



Children and Change: Divorce and Adoption in Interfaith Families

It is a well-known maxim of intermarriage that couples on their own can usually resolve religious and cultural differences and find a comfortable common path, but when children enter the picture, a whole new set of challenging decisions emerges. Intermarried couples have to do much more serious negotiation to come up with a family plan that both meets the needs of each parent and provides for the emotional and spiritual well-being of the children.

Our children offer us the opportunity to share who we are and what we believe with them. When our identity and beliefs differ from those of our partner, the terrain often gets rocky. Add to the equation a difficult emotional situation (like divorce or adoption) plus our nation's complex adversary legal system, and the path can seem impossible. This issue of **DOVETAIL** looks at what happens in interfaith families when they go through legal changes, like divorce or adoption.

Divorce Statistics

Divorce is certainly not a topic that most Jewish/Christian families want to think about, but, for better or worse, it happens to many interfaith couples. The phenomenon of divorce among interfaith families has been studied and analyzed, with mixed results. One 1987 study by Rabbi Allen S. Maller, of Temple Akiba in Culver City, California, found that the divorce rate for Jewish/Christian couples is 133 percent higher than for Jewish couples (who, by most accounts, have a lower than average

divorce rate). According to Joseph Guttman, university professor and author of **Divorce in Psychosocial Perspective** (1993), who has studied the studies, "the divorce rate in interfaith marriages has consistently revealed itself to be higher than in religiously homogamous marriages. . . . Furthermore, when one of the partners in the marriage has no religious affiliation and the other does, the probability of divorce also increases." However, Guttman explains that some of the higher incidence of divorce among intermarried couples may be due to other factors such as age at marriage and social class differences. "Some of the effect," he goes on to say, "may be due to there being more points of conflict over children's socialization and differences in values, traditions, and relevant habits and practices." Furthermore, Guttman cites a 1989 study which found no effect of religion on the divorce rate. Obviously, the research done to date on divorce among intermarried couples is not conclusive.

Children's Religious Identity

While realizing how difficult it is for a happily intermarried couple to consider the possibility of divorce, **DOVETAIL** advocates parents' conscious planning in advance for the religious education of their children in the event of divorce, whether or not they anticipate facing this legal issue down the road. In the United States we have a federal legal system under

which matters of divorce and adoption are governed by state law. Consequently, there is no unified legal precedent or doctrine in these areas, but rather a range of possibilities for outcome based on various state laws. It is very important, given this legal range of outcomes, for interfaith couples to consider these issues in advance, so that their decisions about the religious upbringing of their children can be carried out even if the family splits or changes.

We asked several attorneys who are intimately involved with interfaith divorce and adoption to write for this issue of **DOVETAIL**. Their articles focus especially on the impact on religious identity of children in changing interfaith families. Probably the hardest decision faced by interfaith couples is over the religious identity of their children. When interfaith couples disagree over religious training, their children almost always get caught in the middle. So it is essential for

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Jewish/Christian parents in the process of divorce or adoption to present a united front and avoid feelings of religious competition, which could be internalized by already vulnerable children.

Adoption in Interfaith Families

Adoption, unlike divorce, is a cause for happiness. Still, legal and social hurdles facing Jewish/Christian couples make the experience of adopting a child a complex and challenging one. Many adoption agencies, especially those run by religious institutions, will not con-

sider interfaith couples as potential adoptive parents. The story of one such Jewish/Christian couple's long search to adopt children is shared on pages 6-7 of this issue.

Crucial Decisions

The piece that links adoption and divorce in this issue is the great attention that interfaith parents need to pay to decisions about religious upbringing for their children. Whether through divorce or through adoption, children whose family structure is being changed may rely in a simple way on their religion as a support to guide them through the changes. Parents need to think long and hard about what they teach their children, and about how what they teach will affect their children's ability to cope with difficult situations.

An exciting example of parents who are expending energy and thought to develop a firm foundation of religious education and identity for their children is the Interfaith Families Project of Greater Washington, DC. You will find a profile of this young and growing group on pages 8-9 of this issue. We congratulate the organizers of this grassroots effort, as well as those across the country who are developing similar programs, for their dedication to their children and their persistence in the face of opposition and apathy. We hope that efforts like these will give interfaith families the kind of support they need, whether they are trying to adopt children, find alternatives to divorce, or simply implement a coherent plan for the religious upbringing of their children. ▼

DOVETAIL's mission is to provide a channel of communication for interfaith couples, their parents and children. The more families can share their ideas, experiences, resources, and support, the more they can make peace in their homes and communities. Jewish and Christian perspectives can dovetail.

