforts in this direction will eventually produce the desired outcome, but the available evidence, in my view, fails to support such a claim." The results of the Boston study suggest that his pessimism was mistaken.

Boston's results follow San Francisco's 2004 Jewish Community Study, which showed, in the one

other community that has a robust, well-organized, relatively well-funded collection of outreach programs, interfaith families raising their children as Jews in higher numbers than the national rate. The available evidence now supports the conclusion that expanded and energetic efforts to engage interfaith families in Jewish life do in fact work.

What is so promising about this news is that Boston's outreach efforts are not rocket science. For a relatively small investment, they could easily be replicated in every local Jewish community.

First and foremost, Boston's Jewish community has worked hard to develop and express genuinely welcoming attitudes to the intermarried. In its 1998 strategic plan, [Combined Jewish Philanthropies](#), the Boston community federation, made outreach to interfaith families a priority: "To fulfill the Biblical imperative to welcome the stranger and newcomer, we must reinforce and increase our efforts to be open and welcoming to interfaith families, to help and support them in the hope that they will find meaning in Jewish life, choose to create Jewish families, participate in Jewish communal activities and support Jewish institutions." CJP's president, Barry Shrage, is famous for expressing a vision of Jewish life "as high as Sinai, with low barriers to entry." Since 1998, every invitation to a CJP program has stated: "CJP welcomes those who would like to connect with the Jewish community and encourage the participation of interfaith families, couples and significant others in all its activities."

The community has put its money where its mouth is. CJP has a dedicated line item in its budget expressly for "Services to the Intermarried." CJP's funding for this area - just over \$300,000 for the current year--is the highest in the country, yet it represents just 1% of CJP's total annual allocations. Nationally, even as the Jewish community federations spend \$800 million a year and Jewish family foundations spend \$2.5 billion a year; the amount spent on programs of outreach to interfaith families is below \$3 million--only one-tenth of 1%. By spending just 1% of its allocations--a relatively small investment by any measure-- CJP has achieved dramatic results.

Significantly, CJP directly supports the outreach programming of the religious movements. Almost half of CJP's funding goes to the [local Reform movement](#), enabling it to conduct a wide array of programs aimed at unaffiliated couples and families. Because of CJP's funding, Boston has the only Conservative movement outreach professional in the country.

CJP also funds outreach programs at Boston's Jewish Family & Children's Service and the area's Jewish community centers. All told, local couples and families can find discussion groups, programs for families with young children, short-term educational programs like the very successful Taste of Judaism classes, developed by the Reform movement but also taught in Conservative and Reconstructionist synagogues, and longer courses that can lead to conversion. Each of the funded programs devotes a significant portion of its funding to marketing, including advertising in secular media, generating stories in local media and, most important, using the Internet, including on InterfaithFamily.com's [Connections In Your Area](#) system.

While a few of the programs take place in public spaces, the focus is on programming at core Jewish institutions. The success of such programs shows that interfaith families do not shy away from synagogues and community centers when such institutions are welcoming to them.

CJP also convenes meetings of local outreach professionals, facilitating collaboration. And, for the past decade, the Reform movement's local outreach director has led a collaborative Outreach

Training Institute aimed at generating sensitivity among Jewish professionals and lay leaders.

These efforts have yielded measurable results. In 2002 CJP surveyed participants to evaluate the outreach programs it funded. The study concluded that the outreach efforts reached a group that otherwise had little contact with the Jewish community. Participants rated the quality and helpfulness of the programs very highly, and there were very positive outcomes in terms of increased involvement in Jewish life (39%), movement toward synagogue membership (28%), movement toward conversion (20%) and intention to raise children as Jews (68%).

Every community could emulate these outreach efforts, which need not be supported solely by federations but could be supplemented by other philanthropic sources, such as foundations (as happens significantly in San Francisco) and individual donors. Successful outreach requires more than just money. But if the Jewish community on national and local levels allocated 1% of its funding toward outreach to interfaith families, we now know that we could see 60% of them--or even more--making Jewish choices, enlarging and enriching our community.

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**Edmund Case is president and publisher of InterfaithFamily.com.**

**Kathy Kahn is director of the Union for Reform Judaism's Department of Outreach and Synagogue Community.**

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# Nancy Pelosi's Interfaith Family

**By Jennifer Jacobson**

WASHINGTON, Nov. 8, 2006 (JTA)--Before a packed meeting of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee three years ago, U.S. Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) connected her political support for the Jewish state with her personal life.

