

# Dovetail

A Journal by and for Jewish/Christian Families



## Choosing Your Child's Religion

My first foray into writing for publication was a "Young Mother's Story" for *Redbook* magazine in 1970. My title was "What About the Children?" People used to throw that phrase at us regularly, in varying tones of horror and disbelief, and in the tacit assumption that they were the first to come up with it: we would never have thought of it without them.

The magazine editors, in that annoying way we editors have, changed the title, to "Two Faiths—One Love." I hated it, not only because it was goopy. It also moved the focus off the center of our, and most interfaith couples', chief concern. Our love was not in question; our raising of our children was a topic of ongoing conversation.

Our decision was to educate them in both faiths, actively practice both in the home, encourage them to attend services with either or both of us, and let them make their own, informed, choices. This approach was recently challenged by a rabbi who participates in DI-IFR's new on-line discussion group.\*

He said: "I wonder if by making both families happy today, we are making the children unhappy tomorrow. I know many people say 'we will raise our children as both, and then let them choose.' Almost every study shows that the children then choose 'nothing.' Wouldn't it be easier, and better for the children to give them one religion to identify with, and then have them celebrate the other parent's religion: not for themselves, but to join with either mommy or daddy?"

I think the rabbi's opinion that children allowed to choose their own religion generally choose "nothing" doesn't address two aspects of the issue. One is that what some parents mean by "raising them in both and letting them choose" is really "raise them in nothing more than some lukewarm holiday celebrations and convey our real conviction that none of it matters very much." Such children will, of course, tend to follow the real message they're being given.

I believe that children whose parents actively pursue religious education for themselves as well as their children, who discuss religious issues, and who make it clear that—although they differ in specifics—they consider spirituality a vital part of a full human existence, and institutional religion an irreplaceable means of spiritual growth as well as community identity, will not grow up any more disaffected or uninterested

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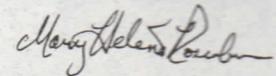
than any other population of children.

It's also true that there is no way to ensure one's children will adopt the values and identities of their parents in any meaningful way. My husband, with two Jewish parents, is the only one of three sons to have any interest in Judaism at all. My sister, raised as I was by two Christian parents, rejects with scorn any thought of religious affiliation (as does her husband, raised by Jewish parents).

Our own children, raised by a Sabbath-observant, kosher-keeping Jewish scholar and a practicing Catholic, church lector, and activist, would not characterize themselves as "nothing." Our daughter is a Jew with practices and attitudes similar to her father's. Our older son minored in Asian philosophy in college (where he wore a Star of David around his neck as a sign of his commitment to his ethnic/cultural Jewish roots) and continues to study philosophy and

religion on a daily basis. Though neither he nor his Catholic-raised wife have any institutional affiliation, he has a deep interest in and knowledge of religious issues, far more than many self-styled Jews and Christians. Our youngest has been the most actively interested in Christianity. (Dovetail readers may remember his article in the June/July 1998 issue.) The point is, both my sons would angrily reject the notion that they are "nothing," though they do not show up on any congregation's membership list.

There are other equally valid options and paths for parents to choose. The important thing to remember is that for the children of interfaith parents, who have been brought to consider practices and beliefs their same-faith counterparts take for granted, the net result can just as easily be a deeper spirituality and a more educated level of commitment and practice. 



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Dovetail's mission is to provide a channel of communication for interfaith couples, their parents, and their children. No matter what their specific choices regarding faith for their home and children, the more interfaith 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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Dovetail welcomes article submissions (query or completed manuscript), letters to the editor, and comments or suggestions. Send to M. H. Rosenbaum, Editor, at the above address.

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# What About the Children? A Methodology

by Arthur Blecher

I'm a rabbi who became a shrink. A large percentage of my practice is couples, and most of the couples are interfaith couples. I have the same approach, whether you're same faith, or mixed faith, or whatever decisions you make.

One of my biases is that parents give religion to children. There are two parts to this: first, the way religion is established with children is from generation to generation; second, parents must do it, it is the job of parents to give religion to children.

## Part One: The Label

There will be pressure on you to label your kids from parents, friends, or one another—even before kids are in the picture. [You may decide the label will be "Jewish" or "Christian."] Some couples have decided that the label for their children will be "both" or "dual-identity" or "Jewish-Christian" or "half-and-half."

## Part Two: Identity

Now, how does the child know himself or herself, and the siblings in the household? This may be slightly different from your label. So you may say, "All right, child's going to be [labeled] Jewish." Inside the house, we'll say "Well, you're Jewish and Christian," or, "You're Jewish but you have a Christian parent." Or, "You're Christian but you have a Jewish side to you." So, the child's identity may be more sophisticated, and may be slightly different from the label.

You establish a label by telling others who this kid is, even if the kid's a theory. You establish identity very easily by telling your child. You establish identity by talking to your kids about who they are.

If you decide on one religion for the child, I do believe that it is more prudent—that is to say easier, more manageable, I don't say more theologically correct—it's cleaner and easier to choose one religion that one of those parents can follow through.