Believing that there are no definitive answers to the questions facing interfaith families, DOVETAIL strives to be open to all ideas and opinions. Editorial content attempts to balance and respect the perspectives of both Jewish and Christian partners in interfaith marriages, as well as the diverse perspectives of parents and children of interfaith couples. Inclusion in DOVETAIL does not imply endorsement. DOVETAIL accepts a thoughtful and constructive discussion of all related issues in the Letters to the Editor section, and reserves the right to reply.

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CLERGY OPINION

What Happens to the Children When Interfaith Couples Break Up?

by Rabbi Dr. Arthur Blecher

The majority of couples I see in my counseling practice are interfaith couples. My clinical experience shows that when interfaith parents separate, the support system they have built for their children's religious identity falls apart far more extensively than for same-faith couples. Ironically, interfaith parents who have elected to raise their children with one specific religious identity, which is the approach that receives the greatest support and approval from the religious establishment, find this to be especially problematic if they break up. In many cases a parent must undertake the responsibility for providing a religious upbringing different from that parent's own religious identity. The situation becomes exacerbated when a parent forms a new relationship, and the child of the interfaith separation is blended into the new family. In my practice I have come across families where, for example, a Christian couple with Christian children are also raising a Jewish child from a previous relationship. I once testified as an expert witness in a very painful custody case where this was the central issue. Interfaith parents, whether or not they are considering divorce, should work hard to build a solid support system for their children's religious identity, a system that can withstand the trials of family change. ▼

Dr. Blecher is both an ordained rabbi and a psychotherapist in private practice in Washington, DC. He can be reached at (202) 462-5448.

A Tale of Two Religions: A Contractual Approach to Religion As a Factor in Child Custody and Visitation Disputes

by Rebecca Korzec

Mr. Simms was Jewish; his wife-to-be was Catholic. They married in a Jewish religious ceremony and raised their children as Jews. Following their separation, Mrs. Simms resumed the practice of Catholicism, taking the children to church with her. Mr. Simms objected. In 1987, a Colorado district court granted physical custody of the Simms children to their Catholic mother, while granting "spiritual custody" "for the purposes of determining religious training" to their Jewish father.

The problem of religious differences between divorced parents is increasing. Cases such as *Simms* require courts to make Solomonic judgments. What role should the religious beliefs and needs of parents and children play in child custody and visitation decisions? Should courts even consider religious preferences or should they remain "neutral" by refusing to consider religious questions under any circumstances?

Resolution of these questions is crucial. With more than fifty percent of marriages ending in divorce, an alarming number of children find their lives disrupted. When the original family's stability is shattered, children become particularly vulnerable to parental conflict. Religious differences are likely to create conflicts. Consequently, courts often are required to make difficult custody decisions—decisions which are usually couched in terms of the best interests of the child.

Parents' Rights and "Neutral Principles"

The right of the parent to direct the religious education of children has been deemed by the Supreme Court to be "fundamental" and "cardinal." Further, the Court has concluded that the Establishment Clause of the first amendment prohibits courts from

resolving "controversies over religious doctrine and practice." Nevertheless, the Supreme Court has recognized certain "neutral principles of law, developed for use in all [church] property disputes, which can be applied without 'establishing' churches to which property is awarded."

The New York Court of Appeals applied "neutral principles" to a family religious dispute in *Avitzur v. Avitzur*. The Avitzurs married in a traditional Jewish ceremony. As part of the ceremony, the parties signed a ketubah (marriage contract), which provided that marital difficulties could be resolved by a religious court if either party so desired. The husband obtained a civil divorce, but refused to grant his wife a religious divorce (get). Under Jewish law only the husband can obtain the get; if he refuses, the wife can never remarry. Mrs. Avitzur brought suit to force her recalcitrant husband to appear before the religious court to obtain the get. The New York Court of Appeals concluded that the ketubah constituted a private agreement between the Avitzurs which is enforceable under "neutral principles." Consequently, enforcement of this private marriage contract would not offend first amendment safeguards.

Ultimately, the *Avitzur* court permitted judicial enforcement of a religious contract because such enforcement could be effectuated on secular terms. Since contract enforcement constitutes a secular purpose—the protection of reasonable contractual expectations—it neither advances nor inhibits religion.

Custody and Pre-Divorce Agreements

The *Avitzur* principles can be applied to custody disputes by developing a purely contractual approach which honors the agree-

ments concerning religion formulated by the pre-divorce family. Significantly, this contractual approach would not offend constitutional safeguards. In fact, first amendment issues need not be reached.

Moreover, the contractual approach would be a substantial improvement over the current patchwork of inconsistent case law, which is largely unworkable and unpredictable. Because only a few states dictate the factors to be weighed in determining the child's best interests, courts have wide discretion in considering religious differences between parents.

Some courts apply a joint or shared custody approach to the religion question. As previously noted, the Colorado district court granted physical custody to the Catholic mother and "spiritual" custody to the Jewish father. By 1988, more than thirty states had enacted legislation permitting, encouraging, or even compelling joint custody arrangements in which both divorced parents decide major issues concerning the child. In some instances, the child even divides time equally between both parental homes.