"My daughter is Catholic. My son-in-law is Jewish," she said. "Last week I celebrated my birthday and my grandchildren--ages 4 and 6--called to sing 'Happy Birthday.' And the surprise, the real gift, was that they sang it in Hebrew."

Now that the Democrats have taken control of the U.S. House of Representatives, the party has installed Pelosi, 66, as speaker, making her the first woman to hold the position that is two heartbeats away from the presidency.

Political observers say it's no surprise that the congresswoman from San Francisco considers herself close to the Jews.

The daughter of Thomas D'Alesandro Jr., a former mayor of Baltimore, Pelosi grew up in a Democratic family with Jewish neighbors and friends.

"She likes to say that, growing up in Baltimore, she went to a bar or bat mitzvah every Saturday," Amy Friedkin, a former president of AIPAC and a friend of Pelosi's for 25 years, wrote in an e-mail message to JTA. Friedkin noted that there's even a soccer field in the Haifa area of Israel named after the lawmaker's family.

While the Republicans had campaigned partly on the premise that support for Israel among Democrats has waned, exit polls from Tuesday's voting show that Democrats won an overwhelming majority of the Jewish vote. With Pelosi as speaker, Jewish activists and officials are confident that the U.S. Congress will remain strongly pro-Israel.

"I've heard her say numerous times that the single greatest achievement of the 20th century" was the founding of the modern state of Israel, Friedkin wrote. "She has been a great friend of the U.S.-Israel relationship during her entire time in Congress and is deeply committed to strengthening that relationship."

Sam Lauter, a pro-Israel activist in San Francisco, has known Pelosi for nearly 40 years. He was 5 when the Pelosis moved into his San Francisco neighborhood, he recalls. The two families lived

on the same street.

"She's one of the classiest," most "straightforward people you could ever meet," Lauter said. "She's incredibly loyal."

Lauter said the Pelosis used to attend the first night of the Passover seder at his parents' house.

"As far as the Jewish community is concerned, she feels our issues in her soul," he said.

To illustrate his point, Lauter told a Pelosi story that has become almost legendary in the Jewish community.

At an AIPAC members luncheon in San Francisco right after the Sept. 11 terror attacks, Pelosi was speaking when an alarm sounded.

"Everybody started getting nervous, scrambling toward the door," Lauter recalled. One person, though, was reading the words of Hatikvah, the Israeli national anthem, above the din. It was Pelosi.

"It actually calmed the crowd," Lauter said. "You could see people actually smiling, saying 'Wow.'" This "wasn't something done purposefully to show everyone that Nancy Pelosi supports the Jewish community," he said. It "actually came from inside her."

Lauter and others say Pelosi will have to draw on that inner strength as speaker, since Lauter predicted that she will hear from those in the Jewish community who argue that Democrats no longer support Israel the way they used to.

Some Republicans, in fact, questioned Pelosi's support for Israel this summer. The congresswoman ended up removing her name as a co-sponsor from a House resolution supporting the Jewish state during its war with Hezbollah because it did not address the protection of civilians.

While Pelosi's aides said she was not going to lend her name to a resolution that did not contain a word she had written, Republicans criticized the move.

"It highlights a real wave within the Democratic Party that wants a more 'evenhanded' approach on these issues, and that wants to view Israel through the same prism as we do Hezbollah," Matt Brooks, the executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition, said at the time. "Watering down is not acceptable right now." Brooks could not be reached for comment this week.

For his part, Lauter believes the argument about the Democrats and Pelosi is false.

For instance, he noted Pelosi's quick response to former President Carter's description of Israel's settlement policies as "apartheid" in a forthcoming book.

Pelosi publicly announced that Carter does not speak for the Democratic Party on Israel.

Rabbi Doug Kahn, director of the Jewish Community Relations Council in San Francisco, also

applauded Pelosi's repudiation of Carter's position.

He has known Pelosi since she started representing his district in 1987. Kahn said his group has always had an excellent working relationship with her. And he praised her passion for issues that relate to equal opportunity, social justice and peace.