Do not choose the dual identity because you don't want to have to make a choice, or you don't want to have a winner or a loser. Select a dual identity if that's the way you want to go, so that there will be assertively two heritages or two identities. Do not be afraid [of] a hard choice....

## Part Three: Membership

Which community considers this child within it? By this I mean the religious community, the establishment, the organizations. The characteristic that's important for us here is that the community of Christians is characterized by the centrality of Jesus, the divinity of Jesus. The safest statement is that for all Christians, Jesus is central.

For Jews, Jesus is absent. Judaism not only doesn't believe that Jesus isn't the messiah, Judaism has nothing to say about Jesus. The Jewish people define entrance into the Jewish community as national, as [peoplehood]. If you're born in the US, you're an American citizen. Jews say the same things [about being born into Judaism].

Both groups agree that an individual who believes in the divinity of Jesus is a Christian. Somebody who becomes a Christian ceases to be a Jew.

You need to know this about membership, because that's part

Arthur Blecher is both an ordained rabbi and a practicing psychotherapist. Among his published books is *Interfaith Couples in the Rabbi's Study*. In addition to his counseling practice and his congregational work, he conducts workshops for interfaith couples.

*This article is excerpted from the transcript of Rabbi Dr. Blecher's workshop at DI-IFR's April 3-5, 1998 conference, "Interfaith Families in the 1990s: New Trends, New Voices." Remember as you read that it was not composed as a written piece. Hint: read as you would listen—moving through the ideas and illustrations as whole units, not focusing on particular sentences. This is like epic poetry, rather than lyric! The printed transcript contains the full-length discussion in a form closer to that in which it occurred. See page 8 for transcript ordering information.*

**A STUDY OF THE ETHNIC & RACIAL DIVERSITY OF THE JEWISH POPULATION**

*Are you Jewish and African American, Latino, Asian American, Native American or mixed race? Are you a Jew of Sephardi or Mizrahi descent? Are you raising a child of color as a Jew?*

*The Institute for Jewish & Community Research is conducting a national study on the diverse racial and ethnic mix of Jewish life in America in order to understand the complex religious and social identities faced by Jews of color.*

*If you are interested in participating in the study, or know someone who might be, please contact: The Institute for Jewish & Community Research  
Call: 415-386-4710  
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Diane@JewishResearch.org.*

of your job as parents to have this nailed down. If it's your intention that the children will be labelled and identified as Jews, then you have to know how the game is played, what you've got to do to get a membership card.

If the child is to be raised as a Christian, and have membership in the church, the child also will need to be baptized, depending on the denomination, and ultimately convert, ultimately accept Christ. But initially baptize or christen him.

**Part Four: Education**

It starts with identity, label, and membership. When you have that figured out, you move on to education. The child must first have an education in the chosen identity/label/membership, if it's one specific one. I often hear mixed couples say, "Well, I guess if I'm going to raise a Jewish child I'd better start learning about Judaism."

If it's a dual identity, what do you do? There are a certain number of Sunday schools you can find. If you're isolated, then you're going to have to do it on your own, you're going to have to do it with other people. Or, you're going to have to talk to the rabbi, if that's the problem, and see what can be worked out.

**Part Five: Participation**

This means what the child sees and does. If the child is doing the things that Jews do, I don't think it undoes the Jewishness for the child to participate, share, observe, and sample the religious life of the other parent. Your job as parents has not been undermined, and you haven't screwed up, if this Jewish kid gets to

go with Mommy to midnight mass. Now if the Jewish kid is taking communion, that's a different story. Some activities have a different meaning. But seeing Mommy pray, or saying "Amen" when Mommy says grace, or having the Easter basket, is not going to undo the Jewishness. Christians, certainly, are not threatened by a Christian child doing Jewish stuff.

Life is complicated. No matter how complex it is, if you are not confused, if you know what you are doing, your children will not be confused—no matter how you're going to do or not do religion in your household. You're not going to screw up your kids because you're a mixed couple.

**The Final Axiom**

The reason you won't is that you'll follow my final axiom, that applies to all couples, which is: Whatever you do as parents you do as a parenting team.

You're not going to mess up your child with religion. Even if you do everything here wrong, if you model love, if you have fun together, and you model a good relationship, if you give your children security and you give them self esteem you will have happy children, even if you get this all screwed up. If you don't do that, then it doesn't matter; you'll have religious, neurotic kids. Trust your gut. Children of mixed marriages are just as screwed up and just as happy as anybody else. 

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# Just Make It!

by Carol Weiss Rubel

I wish I could tell you it had been traumatic. I wish I could regale you with tales of persecution from peers, estrangement from relatives, and generally difficult circumstances. I wish I could tell you that being raised as a child of interfaith marriage had made me intolerant, unaffiliated, and agnostic. If I could, then the naysayers and harbingers of doom would be able to nod their heads in a collective affirmation of spiritual arrogance. But I can't tell you that any of those alleged evils lying in wait for the children of interfaith marriages ever happened to me.