Initially, joint custody promised an ideal form of parenting by divorced parties, encouraging them to remain involved, interested parents. However, the initial enthusiasm for compulsory or imposed joint custody has waned. Divorced parties cannot be forced to parent together in a productive, loving manner; they must parent voluntarily. In fact, forced joint custody may work against the child's interests by fostering parental hostility.

Divorce involving intermarried partners may be particularly vulnerable to such hostility. Individuals experiencing the trauma and disorientation of divorce often seek solace in their ethnic and religious roots. Joint custody is simply inappropriate

under these circumstances.

The Zummo Case

A recent Pennsylvania case, *Zummo v. Zummo*, exemplifies much that is unworkable in the current judicial approach to religion in custody disputes. Paula and David Zummo were married in 1978 and divorced in 1988. Three children were born of the marriage. Paula was raised as a Jew and "actively practiced her faith since childhood." The trial court concluded that the parties had discussed their religious differences prior to their marriage and had agreed orally that any children would be raised in the Jewish faith. Moreover, "[d]uring the marriage, the Zummo family participated fully in the life of the Jewish faith and community. . . . All three of the children were formally given Hebrew names. Before the parties separated, the children attended no religious services outside the Jewish faith."

Following the separation, the Zummos agreed to share legal custody. Under this agreement, the mother had primary physical custody, subject to the father's partial physical custody on alternating weekends, and certain holidays and vacation periods. However, Mr. Zummo refused to have the children attend Jewish Sunday School during his visitation. He preferred to take them to Roman Catholic services instead. The trial court held that Mr. Zummo was obliged to arrange for the children's attendance at Jewish Sunday School, and that he would *not* be permitted to take the children to religious services contrary to the Jewish faith. The Pennsylvania Superior Court reversed, concluding that "it is constitutionally impermissible to decide a custody or visitation dispute, in whole or in part, on the basis of a determination of or consideration of the parent's relative devoutness." The court

specifically vacated that portion of the trial court's order which prevented Mr. Zummo from taking his children to religious services "contrary to the Jewish faith" because the facts failed to demonstrate "a substantial threat of present or future physical or emotional harm" to the children.

Zummo exemplifies the shortcoming of the current judicial approach, in that it fails to promote post-divorce family stability by ignoring the legitimate and reasonable religious contracts formed by the pre-divorce family. Simply stated, the Zummo pre-divorce contract reflected the parties' intent to be a Jewish family. As recognized by both the trial court and the *Zummo* majority, the parents agreed to raise the children as Jews and performed that agreement during the entire marriage. Even Mr. Zummo admitted that his desire to have the children attend church constituted a break from prior practice. In fact, Mr. Zummo testified at trial that his children are Jewish.

Before their divorce, the Zummos chose to raise their children in one religion, rather than two. Their agreement should not have been breached merely because the parents divorced. What the *Zummo* majority refused to consider is that the religious agreement affected not only the parents, but also the children. Although the court recognized parental authority over the religious upbringing of children within the family setting, it created other rules for post-divorce families. Instead of enforcing the Zummo family pre-divorce contract concerning religion, the court adopted a shared custody approach, permitting each parent to "pursue whatever course of religious indoctrination which that parent sees fit . . . during periods of lawful custody or visitation." The tragedy of *Zummo* is that it completely frustrates reasonable family expectations and stability

at precisely the moment they are most critical.

Benefits of the Contract Approach

The contract approach to religious disputes between divorcing or divorced parents avoids the pitfalls of the current case law, especially disasters such as *Zummo* and *Simms*. Courts would enforce family pre-divorce contracts in the post-divorce context. Inquiry would focus on whether the parents had entered into a contract agreement regarding the children's religion. If such an agreement exists, the courts would enforce it, absent a clear showing of actual physical harm to the children.

The parents' written agreement could be secular (such as a premarital or separation agreement) or religious (such as a ketubah). If the agreement is merely oral (such as the agreement in *Zummo*) it could be enforced upon a showing of actual performance during the marriage. For example, raising the children in a specific religion by tacit agreement would be evidence of actual performance. The actions in *Zummo*, which demonstrated that the children were raised as Jews, would meet this contractual test. In the same vein, performing the same acts without any agreement would constitute a valid implied contract, deserving of post-divorce enforcement. Enforcing pre-divorce religious contracts, whether express or implied, would increase the possibility for stability and certainty for both parents and children. ▼

Rebecca Korzec is a professor at the University of Baltimore School of Law. This article is excerpted from the New England Law Review, Volume 25, Number 4. © Copyright New England School of Law 1991. All rights reserved. Reprinted by Permission.

Mediation as an Option in Interfaith Divorce

by Doris T. Friedman, P.C.