Kahn, echoing Lauter's point, said that Pelosi, coming from a city with such a liberal political reputation, will face challenges from the liberal segments of the Democratic Party that have criticized Israeli policies. But he is confident that Pelosi, as speaker, will be effective in persuading people with a broad range of views on the Middle East, the importance of maintaining bipartisan support for Israel.

When it comes to Israel, "she truly gets it," said Matt Dorf, a consultant to the Democratic National Committee. She gets "Israel's value and asset to U.S. security" and its "importance as the only democracy in the Middle East."

Jewish organizational officials also commend Pelosi's record on Jewish communal issues.

William Daroff, vice president for public policy for the United Jewish Communities, the federation system's umbrella group and a Republican himself, said the lawmaker has helped ensure federal funding of Jewish family service agencies and Jewish hospitals and has supported government programs and policies that Jewish organizations value, such as Medicare and Medicaid.

He also noted that Reva Price, Pelosi's liaison to the Jewish community for a year and a half, came from the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, the umbrella group of local community relations councils.

Bringing on board such an insider was "really a masterful stroke," Daroff said.

Price, he added, has done a wonderful job of playing "traffic cop" with Jewish organizations and in making sure that Pelosi's agenda is in tune with that of the Jewish community.

She's been "a real champion of making sure the Jewish community is well served," Daroff said of the lawmaker. "I'm sure she'll continue to be a champion."



**Jennifer Jacobson is a freelance writer in Washington, D.C.**



# Expansive Chuppah: Washington Hebrew OKs Officiation of Interfaith Weddings--with Conditions

By Paula Amann

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

September 6, 2006

As members of the District's [Washington Hebrew Congregation](#) ready for Rosh Hashanah, they'll be heading into a new Jewish year with a set of recent policies that could set off ripples in the region and beyond.

WHC, the oldest and largest synagogue in the area, has set forth guidelines that, for the first time, permit interfaith couples to have a temple rabbi perform their wedding. The Reform movement overall has not forged a consensus on faith-divergent unions, leaving it to the discretion of individual rabbis.

"I felt I could better serve Judaism by being able to welcome the couple under the chuppah and to participate in the creation of a Jewish home and Jewish life," said Senior Rabbi M. Bruce Lustig, who involved the temple's board and five other clergy in the decision, finalized in May. He also consulted with rabbinic colleagues around the country.

No interfaith pairs have yet stood beneath a wedding canopy at WHC, but temple leaders report an "overwhelmingly positive" response from members, in the words of immediate past president David Vise, who presided over the change.

"I had a number of people say, 'What took you so long?'" said Vise, who sees the core of the new policy as a "real commitment to the establishment of Jewish homes and Jewish families."

Indeed, the new guidelines set forth a seven-point set of conditions for WHC members and their children, entailing a "solemn promise by the couple to establish a Jewish home and to rear their children in the context of Judaism and Judaism alone."

The pair must meet with a WHC clergy member, take an Introduction to Judaism class together and produce a document explaining their shared understanding of a Jewish home and Jewish

child-rearing. Like all other couples, they will take part in the clergy's premarital counseling program.

Clergy will not co-officiate with non-Jewish clergy, according to the guidelines. The new policy, however, does allow individual rabbis to choose in the matter of performing the interfaith ceremonies altogether.

The present quartet of WHC rabbis have differing views, with Lustig and Rabbi Josh Burrows choosing to perform interfaith marriages, and Rabbis Joui Hessel and Susan Shankman opting to join their colleagues in counseling and teaching interfaith couples without officiating at their weddings.

Nonetheless, all the clergy and senior staff at the temple signed a May 25 letter setting forth the new policy. The stands of the congregation's two cantors, Mikhail Manevich and Susan Bortnick, on taking part in interfaith ceremonies could not be determined at press time.

Vise stressed that opposition to interfaith marriage would not serve as a bar to retention or hiring of clergy at WHC. In fact, another letter to the membership from the congregation's top lay leaders said "there was no pressure on any of our rabbis, cantors or educators to compromise their beliefs."

"In the spirit of Reform Judaism, we respect the right of clergy to do what is comfortable for them," as in their choice to wear a kippah on the bima or not, Vise said.

The idea of interfaith marriage had provided fodder for discussion for more than 15 years at WHC, he added.

Impetus for change, said current president Hank Levine, came from the membership.