By sharing my personal feelings, I hope to encourage couples looking at this decision to do one thing: make it. No matter what the choice may be, it is my feeling that making a choice—any choice—is important. Not to make the choice is to attempt to put a child into a kind of Limbo. And, as anyone who ever awaited the outcome of a medical test can say, Limbo is the worst of all possible places to be.

## A Catholic Choice

As a child of a marriage between an Irish Catholic mother and an observant Jew, I had the decision made for me. Granted, there was really no discussion about what the choice would be. My parents married during the time when anyone falling in love with a practicing Catholic was forced to indicate (prior to the marriage) an intention to allow children of the union to be baptized and reared as Catholics. My father made that promise. He kept that promise. Together, he and my mother—in the 1960s, before Vatican II—created a home in which the

simultaneous presence of two different religions reflected respect and tolerance based upon understanding.

Our home was not an amalgam. We did not light a menorah while basking in the reflected glow of Christmas tree lights. We did not light Sabbath candles on Friday and attend family folk Mass on Sunday. Rather, we grew up in a home that housed two distinct traditions: no homogenizing of one into the other.

My mother, my sister, and I followed the myriad obligations of Catholicism doggedly. We ate no meat on Fridays, we attended Mass weekly, we observed Lent as a long season of personal penance; we joyfully celebrated Christmas by decorating our house inside and out and by arranging a crèche in the center of our living room mantle. My father watched from the outside. He participated in the secular celebration of our major holidays but he maintained his unique position as the only Jew in a family of Catholics.

## A Jewish Presence

Yet during the most solemn period of the Jewish calendar, my father's traditions became the fulcrum along which our family balanced. I learned by observation how to prepare matzo ball soup to be served at a Rosh Hashanah dinner (complete with circular carrot slices to symbolize a prosperous New Year) and how to make certain that a full container of water waited outside of our back door for my father to use as he performed the ritual hand washing after visiting his parents' graves.

As my father reflected upon his life and atoned for his year's transgres-

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sions, my mother, sister, and I watched. We created a home for him during those days that was respectful of the solemnity the season demanded. My mother did no laundry on those days; she would show not the slightest disrespect to the observance by hanging dripping clothes from our backyard lines. She expanded her recipe file to include the traditional dishes that would make my father's holidays special.

### Crisis Points

Growing up in that environment enriched me. I remember only two moments in my entire childhood when the issue of religious teaching ever created anything remotely resembling a problem. The first happened when I was still in elementary school and attending weekly catechism classes. A young high school student was our CCD (Catholic religious school) teacher (perhaps the biggest failing was that the religious training of youth in our parish was entrusted to other youth rather than to adults) and she informed us with all the certainty of adolescence that the Jews had killed Christ. I was horrified. I had a Jewish father! I had Jewish relatives! I had Jewish friends! How could anyone connected to these people I loved ever have committed such an act? At supper that evening I announced my newest snippet of "truth."

My father listened, paused for a moment, and then said to me, "No. It was the Romans." And that was all he said. His response—calm and reflective rather than critical—allowed me to escape the second when many people fall into the trap of anti-Semitism. It was easy for me

to blame—and forget—people who no longer existed as a culture or government. My daddy, my uncles, my aunts: they were all now "off the hook" and I could continue life as it had existed prior to that CCD class.

The second moment of religious schizophrenia happened to me when I was in high school. Confronting my father about a boy who held my affections at that moment (he was of Italian ethnic heritage), my father shouted, "Why don't you just stick to your own kind?" I responded, "I would if I knew what my kind was!"

### Good Experiences

My experiences as a child of interfaith marriage were good ones. I am convinced they were good because my parents made the choice for me. They no more entrusted that option to me than they would have allowed me to decide whether or not I wished to have a polio vaccination or have my teeth cleaned.

I don't think it would have mattered which end of the Judeo-Christian tradition I was reared in. The gift of being raised with a belief system that I could embrace, accept, or reject as an adult was a grounding factor in my childhood. Give your child the spiritual base to begin, enrich his life with a respectful recognition of the other tradition in your home, and celebrate the richness of diversity. But, remember this: nothing diluted, whether it is chicken soup or religious observance, is ever as satisfying as the full-strength portion intended by the creator. 

# A Different Path

by Randi Field

**M**y best friend didn't congratulate me when I told her that Matt and I were getting married. Instead, I was reminded of the Holocaust and scolded for marrying out of the faith. I owed it to my people to perpetuate Judaism.

We approached the rabbi who had given me my Hebrew name when I was born and asked if he would marry us. He spent the entire meeting trying to convert Matt. I explained that the man I was in love with was an Irish-Catholic and I had no desire to change him. The rabbi washed his hands of the matter and ushered us out.

I felt like the Jewish community had just hung up on me with a resounding slam. I felt alienated. For a while, I wasn't sure I even cared about being a Jew anymore. I suggested a civil ceremony devoid of any religious traditions.