Any family that anticipates a separation or divorce is faced with countless problems and hurdles to overcome—custody, visitation, extended family relations, support, equitable distribution and lifestyles. For the interfaith family, all of these problems are compounded by

Mediation is a process whereby the parties sit together (or in separate rooms) at the same time with a neutral professional who is able to assist the parties in resolving their own differences, rather than accepting mandated resolutions from a court.

questions of religion. When divorce leads to physical relocation, children who are already heartbroken and confused may be further stressed by communities who do not accept their unique backgrounds.

One method of attempting to resolve the problems faced by divorcing interfaith parents is family mediation. Mediation is a process whereby the parties sit together (or in separate rooms) at the same time with a neutral professional who is able to assist the parties in resolving their own differences, rather than accepting mandated resolutions from a court. Mediation can diminish the sharpness and adversarial nature of separation, and couples who select mediation as the method of resolving their disputes are already one step ahead of those who have chosen the adversarial legal arena. For parents who must learn to co-parent whether or not they are separated, mediation is both a method of resolution and of education, as parents learn to communicate with each other in a different relationship. Parents must learn to interact with

sensitivity, patience, and commitment to the hard work of resolution. When the mediation process works well, interfaith children can grow up to be comfortable in both of their worlds, with pride in both heritages and solid in their knowledge that they are loved enough to prevail over their parents' anger and hostility toward each other.

Recently, I concluded a difficult mediation in which the parents were both racially diverse and from two different religions. After the death of one of the parents, the grandparents, who had been against the marriage from the beginning, were unable to overlook these differences of race and religion. The anger on both sides had caused visitation of the grandparents with the grandchildren to stop. When the parties were referred to the mediator, they were so angry that they would not even sit in the same room. The mediator had to go back and forth between two rooms during their sessions.

The mediator was able to elicit from the grandparents the admission that in spite of their good intentions, they constantly criticized the surviving parent's religion, racial and ethnic background and the traditions emanating from that background. The next problem was to convince the parent that the grandparents were willing to work at improving communication and building trust and faith where there was none. The mediator suggested counseling to the grandparents and the parent, and strongly suggested that the grandparents take courses or do reading on the history of the cultural background of the surviving parent. This process took a long time, with parties coming back to the mediator periodically. Before the end of the process, the parent and grandparents were finally able to sit down in the same room and honestly discuss things with each other. The mediator was able to arrange with the

grandchildren to take the grandparents to an ethnic heritage festival of which they were a part. Thus the grandparents were finally able to absorb some of the joys and beauty of this other world. After that, the surviving parent was willing to accompany the children to go with the grandparents to a religious event.

In this case, there is still pain; not all ill will can be erased from these

When the mediation process works well, interfaith children can grow up to be comfortable in both of their worlds, with pride in both heritages and solid in their knowledge that they are loved enough to prevail over their parents' anger and hostility toward each other.

difficult and sensitive issues. But what people who are willing to enter the alternative dispute resolution process have learned is the ability to bridge, in the true sense of the word, the differences all families have. Decisions reached through mediation come from the individuals themselves, and thus have more meaning to the parties involved. It is this writer's hope that more interfaith families in crisis or dispute will turn to mediation. ▼

Doris T. Friedman, P.C., is admitted to practice law in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the State of New York and before U.S. Federal Courts. She has worked as an attorney for 37 years and has been involved in private mediation for 15 years. She is the founder and past president of the New York Council on Divorce Mediation, and is a practicing member of the Academy of Family Mediators.

Adoption in an Interfaith Family

by Hannah Goldberg*

Tom* and I met in a fairly idealistic situation, as we were both in a graduate school law program overseas. We became friends almost immediately, and later found out we were also attracted to each other. However, being just friends for six weeks before our "first date" was the best thing that could have happened to us, particularly as there are so many reasons why we should not have become a couple: I had been married and divorced; there was an age gap, with me the older; I was the consummate New Yorker and never wished to leave; and there were the religious differences. I come from a close-knit and very Jewish environment, both cultural and religious. Tom, on the other hand, was a classic midwestern boy, raised in the United Church of Christ. While neither one of us was particularly observant, we both felt strong ties to our own religious roots, and still do.

So, when I realized Tom was asking me out on a date, rather than just to accompany him to a movie as a friend, I accepted with the following rather strange proviso: before we start moving to the next level, from friendship to love, I required his promise that our children would be raised Jewish.

Six years later, after uprooting me from my entire family, friends and New York, and plunking me down in Chicago—where for the first time in my life I felt like a minority—we decided to start a family.

Much to our dismay, and despite warnings that if I held my high school boyfriend's hand too tight I would become pregnant, we discovered I was infertile, for no apparent reason and with no possible cure. After years of invasive and painful fertility work, it became apparent that pregnancy was not going to happen.