"Too many people were hurt and felt their temple had turned them away," said Levine, who also cited an "overwhelming consensus" on the question.

The District temple, with some 2,652 households, ranks third in size among Reform congregations nationwide, after Temple Israel in West Bloomfield, Mich. (3,117 households), and [Stephen S. Wise Temple](#) in Los Angeles (2,984 households), according to the Union for Reform Judaism.

At Michigan's Temple Israel, said Rabbi Paul Yedwab, clergy have been performing interfaith weddings since the congregation's founding seven decades ago. He and his colleagues set similar prerequisites: a pledge to make "an exclusively Jewish home and raise exclusively Jewish children" and participation in an Introduction to Judaism class.

Yedwab sees the policy as a success, estimating that some 50 potential Jews, most part of interfaith couples, come through that class annually, and notes that the temple does some 35 conversions a year.

"What doing intermarriage does for me is that it gives me one hour with the couple, and to me that's a very important hour" in which to make a case for conversion, said Yedwab, who has served Temple Israel for some 20 years. "I get a chance to place those arguments in front of the

couple."

Across the Washington area, most rabbis serving Reform-affiliated congregations polled say they do not perform interfaith unions.

Rabbi Jack Luxemburg of [Temple Beth Ami](#) in Rockville, Md., declines to marry Jews and non-Jews, but offers to counsel them as they discuss their plans. In certain cases, that conversation has led to conversion on the part of the non-Jewish spouse-to-be.

"Many's the time I've sat with a couple where the non-Jewish partner didn't know there was an option to convert," Luxemburg said. "Sometimes, I've ended up at a chuppah with that couple."

But in Winchester, Va., Rabbi Jonathan Brown of Beth El Congregation will lend his office to interfaith marriage on three strict conditions: "that they would establish a Jewish home, raise the child with the intention that it be Jewish and that there be no officiant from a different faith."

That third prerequisite stems from Brown's desire to convey an unambiguous religious message, he says.

"A wedding is a statement, and I want the statement to be clear: Co-officiation muddles that," Brown explained.

Blocks away from WHC in the District, Rabbi Daniel Zemel of [Temple Micah](#) opts not to perform intermarriages.

What he does, however, is meet regularly with the non-Jewish partners of Jewish congregants. The Union for Reform Judaism's new push to urge conversion of such members has had "no ripple effect at Temple Micah whatsoever," Zemel said, but he reports doing a lot of conversions.

"I have never, ever been the first to utter the c-word ... but the best welcome is implicit, rather than explicit," Zemel argued.

At [Temple Shalom](#) in Chevy Chase, Md., meanwhile, Rabbi Michael Feshbach notes pressure from the Reform grassroots in light of his and other rabbis' willingness to wed Jewish same-sex couples.

"People say, how can you do one and not the other?" said Feshbach, who does not perform interfaith unions. "To me, it's apples and oranges, but I understand why many make an emotional link between the two issues."

Rabbi Brett Isserow of [Beth El Hebrew Congregation](#) in Alexandria, Va., resolved years ago while studying for the rabbinate to not perform weddings of Jews and non-Jews, but hints at similar clamor from congregants.

"The bottom line is this is one of the toughest decisions of my career and probably one of the toughest to maintain," said Isserow, who reports declining to officiate at his own brother's interfaith marriage.

At WHC, Levine sees the recent guidelines as a realistic approach to the increase in intermarriage. The 2003 Greater Washington Jewish Community Study found 41 percent of married couples are intermarried.

"It's life in 2006. Part of what Reform Judaism is about is adapting our practices so our faith can continue to flourish," Levine said, noting of interfaith couples, "If you bar the door coming in, it's harder to reach out to them later."

Since the guidelines appeared, Lustig has heard from more than one interfaith couple who would like to hold an anniversary ceremony--under the chuppah.

The pairs, who had civil weddings, "want to be able to have a Jewish wedding for the first time," Lustig said.

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**Paula Amann is news editor of *Washington Jewish Week*.**

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## Jew-Bu Detective Story Blends Two Cultures

By Michael Fox

The droll independent film *Zen Noir* has both Jewish and Buddhist genes. It's easy to spot the Bu from the title, but where's the Jew?