My mother wouldn't hear of it. People needed spirituality. Our road may be different but whichever way it wound, we must not abandon our spirituality. She found a very understanding rabbi and priest who agreed to perform an interfaith ceremony. Thankfully, both of our families liked the idea of their traditions being respected when our union was formed and the wedding went forward. I still remember my best friend's face as I walked down the aisle. She was frowning at me and shaking her head. That was the last time I saw her.

But what about the children? How could we instill them with a sense of spirituality and faith? Although clergy counsel interfaith couples to choose

one religion over another, that was never the right path for us. Matt and I are both strong-willed and choosing one would have thrown us into a competition of wills. We couldn't choose one religion without one of us feeling like the outsider.

That left us with three options—doing nothing, doing something different (like Unitarianism), or doing both. Doing nothing left us with nothing and seemed like a losing proposition. Doing something different seemed better than doing nothing but still felt like we were giving up too much. Our religious traditions are important aspects of our identities. We both wanted our children to connect with our cultures and identities. For us, doing both was the only viable way to keep our traditions alive.

How would we do both? When our son, Jared, was born we had an interfaith ceremony in our home. Jared was given a full Hebrew name, then baptized. Our neighbors joined us for huge deli platters that exceeded our budget. When our daughter, Casey, was born we were still burnt out from the logistics and costs of Jared's ceremony. So, our little family hung out together and bonded a lot.

Over the years, we made feeble attempts at celebrating holidays but, without family in the area, everything seemed like too much effort. We needed to belong to a spiritual community. Two years ago, we found one: the Interfaith Families Project of Greater Washington (IFFP) (<http://members.tripod.com/~IFFP>).

IFFP is where we go to be ourselves. Jared and Casey attend Jewish-Christian Sunday School with other

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kindred spirits. Matt and I attend adult group meetings while the kids are in class. Our community celebrates holidays with potluck festivities. IFFP has helped us sort out what we want to pass on to our children. Like us, IFFP is a work-in-progress.

Choosing both has not been an easy path, but it has brought us back to our religions. We continue charting new territory in our quest to decide what is meaningful to us. Our strength is that our union is based on open communication, mutual respect

and trust. We encourage our children to understand and observe the other spouse's traditions. With IFFP's help, our children are learning how to think, not what to think. One or both children may choose Christianity or Judaism. We can respect those choices when it comes from their hearts, not our wills.

Embracing both traditions has allowed us to work together to foster faith and spiritual development for our children. For us, it is a much more positive and nurturing path than working against each other. 

**CONFERENCE '98 VIDEOTAPES**

Video I, a two-tape set, features:

- Cokie and Steve Roberts keynote address, "Living in a Two-Faith Family." Cokie and Steven Roberts are nationally renowned journalists and broadcast commentators whose 30-year interfaith marriage came to public attention when their contribution to the book *Letters to Our Children* was recently excerpted in *USA Weekend*.
- "Understanding and Misunderstanding: How History Affects Relationships" by Dr. Eugene Fisher director of Catholic-Jewish Relations, National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. He has published eighteen books and monographs, and over 200 articles in major religious journals. In 1981, Dr. Fisher was appointed Consultor to the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations With the Jews by Pope John Paul II. He is one of nine Consultors world wide and the only American. In 1985, he was named to the International Vatican-Jewish Liaison Committee, representing the Holy See.
- "Protestants and Prophecy: Common Ground for Interfaith Couples," by Rev. Dr. Bruce Robbins, General Secretary of the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns of The United Methodist Church. He holds an M. Div. from Union Theological Seminary (NY) and a Ph.D. in Church History from Southern Methodist University. Dr. Robbins serves on the Executive Board and General Assembly of

the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. A specialist in Christian-Jewish relations, he coauthored the book *Jews and Christians: A Dialogue Service about Prayer* with Rabbi Leon Klenicki.

- "How do Intermarried Couples Bear Witness to the Holocaust?" by Rabbi Dr. Edward Zerlin, who has written eight books, the most recent of which is *How to Explain Judaism to Your Non-Jewish Neighbor*. In addition, Dr. Zerlin, whose Ph.D. from USC was partly in New Testament, has served as Jewish consultant on 45 Catholic textbooks. He and his wife are licensed therapists who run the Westlake (CA) Center for Marriage and Family Counseling.
- "Presentation of Father Dan Montalbano Award for Promoting Interfaith Understanding" by DI-IFR board member and Good Company president Rabbi Allen Secher, a leader of the Chicago Interfaith Couples Dialogue Group, for Rabbi Samuel Silver. His work with the Stamford-Darien Council of Churches and Synagogues and the Stamford-Darien Ministers League, and such publications as *Explaining Judaism to Jews and Christians*, as well as the pioneering *Mixed Marriage Between Jew and Christian*, made him the obvious choice for this award.

The Video I set can be purchased for \$29.95. Video II is the Steve and Cokie Roberts talk only, and costs \$25.95. To order tapes, call 800-530-1596, fax 502-549-3543, or send a check to DI-IFR, 775 Simon Greenwell Ln., Boston, KY 40107.

