

The religion conundrum:



MIXED marriages

BY ELLEN S. GLAZER

Ed Case is a man with a mission: to encourage interfaith families (in which one partner is Jewish) to make “Jewish choices.” When he speaks of “Jewish choices,” Case focuses primarily on raising children with an exclusively Jewish religious identity. It was the choice that he and his wife, Wendy, made when they became parents 25 years ago and it is one that Case has seen countless others make over the years.

Why does Case feel it is so important? “Because I care about Judaism and the future of the Jewish people. If 47% of Jews are marrying people of other faiths, the choices these families make will have a significant impact on the future of the Jewish people. I am hoping that more of them will choose to raise Jewish children.”

Seven years ago, Ed Case was a man without a mission—at least temporarily. Tiring of work that to him “had no social utility,” the then head litigator at a major Boston law firm decided to put his 22 years of corporate law behind him and to look for work that really mattered to him.

“I thought a lot about what that might be and realized that what I cared most about was Jewish outreach to the intermarried.” As coordinator, with Wendy Case, of the interfaith group at *Temple Shalom* of Newton, where he was later president, Case had come



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to appreciate just how important it was for the Jewish community to include and welcome interfaith families like his own. “We had several people in our group who were, like Wendy, ‘living Jewishly’ but who had not converted. Conversion is wonderful for those that choose it, but I felt it was crucial that interfaith families be included as an integral part of the Jewish community.”

So how did a successful corporate lawyer metamorphasize into an advocate for interfaith outreach? Case decided to “take a time” out after leaving the law and attend the combined Master’s degree program in Jewish communal service and management offered by the *Hornstein* program and the *Heller School at Brandeis*. “I wasn’t sure what I would do when I completed the program, but it seemed like it would be time well spent and might lead to something.”

And indeed, it did. Case studied intermarriage from a variety of perspectives with a Hornstein faculty member he found to be “gifted and well connected.” His first year field work placement was at *Jewish Family and Children’s Service* where he helped coordinate programming for interfaith families. His second year placement was at *Combined Jewish Philanthropies*, where his role was to help create a planning and allocation committee for services for the intermarried. The study and fieldwork reconfirmed to him what a critical issue outreach is for the Jewish future. It convinced Case that what he needed and wanted to do was to found a non-profit organization dedicated to this *mission*.

Enter *Jewish Family and Life* and *InterfaithFamily.com*, a non-profit Jewish media organization founded by Yossi Abramowitz who had created a number of online magazines including publisher of *InterfaithFamily.com*. Ed Case went to work for JFL (*Jewish Family and Life*) in 1999 and two years later, he founded *InterfaithFamily.com, Inc.*, a non-profit organization that provides “information, connections, support and advocacy” for interfaith families. Four months later, he purchased the internet magazine from *Jewish Family and Life*. It was while he was at *Jewish Family and Life* that Ed Case began working with Ronnie Friedland, current Editor of *InterfaithFamily.com* and Case’s co-editor of the book, *The Guide to Jewish Interfaith Family Life: An Interfaith.Com Handbook*.

Like most in the non-profit arena, Ed Case struggles to find funding for *InterfaithFamily.com*. Fortunately, he was able to secure grants from several institutional donors including the *Richard & Rhoda Goldman Fund* and the *Walter & Elise Haas Fund* in San Francisco, *Combined Jewish Philanthropies* in Boston and the *Jacob & Hilda Blaustein Foundation* in Baltimore. Case also has 450 supporting members of *InterfaithFamily.com*, individuals and families that contribute at least \$36 yearly—and hopes to attract thousands more. Still, the organization, which has a budget of \$250,000 and needs to nearly double that

in the next two years, struggles. “I can’t imagine an issue more important to the Jewish community, but it is controversial and has not been a popular funding area.”

Raising money has not been the only challenge that *InterfaithFamily.com* has faced. Case loves his work, but he admits that there are times when he finds himself in a “no win” position. “There are people who accuse me of discouraging people from converting because I am offering another option. There are others who charge me with being ‘too Jewish.’ I’m not trying to convince people of anything other than that the Jewish community can be strengthened if more interfaith families make Jewish choices. For the community not to recognize that is to shoot itself in the foot.”

When asked how he feels about interfaith families making “non-Jewish” choices, Ed Case says that he feels that providing children with a faith—whatever the faith is—is better than not offering them a faith—or trying to raise them with two. “Sure I hope they will choose Judaism, but I would rather they choose the other parents’ religion than both or nothing.” When asked if the Christian member of an interfaith family that chooses Judaism can retain his/her Christian identity, Case says an emphatic ‘yes.’” In fact, this is one clear option that *InterfaithFamily.com* stands for: a person can marry a Jew, choose to raise Jewish children, have a Jewish home and still retain pride in and connection to the faith they were raised in. “Some will go on to choose to convert, some will live ‘Jewishly’ as Wendy does, and others will be observant, church attending Christians living in Jewish homes.”