*names in this story have been changed to protect privacy.

Looking Into Adoption

Desperately wanting the experience of being parents and the privilege of raising a child, we turned to alternative solutions. Of course, the first area to explore was adoption. I contacted numerous adoption agencies and organizations in the midwest and New York. Door after door closed in our faces. Our age difference, no longer of any issue with us, freaked out some people. It was, however, the "mixed marriage" that was the biggest hurdle. The first time an adoption counselor referred to us as a mixed marriage, I thought, "what do you mean? He's a man and I'm a woman?" only to discover that society at large really still frowns on mixed religious marriages (heaven forbid there should be a mixed race marriage!) and that anti-Semitism is alive and well.

However, the most discouraging and depressing encounter came from a Jewish adoption agency. The woman I spoke with was downright rude and nasty. Despite my assurances and offer of affidavits attesting that we would raise the children strictly Jewish, to even take our application she demanded that Tom convert and said in the snittiest of voices, "Why would we give a baby to you? Why would I place a Jewish child with someone like you?" I was devastated that "my own" would treat me this way, and embarrassed to have to tell Tom.

However, while the Jewish agency was the nastiest of our encounters, it was not uncommon. We were judged too old; we were judged not to be firmly grounded in either religion as neither Tom nor I planned to convert; we were judged.

We began despairing of ever having a child and, much to our dismay, became bitter, to the extent that it was difficult to take joy in friends' announcements of impending births. One day we walked through

the Lincoln Park Zoo, one of our favorite places, only to make a 360-degree turn and realize that we were the only couple there not with a child or with child. I don't remember who turned to whom but one of us said, "I can't stand this; let's go home."

Unless one partner has converted and there is only one religion in your household, do not expect traditional adoption agencies to be of much use to you.

We even tried surrogating. Yes, the very agency that arranged for the well-known Baby M birth met with us and gladly accepted a huge amount of money to put us together with women to bear a child for us. We began to explore third world adoptions, but were concerned about the possibility of getting involved with an unscrupulous organization. We looked into a domestic interracial adoption, but were warned that this could involve many hurdles and complications and were, in fact, strongly discouraged from pursuing this path.

Meanwhile, we started sending out letters to OB-GYNs, school principals, guidance counselors, family practitioners and family attorneys throughout the country, hoping that someone would judge us fit to raise a child. We were highly educated (both attorneys), owned our own home in a lovely part of Chicago (economically and racially diverse), in good health and still relatively young, at least to our minds. I discovered, however, that 39 was considered way over the hill by most birth mothers and

agencies, sight unseen, despite the fact that I was literally still being carded when I ordered a drink.

"Pure Dumb Luck"

So how did we finally manage to adopt children? Pure dumb luck. One day I ran into another female attorney and we chatted on a street corner in downtown Chicago. The usual pleasantries were exchanged, and then I proceeded to tell this woman of our frustrations in not being able to have a family. Approximately six weeks later, Tom received a phone call from her. "This is a funny question," she said, "but would you and Hannah like a baby?" Apparently a woman, then two days past her due date, had promised her unborn child to a couple who had gotten another baby elsewhere sooner. This very responsible mother-to-be did not have an acceptable couple to raise her child. Later that day I received a telephone call from her, and we proceeded to talk for two hours. I tried to convince her that we were the right people to raise her child. We were lucky; not only was this birth mother not a kid (into her 30s), but she had also been married and divorced, not holding my history as a stigma against me. The fact that I was Jewish did not upset her either, and in fact she mentioned one of the reasons she was giving up this child was because she could not possibly afford to raise and educate him/her in the way she wanted—with the best education money could buy. She stated a well-known generalization, that Jews stress education and learning. I assured her the stereotype was certainly true in our case. I also assured her that while her child would be raised Jewish, he/she would certainly get a grounding in Christianity through his/her father's side of the family.

Three weeks later our son was born, and our lives were changed for

the better forever. At age five days he came into our lives, and we have never stopped marveling at his existence. Three months later we had another amazing thing happen: we received a telephone call from our former surrogate mother candidate, who told us she had become pregnant with her own boyfriend. For financial and other reasons she could not keep the child. Were we still interested? "You bet!" One year and thirteen days after our son was born, our beautiful daughter came into the world. She joined us 17 days later.

I believe that had we not been able to effect private adoptions we would be childless still. Moreover, if we did not have the financial ability to pay the staggering hospital bills which were not covered by any health insurance, not to mention the legal fees and miscellaneous fees to state agencies, we would be childless. The entire adoption process is, unfortunately, weighted in favor of people with money—but don't let that stop you!