# A Matter of Trust

by Loretta Fox

**B**eing Catholic has always been a central part of my life. My parents shared their beliefs with me, and as I grew up I explored my faith and religious practices on my own.

However, my greatest faith-building experience has been my marriage to my Jewish husband—something I never would have predicted. This new path—call it God's hand, Providence, or coincidence—has been a source of substantial growth, not just for Scott and me but also for our extended families.

Scott and I have very different spiritualities. For Scott, a relationship with God is very personal, one-to-one, and should be respected as private. Although I agree with that, I also see community as integral to my experience of God. And even so, I have never felt so connected to anyone as I feel with Scott. In our everyday life together, we have found a lot of common territory. We both agree that the time we spend together is like a special, natural prayer—non-denominational, of course!

## The Theory

Even before we announced our engagement, we had been discussing and debating the obvious issues, including how to raise children, for a few years. We came to the conclusion that we could proceed with the marriage plans at about the same time that we realized that there is no one prescription for any of this. We decided to take one day at a time, again making it a matter of trust. We both wanted to share our beliefs with our future children while supporting each other's faith and practices. This seemed reasonable. When I became

pregnant, though, the conversations and debates about what to teach our children escalated. At times, it felt like we were spinning our wheels in the same discussions, agonizing over compromise.

Prior to our wedding, Scott had agreed to baptism for our children. We had also decided to take one sacrament at a time after that. With the pregnancy, we both began reading and exploring more about each other's traditions. An unexpected hurdle came when Scott began to reconsider our plan. As he learned more about the commitments to the Christian community connected to baptism, he had trouble reconciling himself with seeing his own child baptized. Likewise, it was unthinkable for me not to baptize my child. It was a true dilemma.

The key for us was constant communication. We spoke to priests (eight in all; each one referred us to another) and a rabbi (the one we could find who agreed to meet with us), all of whom seemed to make the situation more cloudy than clear.

As part of our wedding preparation, I had made a promise as the Catholic partner to do my best to raise children according to the Catholic religion. (Scott jokes that I have certainly kept that promise.) However, several of the priests we spoke with explained that my promise does not take for granted that our children would be Catholic. They emphasized that the commitment is to "do my best," and that it would still be quite possible that, for the sake of my marriage, children might not be raised Catholic. In fact, one priest who is in a position of authority told me that in the

*Loretta Fox says: "My life choices have included a year in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps teaching religion classes, a master's degree in theology from a Catholic seminary, over five years working full time in diocesan offices, and constant involvement in my parish communities."*

*[For a more complete biography, see *Holidays and Happenings* on page 11.]*

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*Help us keep offering our resources!*

Church's view, it would be better for me to raise devout Jewish children than to abandon my marriage commitment. This is a change from the teaching of previous generations, and it can be difficult to explain to some people.

Interestingly, a few of the clergy we spoke with told us that interfaith family situations like ours can be much less complicated for couples who do not care as much. I am not sure if that made us feel better or worse.

Scott and I continued trying to be honest and open, and we had to really listen well to each other while trying not to discount each other's feelings. Soon, we started to realize that in the questions themselves were our answers.

When we were married, we signed an interfaith wedding ketubah. In it, we pledged to respect each other's beliefs and honor our mutual traditions in our home. Certainly, our home would include our children. We gradually realized that for us to label our child as one religion without regard to the other would deny half of who that child is. For us, the answer is an interfaith identity. Our goal is to give our child the best of both worlds.

**The Reality**

When our daughter, Abby Tess, was born a year ago, she was welcomed into both traditions. At my parish, we had a beautiful private baptismal ceremony that was tailored to our family. Our priest included many Jewish references, and tried to substitute the word "God" for "Jesus" wherever possible. He met with us

several times beforehand to familiarize Scott with the sacrament, and explained everything during the ceremony. Scott eventually felt much less threatened, and even did the Hebrew Scripture reading at the ceremony.

Immediately following the baptism, our daughter had a Hebrew naming ceremony at our home, during which I read a special prayer of thanksgiving. Our rabbi also met with us prior to the ceremony to explain the ritual to me. During the naming, she repeatedly said that we were welcoming this baby into our communities (plural), and used inclusive language and references.

We chose our daughter's name, too, as a bridge between both of our traditions. *Abby*, in the Jewish tradition, honors Scott's father. *Tess*, in the Catholic tradition, is a derivative of St. Therese. We seemed to strike a balance, and the day of welcoming turned out to be warm and wonderful.

Abby will have her religious education at home with her parents as her primary teachers. Both our Catholic pastor and our rabbi are supportive of this, and our families have responded well. We now buy Hanukkah gifts for my parents, and Scott's family shares in our Easter dinner. I am grateful for such a rich experience and for such open-minded relatives.

As far as the future, every day we face the eternal "What next?" as we make decisions as an interfaith family. Abby's Hebrew name, Ahava Tikvah, means *Love* and *Hope*. My prayer for Abby is that she will develop her own spirituality filled with both. 