L.A.-based writer-director Marc Rosenbush, himself a Jew-Bu, conceived of *Zen Noir* as a fish-out-of-water tale, a deadpan clash between disparate cultures (and genres) that resolves itself in genial mutual acceptance. The film is propelled not by acres of plot but by a whiff of mystery, a steady trickle of low-key laughs, an ephemeral love affair and the unusual desire to induce viewers into a contemplative state.



When a follower keels over at a small Buddhist enclave, a tough-talking private eye shows up to solve what he's certain is a murder. His rat-a-tat-tat style of questioning, aimed at flushing out straight answers and revealing absolute truths, is amusingly deflected and frustrated by the enlightened "suspects."

The jokes are key to the movie's appeal, not for their brilliance but because they undercut any tendencies toward earnestness. While that was Rosenbush's plan, one gathers that comedy is part of almost every project he's involved with.

"The humor of Judaism is very central to my character," Rosenbush acknowledges. "A lot of the humor in the film was influenced by Woody Allen--poking fun at one's deepest foibles."

A longtime Chicago theater director and producer, Rosenbush, who is in his mid-30s, moved to Los Angeles some five years ago to make the transition to movies. The independently financed, produced and distributed "*Zen Noir*," winner of numerous awards at smaller film festivals from Boulder to Chicago to Rhode Island, marks his feature debut.

Rosenbush grew up across the street from the site of an outdoor Shakespeare festival in Oak Park, the burg next door to Chicago made famous by Frank Lloyd Wright. The theater and being Jewish were equally formative experiences.

"I had the seminal experience that many Jewish kids have had: 'People hate us because of this.'

That part of my Jewish identity is never going to go away."

Diminutive with a close-cropped beard, Rosenbush was raised Reform in a house of words and ideas; his father was a professor of Russian. (The senior Rosenbush was instrumental in bringing the Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh from Vietnam to Israel in 1999, leading to the formation of some Buddhist communities.) What stuck with him from childhood was "less the religious side of Judaism than the intellectual curiosity--the importance of education, the importance of literature."

In a late-night conversation in his hotel lobby after a sneak preview of *Zen Noir* a few months ago, Rosenbush mused about the differences and connections between Buddhism and Judaism.

"Much of Jewish culture is left-brained. Much of Jewish culture is study-oriented. I wasn't raised on Jewish mysticism, and so the thing that appealed to me in Buddhism was the non-thinking--the intuitive, the experiential.

"I find the two are a very good balance. You can be Buddhist and that doesn't mean you're not Jewish anymore. The more I've looked at religion, the more I see how at their roots they're all the same. Jewish liturgical music is not that far from Buddhist chanting, in some ways."

Rosenbush added with a chuckle, "Once I learned to meditate, I could have a very nice time in a Jewish service."

Clearly, *Zen Noir* accurately reflects its maker. It blends Buddhist philosophy and Jewish irreverence, while drawing on a lesson gleaned from years in the theater.

"Laughter's a good way to get an audience in the door," Rosenbush said. "Then you can whack them with wisdom."



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

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# Happy Ever After

By Pat Sherman

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[My Latest Grievance](#), by Elinor Lipman, Houghton Mifflin Company, 256 pp., \$24.

What to do with Elinor Lipman? Her books are enjoyable, but so darn optimistic! What's more, she refuses to condemn intermarriage.

At a time when tales of unrelieved angst seem to be the surest way to grab the literary spotlight, Elinor Lipman is that rarity among writers--a true believer in happy endings. "My writing is a product of my world view," she observes. "Which is embarrassingly optimistic."



Frederica Hatch, the 16-year-old narrator of *My Latest Grievance*, certainly has her fair share of angst. As she comes of age during the mid-1970s, she finds her adolescent rebellion short-circuited by her ultra-liberal college-professor parents. What's a red-blooded teenager to do? Fortunately she's rescued from a life of terminal political correctness by the arrival on campus of Laura Lee French--glamorous, flamboyant and, most significantly, her staid father's first wife. Under Laura Lee's dubious influence, Frederica is delighted to feel herself "slipping, philosophically speaking." "Not that I didn't want wrongs to be righted," she protests. "But I also wanted the freedom to voice my admiration for all things material and foolish. And to wear clothes not stitched by the Ladies Garment Workers Union." From the outset, it's abundantly clear that Frederica will emerge from this encounter older and wiser. What saves the story from becoming a predictable moral fable, though, is Lipman's ability to make the vain and flighty Laura Lee worthy of Frederica's interest and

compassion, and ultimately, worthy of ours too. The novel encompasses adultery, illegitimacy, attempted suicide and alcoholism--hardly fodder for an optimist. Yet through it all Lipman never loses her light touch. She won't abandon Frederica to her misery, and the happy ending, when it finally arrives, is neither neat nor cliched. It comes with an unexpected twist, a hallmark of

Lipman's style.