Advice from a Pro

If you are in an interfaith marriage and wish to adopt, what do I suggest? Take a clear religious path and stick to it. This doesn't mean you have to choose one religion over the other, but you must be able to tell a birth mother that there is going to be religious direction in her child's life. This seemed to be, repeatedly, a theme for the prospective surrogate mothers and birth mothers with whom we came in contact. While the choice of Judaism may close out some options, I would not let this factor control your choice. For every person opposed to placing adopted children with Jewish/Christian families, there are people who just want a good home with a strong ethical and moral direction for their child.

Don't wait too long! If it becomes clear after a few years that you're not

going to conceive, start looking at adoption possibilities right away. It takes time and effort, and there's a strong antipathy towards older parents among birth mothers, particularly as the age for birth mothers seems to be getting younger and younger.

Speak to a local attorney experienced in adoption, early on. Find out what is legal in your state, and follow those guidelines, including the Interstate Adoption Pact, scrupulously to avoid a Baby Richard tragedy. The Interstate Adoption Pact strictly dictates documents to be filed in connection with an interstate adoption and the timetable for such filings. Beware: Many attorneys are not aware of the Pact and may dismiss the necessity of such filings. Be insistent! Without the proper filings, the birthparents can come back at any time to demand your child, and probably be successful.

Most of all, unless one partner has converted and there is only one religion in your household, do not expect traditional adoption agencies to be of much use to you. The market for adoptable children is vast and anything will be used against you, including and especially your interfaith marriage. On the other hand, if you are looking to adopt, don't give up hope. Be assured, it is worth all the effort and much, much more. ▼

"Hannah" and her husband "Tom" live in Chicago with their two children, who have always been told that they are adopted.

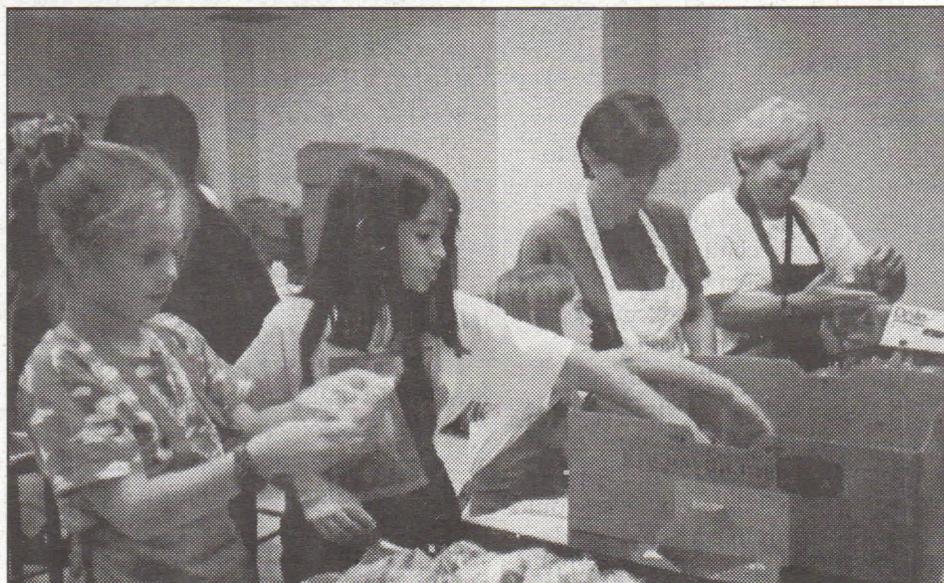
From Dream to Reality: The Interfaith Families Project of Greater Washington, DC

by Irene Smith Landsman

In 1987, Stacey Katz and Irene Landsman met one another in a pre-natal exercise class in suburban Washington, DC. The many things they had in common included the fact that both were in interfaith marriages, and over the next several years as their friendship deepened, they talked many times about the challenges this sometimes posed. Stacey is Jewish; her husband Robert was raised Catholic. Irene's background includes both Unitarianism and Catholicism; her husband Ron is Jewish. Both women found that in the early stages of an interfaith relationship "interfaith issues" arose around the wedding ceremony, and which religious holidays to observe with which in-laws. As their children grew older, however, the most pressing issues began to involve how to teach children about God and religion, and how to define the families' and children's religious identity.

A Core Group Emerges

Stacey was the driving force in putting together the group that now comprises the Interfaith Families Project of Greater Washington (IFFP). She began by convening informal discussions with other mothers. From this evolved a core group of women, including Stacey and Irene, and also Laura Steinberg (Jewish; her husband Peter was raised Catholic) and Mary Joel Holin (Catholic; her husband Peter is Jewish). The four women met regularly in Stacey's and Laura's Takoma Park, MD, kitchens, for coffee and bagels, discussion and planning. Stacey and others contacted numerous congregations and organizations, hoping to find an existing group that could meet the needs of interfaith families. While many clergy and educators with whom she spoke were impressed by the desire of these interfaith families to establish a mutually-supportive community,



Members of the Interfaith Families Project package food for people in need at "Martha's Table" in Washington, DC.

none were involved in anything similar, and a few expressed the belief that it simply could not be done. Some suggested existing groups that were either primarily Jewish or primarily Christian—while accepting of diverse religious backgrounds, none of these groups was attempting to embrace both religious faiths.