# One Community's Choices

by Lance Flitter

The Interfaith Families Project of Greater Washington D.C. (IFFP) has an adult discussion group that gets together regularly to discuss issues relevant to interfaith marriage. In our final meeting of 1998 the discussion participants reflected on what we, as interfaith families, seek spiritually for our interfaith children.

During the previous discussion session we had a guest speaker, Rabbi Harold White, who spoke to us about a number of topics.\* The December 13 session used as a starting point Rabbi White's provocative assertion that the children of interfaith families might grow up to be "religious schizophrenics" unless parents pick one faith for them.

One adult child of interfaith parents who was raised as a Jew described feeling "divided" based on her knowledge of her heritage and her mother's and grandparents' Christian faith. She told the group that she believed that, however we choose to raise our children spiritually, and regardless of what we choose to tell them that they are, they are going "to be both."

Members of the group discussed the struggles they have faced, and still face, in making religious decisions for their children. Several expressed their appreciation of IFFP for supporting the exposure of children to both their heritages in order to impart a cultural identity and sense of belonging. A community that shares your views and is supportive of your efforts is a great boon for interfaith families. In addition, the religious and social environment is significantly different today than just a few decades ago. In our multi-cultural, multi-racial society, "multi-

religious" children do not stand out quite as much as they would have a generation ago. Being interfaith has become a recognized identity, and there are growing communities to which a child of an interfaith marriage can belong.

The group had a variety of reactions to the difficult question, "What do we expect our children to become, religiously, when they grow up?" Some admitted to "rooting" for their religion, and to a fear that their child might reject their religion entirely. Others hoped that they would be tolerant of whatever religious choices their children make. They wanted their children to be happy in this choice as with the many other choices in life. Some expressed the hope that their children would choose to make spirituality a part of their life and that their IFFP training could empower them to make an informed choice in how they wished to do this. Others said that it did not matter that much to them what particular choice their children made in terms of religion as long as they had respect for the religious traditions of both of their parents.

In the end, the group returned to the child of an interfaith marriage's observation that, as interfaith parents, our children are, and will always be, interfaith. The choices that this identity leads them to make, as with all choices children make, are ultimately in their hands. As IFFP parents, our goal is to provide them with the knowledge, community, and sense of spirituality that will best prepare them for an informed decision to become Christian or Jewish, continue as both, or take another path entirely. ■

Lance Flitter is a computer scientist for the Navy living in Maryland near Washington, DC. He has been happily married to Kathryn for over three years; their first child, baby Joshua, made his appearance last June.

Lance is a member and on the Board of Directors of the Interfaith Families Project of Greater Washington (IFFP). He is interested in making contact with other interfaith groups around the country.

Anyone who is part of an interfaith group that would like to exchange information can call him at (301) 540-4865.

\*A brief description can be found on the IFFP web site at [www.tripod.com/~IFFP/](http://www.tripod.com/~IFFP/) in the December newsletter.

## Conversation in Cyberspace Excerpts from On-Line Exchanges

Visit the DI-IFR on-line discussion group at <http://www.eGroups.com/list/interfaith>. To post a message, email [interfaith@egroups.com](mailto:interfaith@egroups.com). To join the group, send a request to [DI-IFR@Bardstown.com](mailto:DI-IFR@Bardstown.com).

**T**he following remarks are taken from responses to the questions posed by "Rabbi S" quoted on page one of this issue.

**Rev. JJ:** I think raising your kids to appreciate, honor, celebrate both religions is a possibility. As a Unitarian Universalist Christian minister, I want my kids to grow up knowing they are loved by God and that Jesus was one of God's children, just like we all are, and he especially lived out his inheritance like MLK and Gandhi, etc. It is great to have these important discussions.

**LF:** Note the assumption that being "nothing" leads to unhappiness, which, I think, is as unproven as the assertion that raising the children in both leads to nothing. From my viewpoint it looks like the real concern is for the "health" of their religious establishments rather than the health and happiness of the child.

Being interfaith IS an identity. To help establish an identity you generally want a community to which you can "belong." In the previous generation that might have been more difficult for an interfaith child but now, interfaith families abound. We are forming our own communities. In addition, despite what some may think, I think it is quite possible to feel an attachment to more than one tradition.

I also think a little uncertainty is not a bad thing.

**RB:** When my husband and I announced our engagement, my mother said she would prefer that "(God forbid) you raise your children Christian, rather than raising them with both." (Please note that the "God forbid" was her phrase,

not mine). It seems to be a common viewpoint.

On one level, I can understand the viewpoint perfectly. Preservation of one's own religion is of paramount importance, especially in the minds of most Jews, especially after the Holocaust.

On another level, I am capable of becoming very angry at this viewpoint. I was reared to respect people of other faiths; why then should it come as a surprise that I am capable of loving someone of another faith?