*My Latest Grievance* is the ninth of her books, all of which have been well-received. A 1972 graduate of Boston's Simmons College, Lipman started writing fiction almost by accident. In her late 20s, having grown frustrated with her job in public relations, she signed up on a whim for a graduate course in creative writing. A few years later, she published a collection of short stories, *Into Love and Out Again*. Her first novel, *Then She Found Me* (1990), soon followed. Lipman's quirky characters and snappy dialogue quickly charmed readers and she has since gained an enthusiastic following for her off-beat romances.

Critics have frequently compared her to Jane Austen. Fellow novelist Fay Weldon recently praised Lipman as an "Austen-like" stylist in *The Washington Post*, and *The Chicago Tribune* urged readers to "Think Jane Austen in the Catskills!" when reviewing her fourth novel, *The Inn at Lake Devine*. Of course, being dubbed a contemporary Austen may not be all that unusual. After all, what successful female writer of light fiction hasn't been hailed as the new Austen by devoted admirers? Lipman, however, is distinguished not just by her wit but also by her "Austen-like" willingness to let her characters expose their faults and weaknesses, sometimes to her own surprise. "I don't plan ahead," she swears. Although her plots often appear tightly choreographed, she works without an outline, the writer's version of an acrobat's net. "If I'm lucky, a sentence will come to me that intrigues me enough so that I want to see where it will go ... I keep writing because I want to know what happens next."

And she's not ashamed to poke fun at her own penchant for looking on the bright side, either. "My husband and son will be discussing a movie and my husband will ask, 'Do you think your mom will like that?' And my son will say, 'Nah, Mom only likes movies that are affirmations of the human spirit.'"

"I had a very safe, functional family," she admits with slight chagrin when queried about her background. The second of two daughters, she grew up in the suburbs of Lowell, Massachusetts, an environment she richly mined for *The Inn at Lake Devine*. *Devine* opens with the protagonist, Natalie Marx, waxing nostalgic over a neighborhood which, like Lipman's, was "one third each Protestant, Catholic and Jewish," and where "no one's house was any better than anyone else's." Inevitably, though, even this Eden of the 1950s has a serpent. It slips in in the form of a letter from an innkeeper in Vermont. Responding to their inquiry regarding accommodations, proprietor Ingrid Berry informs the Marxes, "Our guests who feel most comfortable and return year after year are Gentiles." Twelve-year-old Natalie is at first indignant, then curious. She finagles an invitation to the forbidding inn through a bunkmate at summer camp, and promptly develops a crush on the innkeeper's eldest son, Nelson.

*Lake Devine* isn't quite a comedy of manners about anti-Semitism, though it does come close to it. When the adult Natalie returns to the inn, she falls in love again, this time with the Berrys' second son, Kris. Her friend Linette Feldman, daughter of a Catskills hotelier, subsequently captures the heart of the aforementioned Nelson. All's well that ends well, and *The Inn at Lake Devine* ends with what Lipman refers to, both in person and in print, as "rampant mixed marriage."

Popular as she may be, the ease with which Lipman depicts mixed marriage doesn't always sit well with her audience. Whenever she speaks to Jewish groups, she says, the first question she faces is invariably, "Don't you think you have a social responsibility to encourage Jews to marry

Jews?" The suggestion is enough to ruffle even her cheerful equanimity. "It's not your daughter, it's a book," she retorts. "If one Jewish woman falls in love with one non-Jewish man, doesn't the writer have the right to write about that?"

Lipman herself married a doctor whom she met on a blind date in college. That he is also a Jew strikes her as mere serendipity. She married because she fell in love and she defends her characters' right to do likewise. "All around me I see fabulous mixed marriages of long duration," she argues. "With fabulous children."