The group gradually realized that there was no existing local organization to join—that whatever was to emerge would have to be created. This was both daunting and liberating, and caused the group to think very hard about its goals. They decided that their families were committed to "choose both" religious heritages, rather than choosing only Judaism or Christianity, a separate faith (such as Unitarianism or Ethical Culture), or nothing. They also determined that they wanted to establish an interfaith Sunday School—first at the grade school level and then for adolescents—for their own children and for those of other like-minded families.

Joined now by the four husbands,

the group had intense and serious discussions about the nature of faith, the role of dogma, and the fact of conflict between some aspects of Jewish and Christian teachings. What emerged from this was a consensus that differences must be acknowledged. On the other hand, the group felt the exclusionary aspects of various religions are not central to their spiritual value, but may represent human fallibility more than divine guidance. They became more comfortable acknowledging the limits of their own certainty, both to themselves and to their children.

At this point, Stacey found out about DOVETAIL, and the existence of programs in New Haven and elsewhere. The local group felt a new inspiration and hope that an interfaith community was possible, including the central goal of a Sunday School.

Shared Observances

In the past year, the IFFP has held shared observations of several religious holidays. In December it was a combined Advent and Hanukkah

party where the parents helped children make Advent wreaths and discussed the meaning of the season, read the Hanukkah story, ate potato latkes and sang both Christmas and Hanukkah songs. It was a warm and wonderful celebration and in many ways a bonding experience for the families involved.

In the early spring, another gathering was organized around the season of Lent and the holiday of Purim. Parents and children joined in a discussion about Lent, fasting, sacrifice and penance. Plans were made for a community service activity in observation of Lent. Then the story of Purim was told and traditional Purim games played. And, last but not least, delicious foods were shared. Later in the spring the children gathered to make Easter baskets to donate to a local shelter for South American refugees. During that activity, the story of Easter was read and discussed.

Later that week, the four core families—this time with some of their extended families—met for their first shared Passover seder. This was a joyous, noisy, and very moving experience, and one which further reinforced a shared sense of a strong and creative community of interfaith families.

Creating a Sunday School

Buoyed by these successes, and also very much inspired by the reports of similar efforts reported in **DOVETAIL**, the IFFP is embarking on its most ambitious project yet. Negotiations are under way to hire a teacher and obtain meeting space, and the group plans to begin a Sunday school this fall for children between the ages of seven and ten. Many other families have expressed an interest in participating in the Sunday school program,

and it seems that this part of the shared interfaith vision will soon be realized.

Washington, DC, area families who are interested in the Sunday school or other activities of the IFFP should contact Laura Steinberg at (301) 589-9280. Registration for Sunday school is underway now, so don't delay! ▼

Irene Smith Landsman is a member of the Board of the IFFP, and a clinical psychologist specializing in trauma and bereavement. She lives with her family in Washington, DC.

Back Issues of DOVETAIL Available

Did you miss the early issues of **DOVETAIL**? Or give a copy to a friend? Complete your set by ordering from the following list. Send \$4.50 per issue to **DOVETAIL**, making sure to note the issue number. Quantities are limited, so order today!

- Issue 1:1:* **An Important New Resource for Parents and Children of All Ages**
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- Issue 3:3:* **Seeking Therapy: When Interfaith Couples Need Help**
- Issue 3:4:* **The Special Circumstances of Death in an Interfaith Family**
- Issue 3:5:* **Passover and Easter: Two Faiths' Celebrations of the Spring**
- Issue 3:6:* **Coming of Age in an Interfaith Family**

Results of DOVETAIL's Second Reader Survey

The focus of this survey, which was distributed in our February/March 1995 issue, was how interfaith couples felt about their engagements and weddings. We received completed surveys from partners in 42 interfaith couples across the country. A copy of the original survey questionnaire is available upon request.

General Demographic Information

The average age of survey respondents was 35. Following is a breakdown of the marital status of the respondents:

MARITAL STATUS	
Married	83.3%
Engaged to be married	14.3%
Divorced	2.4%

Respondents came from a variety of religious backgrounds. On the Jewish side, the majority of respondents came from a Reform or Conservative background.

JEWISH PARTNER'S BACKGROUND	
Reform Jewish	41.9%
Conservative Jewish	41.9%
Orthodox Jewish	6.4%
Other Jewish	9.7%
(includes Reconstructionist and secular Jews)	

On the Christian side, respondents were fairly evenly divided between Roman Catholic and Protestant backgrounds.