**Rabbi S:** Here are some questions I give my interfaith couples to work on by themselves, to answer as they think their partner would answer. Thus, the Christian or not-Jewish partner answers as if (s)he were Jewish; the Jewish partner should answer as if (s)he were Christian or Moslem or whatever the partner's tradition is.

1. My first child has just been born. It's a boy. The first thought on my mind is to \_\_\_\_\_. (Remember, change religious roles). I would like to give him the name \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

2. When my children become 13 years old I would like to have them celebrate by \_\_\_\_\_; and when they turn 16 I would like them to have a \_\_\_\_\_.

3. It is most important to me that my children learn the values of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

4. I look forward to celebrating special holidays with my children. Two of my favorite holidays are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

That's a start. Hope you find this interesting and helpful. Don't be afraid to share as you think your partner would answer... then decide how you will deal with it. 

# And You Shall Tell Your Children ...

Whether a family celebrates Christian holidays, Jewish holidays, or both, it would be hard to deny that this time of year is sacred. My family has chosen an interfaith identity, and this spring we find ourselves finishing the last of the Pesach matzoh while beginning the Easter season.

At this time of year especially, I think about the values that we are passing on to our children. Sound values come from many sources; our elders are invaluable in teaching children about life's most important things, as I can illustrate through a story my German-Catholic grandmother told me. I recall this story now, as my own family observes Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, on April 13. When I heard this simple story so often growing up, I did not know the impact it would have in my adult life, opening my eyes to the unspeakable loss of one third of the world's pre-war Jewish population.

My grandmother, Klara, was the youngest of twelve children in a very poor family during the German depression. The children were expected to bring their lunches to school with them, and little Klara, like her brothers and sisters, always had dry bread, sometimes just a crust.

There was a young Jewish girl in my grandmother's school whose father was a merchant. Almost every day, that girl would seemingly beg Klara to trade lunches. She always had meat or cheese with her bread, very fine and tasty foods, as my grandmother described them. More important, they were nourishing. The girl would make it seem as though she really preferred the dry

bread, saying things like, "Please, Klara, let me have your good bread; I always have to eat these things at home."

My grandmother told that story often, always concluding by telling us that this girl was compassionate beyond her years and that she must have had a fine family to have learned to extend such great kindness in such a humble way. She would finish the story with the words that haunt me the most: "I don't know what ever happened to her or to her family. They are probably gone."

Probably gone.

Especially as a child, I always thought it a complete outrage that this young heroine should probably face the darkest fate in human history. It gave a face and personality to one of the six million. And this story gave me my first glimpse of the excruciating horror, wholly unimaginable, that was the Shoah.

My grandmother made sure that we heard and understood her story; it actually became part of her own identity. The story has value for future generations in our family. I will tell it to my children.

In the midst of the significant Christian and Jewish holidays in the spring, as we reflect on freedom, goodness and new growth, Yom HaShoah reminds us that we all have a responsibility for raising our children—our own and those of the greater community—with strong values and with a respect for human dignity among all people. I would call this a true sense of the sacred. ▀

**Holidays  
and  
Happenings**  
by Loretta Fox

Loretta Fox is an adjunct faculty member at Chestnut Hill College teaching Religious Studies. With a Master of Arts in Theology from St. Charles Seminary, Loretta has worked in various capacities for the archdiocese of Philadelphia. She is the Catholic partner in a Jewish/Christian marriage, and her full-time job is being an at-home mom. She and husband Scott have one daughter, Abby, and another child due in July.

# Spring Review Roundup

by M. H. Rosenbaum

**The Inter-Faith Family Seder Book: How to Celebrate a Jewish Passover Supper with Christian In-Laws and Non-Jewish Friends** by Nan Meyer (1998): The title says it all. This is a delightful, easy-to-use haggadah that, while making the prayers, songs, and ritual accessible and comprehensible to the non-Jew, does not fall into the trap of "Christianizing" the seder. It has such practical pointers as suggesting white rather than purple grape juice for the children because purple stains, "and there may not be much time to get their holiday finery cleaned for Easter Sunday." Then there are sensitive interpretations, such as that for the ten plagues visited on the Egyptians: "When people do evil, they defy God's will and bring suffering upon themselves.... [but] we cannot rejoice over their pain." Finally, traditional songs like "Chad Gadya" are paired with a universalist English (only the blessings are in Hebrew in this user-friendly ritual) paraphrase of "Eliyahu ha-Navi" set to the tune of "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing." We've taken advantage of the \$8 special price for orders of 10 or more for our family seder.

**God's Paintbrush Celebration Kit** by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso and Rev. Donald Schmidt; Annette Compton, Ill. (1999): That rare phenomenon, a religious education resource that will not make children of mixed-faith families feel excluded. A richly multifaceted approach, highly recommended for teachers and parents who operate in an interfaith setting, this set of 40 activity sheets is meant to accompany the book **God's Paintbrush**, but can be used independently. The authors, a rabbi and a Methodist minister, have produced a truly non-sectarian work that relates to children's concerns and joys. There

are activities and discussion questions, scripture references and songs. The title comes from the closing verse: "[G]reen and purple and red and blue./ I think these are just like God's colors./ I know God's colors are in me, too./ And I can paint with God's paintbrush." An ideal sentiment for the child of interfaith parents.