Frederica Hatch, of *My Latest Grievance*, is one of those children. Precocious and articulate, she introduces her WASP father and Jewish mother to the reader as "two bleeding hearts that beat as one." David Hatch and Aviva Ginsberg present a united front, whether agitating on behalf of their faculty union or educating their child. They conscientiously observe both Hanukkah and Christmas, as well as the day the National Labor Relations Board declared that college faculty members were covered under the National Labor Relations Act, an event "forever celebrated by the Hatches as a holiday with cake." Frederica isn't torn between Judaism and Christianity, but between left-wing activism and her longing for a "conventional" family life like that of her best friend, Patsy, whose stay-at-home mom wears lipstick and aprons.

Still, Frederica doesn't remain completely oblivious to the dilemmas posed by her heritage. Her father's Christian mother may be sensitive enough to wrap her Christmas gifts in Hanukkah paper, but Grandma still ends grace at the family table with thanks to "Christ our Lord amen." As in "Lake Devine," these incidents are presented as more irritating than threatening. Even the politically correct Aviva rolls her eyes patiently at her mother-in-law's gaffes, reassuring Frederica that "at least she made latkes" for Christmas dinner. Not every conflict can be reduced to "Sociology 101," observes Frederica, who is drawn to social life, not social movements, a tendency she shares with her author.

"People get along in my books," Lipman points out. "And when they don't, it's for personal reasons, not for ... political ones."

These days, multiculturalism may need all the help it can get. Lipman and many of her best fans belong to a generation that believed society could have diversity without divisiveness, ethnic pride without ethnic conflict. But is this just a liberal fantasy?

A full-time writer and life-long resident of the East Coast, Lipman currently divides her time between New York and Northampton, Massachusetts--the latter a college town famous (or infamous) for its embrace of all things leftist. Is this the real world, I ask her. Every day the news reminds us that, far from fading away, ethnic and religious boundaries are sharpening around the globe. Are her characters living in a time warp? Are her novels doomed to become relics of a bygone, idealistic era, when people honestly thought they could "get along"? "That's a wonderful and deep question," Lipman acknowledges. It intrigues her as a person, but not as a writer. Defying trends, she persists in believing that a novelist can capture universal human experience, even in this age of identity politics.

Universality, unfortunately, might be as unfashionable today as optimism. Savvy publicists package authors by age, genre, gender or ethnicity, in order to raise their profile in a competitive marketplace. In spite of her efforts to avoid it, Lipman has frequently been pigeon-holed as yet

another writer of women's novels, or so-called "chick lit." Lipman dismisses the label as sales ploy. Women buy more books than men, an economic reality publishers cannot afford to ignore.

"My book covers would arrive and my son would say, 'Mom, no guy would be caught dead reading that.'" She grimaces. When she told him *The Inn at Lake Devine* concerned an anti-Semitic hotel, he quipped with teenage audacity, "If you put a swastika on the cover, men would buy it too." She throws up her hands. "Now my editors think he's a marketing genius!"

Obviously, though, Lipman won't be resorting to sensationalized cover art any time soon, at least if she has any say in it. She doesn't have to. Optimism is as unlikely to go out of style permanently as love itself. When Frederica is called upon to explain to Laura Lee's daughter, Julia, the peculiar and painful circumstances surrounding Julia's birth, Frederica knows, "I should be able to tell her the truth." But truth consists of more than facts. Frederica isn't like her parents, whose convictions require them to live their entire lives "under oath." Instead, she tells Julia that "every character in her story, at one time, loved each other deeply," whether social activist or socialite, solid citizen, dilettante, bohemian artist or bleeding heart.

Ultimately, Lipman's appeal lies in this capacity to tell stories about people who do indeed love one another deeply--if not all the time, at least often enough to keep the angst at bay and the hope of happy endings alive.

To hear Web Magazine Editor Ronnie Friedland's interview with Elinor Lipman, click [here](#).

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**Pat Sherman is a freelance writer and children's author in Cambridge, Mass. Her first book, [Sun's Daughter](#), was published by Clarion in 2005.**

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# Interview with Elinor Lipman

**By Ronnie Friedland**

To hear Web Magazine Editor Ronnie Friedland's interview with Elinor Lipman, click [here](#).

To read a written interview with Elinor Lipman, click [here](#).

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**Ronnie Friedland is the Web Magazine Editor of InterfaithFamily.com.**

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