CHRISTIAN PARTNER'S BACKGROUND	
Roman Catholic	41.0%
Protestant	48.8%
(includes seven denominations)	
Unitarian-Universalist	5.1%
Other Christian	5.1%
(includes Armenian Apostolic, Russian Orthodox)	

When we asked about our readers' current religious affiliations, we got somewhat different answers. Most who currently affiliate with a Jewish

institution choose Reform Judaism (67.9%). Affiliation with Christian institutions is evenly divided between Protestant and Roman Catholic churches. And a significant minority of the total respondents (8.6%) affiliate with no religious institution.

Courtship and Engagement

We asked our readers to share their reflections on their courtships and engagements. In response to our question of how couples met, respondents told us they met through mutual friends, at work, in college or graduate school, or while doing a hobby or sport.

HOW COUPLES MET	
Through a friend	21.4%
In jr. high or high school	7.1%
In college	16.7%
In graduate school	21.4%
At work	11.9%
At a party or bar	7.1%
Other	14.3%

(includes swimming, skiing, stock car racing, Israeli folkdancing, and pen pals during Desert Storm)

We asked readers what characteristics had been important to them in choosing a partner. Taken together, the responses suggest that religious affiliation was absolutely the least important thing for respondents to consider when they were choosing their partner. What was most important in choosing a partner had been their value system, followed by their family goals and their hobbies/interests. Of moderate importance were common experiences, career goals, and physical appearance. Of least importance were age, occupation, and religious affiliation.

As we suspected, when asked about their level of comfort with their partner's religious background and affiliation, respondents indicated an

increasing level of comfort over time. Even couples who were very uncomfortable with one another's religious background when they met had become at least somewhat more comfortable by the time they married. And the number of respondents who felt "very comfortable" with their partner's religious background doubled from the time of first meeting to the wedding day.

Family Responses

When we asked readers if they had misgivings about telling either of their families about their engagement, one-third responded affirmatively, leaving two-thirds who did not have misgivings about announcing their engagement to their families.

Couples seem to have been more or less correct in their projections, for when they announced their engagement to the Christian extended family, 63.6 percent received a very positive response, and only 2.3% received a very negative response. While 52.2 percent of the Jewish families responded very positively, 10.9% responded very negatively.

RESPONSE OF THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY	
Very positive	63.6%
Somewhat positive	13.6%
Neutral	6.8%
Somewhat negative	13.6%
Very Negative	2.3%
Didn't respond	0.0%

RESPONSE OF THE JEWISH FAMILY	
Very positive	52.2%
Somewhat positive	26.1%
Neutral	4.3%
Somewhat negative	4.3%
Very negative	10.9%
Didn't respond	2.2%

Wedding Plans

We asked readers about the importance of having supportive clergy present at their weddings. It was somewhat more important for couples to find a Jewish clergy person.

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IMPORTANCE OF FINDING A SUPPORTIVE
CHRISTIAN CLERGYPERSON

Very important	50.0%
Somewhat important	23.8%
Not at all important	26.2%

IMPORTANCE OF FINDING A SUPPORTIVE
JEWISH CLERGYPERSON

Very important	58.5%
Somewhat important	22.0%
Not at all important	19.5%

When we asked readers if their wedding had included Christian and Jewish clergy, we found that more than half (53.7%) of the ceremonies had included both a Christian and a Jewish clergyperson. Many other ceremonies had the presence of either a Christian or a Jewish clergyperson, and a handful had no clergy representation. It is interesting to note that, despite the common belief that it is difficult to find a rabbi to marry a Jewish/Christian couple, more than half of our respondents had a Jewish clergyperson at their ceremony.

CHRISTIAN CLERGY PRESENT

Yes	63.4%
No	36.6%

JEWISH CLERGY PRESENT

Yes	58.5%
No	34.1%

We look forward to sharing more results with you in a future issue. ▼

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I have read **DOVETAIL** with great interest and admiration. I've already shared it with some friends and will soon send a few more names along to you for sample issues. I had no idea that there was a whole "movement" of people dealing with Jewish-Christian issues, much less books and periodicals. **DOVETAIL** is truly an exciting discovery for me, my wife, and my friends. Thanks for being there.

David Howard
Ojai, CA

I would like to hear from families with children where the wife is Protestant and the husband is Jewish. I'd especially like to hear from spiritual Jewish husbands who have decided to raise their children in both religions.

Name withheld by request

*Editor's note: If you fit the description above and would like to share your experiences, please contact **DOVETAIL**.*

Thank you for producing such a wonderful publication! **DOVETAIL** is a super resource that has given my husband and me a lot of information and food for thought as we negotiate our way through our interfaith marriage. Keep up the great work.

Debbie Toy
Delmar, NY

Looking for great holiday gift ideas for the interfaith families in your life? Watch for the special Winter Holiday Advertising Section in the next issue of **DOVETAIL**!

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