INSIGHT

in interfaith families

POIGNANT CONFLICTS IN IDENTITY

If anything captures the breadth of choices that interfaith families are making and celebrating, it is the on-line magazine, InterfaithFamily.com. Published every two weeks, the magazine covers a range of issues familiar to interfaith families: welcoming Christian grandparents at Jewish lifecycle events, the participation of a non-Jew in synagogue services and of course, the all-too-familiar, “December dilemma.” In 2003, *InterfaithFamily.com* launched its first reader’s contest, offering cash prizes to essayists in four categories: Claiming Jewish Roots (for children of interfaith parents), Engaging in Jewish Life, Loving Jewish Grandchildren, and Raising Jewish Children. The contest, which yielded 130 entries, received national publicity in the Jewish press, bringing in many new readers to *InterfaithFamily.com*. “We’ve been getting 50,000 visits a month and the number is increasing.”

Although the on-line magazine, with its large following, is now well known and well regarded, it represents only one “branch” of *InterfaithFamily.com, Inc’s* activities and mission. The other two critical components, according to Ed Case, are *Connections in Your Area* and *Advocacy*. *The Connections in Your Area* is an organization and program listing service that connects interfaith families with each other. It brings people together at local synagogues and Jewish community centers across the U.S., offering them the opportunity to talk with others who are grappling with issues similar to those they face. The *InterfaithFamily.com* network is a grass roots association that advocates for a more welcoming Jewish community.

The advocacy efforts undoubtedly ben-

Ronnie Friedland, Editor of *InterfaithFamily.com* is a veteran author and journalist, who has written extensively about parenthood in her (co-edited) books, *The Mother’s Book*, (Houghton Mifflin) and *The Father’s Book* (Hall) and in the *Boston Globe*, *Boston Herald* and *Parenting Magazine*. However, the people who have written for *InterfaithFamily.com* have offered Friedland some of the most compelling stories she has encountered.

“Some of the most poignant articles have been from children growing up in intermarried families who feel torn between their two parents’ religions. We take the position that it is usually best for children if parents choose one religion for their kids. When the parents don’t

benefit from Ed Case’s 22 years experience as a successful litigator. The *Harvard Law* trained, “recovering attorney” uses his well tuned persuasive skills to write op-eds for publications ranging from the *Forward* to *Reform Judaism* and speaks nationally on the importance of outreach to interfaith families. Anyone who has heard him speak or has read his editorials has no doubt that this is, indeed, a man with a mission.

As a lawyer, Ed Case had a beautiful corner office high above Boston harbor. Now he has a very different “corner office”--a modest space in a building at the corner of Oak and Chestnut streets in Newton Upper Falls.

On his desk is a picture frame that says, LEAP. It was a gift from his daughter Emily. She gave it to him at the time he was first contemplating a career change. Case took the leap and since that time, he has never looked back with regret. Still, many people have told him he was brave to make such a dramatic change. When asked about this, Case smiles and counters, “I wasn’t brave. I was lucky. How lucky could I be to be able to find work that I love, that matters to me and that gives me a chance to try to make a real difference.”

choose, it can be really heartbreaking for kids. Or, [another instance is] if the parents have a bitter divorce. I was especially moved by a boy who was about to become a bar mitzvah and who wrote about not knowing whether his Catholic father would attend the ceremony.

“Another group that has moved me are children with Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers who have been raised as Jews but are told they aren’t really Jewish because their mothers aren’t Jewish. In a recent issue on this topic, Hana Daley wrote, ‘Our teacher, who happened to be a very religious, knowledgeable man, told me if my mom wasn’t Jewish, then I wasn’t Jewish. How could this be? My entire life I always proudly identified myself as a Jew and I had been in Hebrew school since I was five. I loved Judaism.’

“I have also learned from Christian parents raising Jewish children. Many of them are so dedicated to raise the children Jewishly that they become more Jewishly educated than many Jewish parents. One of these mothers, Rena Mello, described in an article how her son recently said to her,

“Mom, I am Jewish, so I celebrate Hanukkah and Jake (my sister’s son) is Christian, so he celebrates Christmas.”

“Yes, that’s right, honey.” I said.

“Mom, is Dad Jewish?”

“Yes.”

“Is Hannah Jewish?”

“Yes.”

“Mom, are you Jewish?”

“No, sweetie, Mom is not Jewish but I choose to raise you and Hannah in the Jewish religion because I like it.”

Her son then exclaimed, in a sincere yet urgent tone, “But Mom, I want you to be Jewish, too.”

In an age where intermarriage will be an unavoidable part of Jewish life, it is comments like that from Rena Mello’s son that will play a large role in shaping the Jewish future.”