**Thank You, God; Look and See What God Gave Me; God's Best Gift**, all by Sally Anne Conan; Kathy Rogers, Ill. (1997): These books are written in rhythmic iambic meter that lends itself to reading aloud; they also have a limited vocabulary and simple sentence structure suited to for new readers. The sentiments are uniformly sunny and, though the publisher is a Roman Catholic house, contain nothing that a Jewish parent (or child) will find uncomfortable or unfamiliar. A fine starter set for the interfaith family.

**Keys to Interfaith Parenting** by Iris M. Yob, Ed. D. (1998): The author, a religious educator, has produced a comprehensive introduction to the subject. It begins with a section on the basics—the place of faith in human life, and the challenges and rewards for interfaith families. Next, the author briefly outlines the tenets and practices of a number of faiths. Part 3, "Making a Choice," and 4, "Meeting Challenges," use discussion questions, present options, and lay out alternatives. The format makes it easy for readers to focus on areas relevant to them; the clear, straightforward writing style helps cut through theological underbrush. The book includes a glossary and a resource list and is a useful aid particularly for people beginning an interfaith journey. ■

**Ordering Information**

**The Inter-Faith Family Seder Book:** Heritage, POB 212, E. Amherst, NY 14051-0212, fax 716-636-0645. \$13.50  
**God's Paintbrush Celebration Kit:** Jewish Lights Publishing, POB 237, Woodstock, VT 05091, tel 800-962-4544; also available from most Christian and Jewish bookstores. \$19.50  
**Thank You, God; Look and See What God Gave Me; God's Best Gift:** Paulist Press, 997 Macarthur Blvd., Mahwah, NJ 07430, tel 201-825-7300. \$7.95 each  
**Keys to Interfaith Parenting:** Barron's, 250 Wireless Blvd., Hauppauge, NY 11788, tel 516-434-3311. \$6.95

# Bulletin Board

## Interfaith Support Around the Nation

To be listed as a contact person for a new or existing group, or to indicate that you are seeking to join or form a group, please send information to:

Dan Josephs  
1175 S. Euclid Avenue, Oak Park IL 60304  
Home phone: (708) 660-9503  
Fax: (630) 574-8089  
E-Mail: JosephsDA@aol.com

Dan is one of the founders and coordinators of the Chicago Jewish-Catholic Couples' Group. We look forward to hearing from you.

PLEASE NOTE: Dovetail does not interview or endorse any entry listed here.

**California, San Francisco Bay Area\***  
Existing interfaith group. Contact: Alicia Torre, (415) 591-9434

**California, San Francisco Bay Area\***  
Interfaith Connection Groups for interfaith couples. Contact: Rosanne Levitt, Director (415) 292-1252

**Colorado, Denver\***  
Interested in forming an interfaith group. Contact: Karen McCarthy and Dan Kowal (303) 439-7750

**Connecticut, Hamden**  
Congregation Mishkan Israel: "Stepping Stones to a Jewish Me" Classes and Workshops for Unaffiliated Interfaith Families. Contact: Rabbi Sonya Starr, (203) 288-3877

**Connecticut, New Haven\***  
Existing interfaith group. Contact: Christina Giebisch-Mohrer (203) 287-9110

**District of Columbia, Greater Washington \***  
Interfaith Families Project: Existing interfaith group. Contact: Laura Steinberg, (301) 589-9280

**District of Columbia, Greater Washington**  
Bethesda Jewish Congregation: Jewish congregation welcomes interfaith families. Contact: Maran Beth Gluckstein, Exec. Dir. (301) 469-8636

**Illinois, Chicago metropolitan area\***  
Jewish-Catholic Couples' Dialogue Group: Existing interfaith group. Contact: Abbe and Dan Josephs, (708) 660-9503, or Patty and David Kovacs (773) 275-5689

**Kentucky, Louisville\***  
Interested in forming an interfaith group. Contact: Carolyn Humphrey & Fred Gross (502) 423-8583

**Louisiana, New Orleans**  
Outreach programs on interfaith issues. Contact: Courtney Nathan, Jewish Family Service, (504) 831-8475

**Maryland, Baltimore**  
Jewish Outreach Network Programs: Groups, workshops, and counseling for interfaith families, parents, and converts, including interfaith discussion support group. Contact: Beth Land Hecht, Director (410) 466-9200, ext. 381

**Maryland, Rockville**  
Interfaith Outreach Program, JCC of Greater Washington, DC: Introduces interfaith families to Jewish life and offers workshops, classes, and programs dealing with interfaith issues. Contact: Lisa Shapero, Director (301) 881-0100, ext. 6782

**Massachusetts, Amherst\***  
Existing interfaith group. Contact: Janet Lehan Bloom, (413) 253-3685

**Massachusetts, Boston\***  
Developing a network of interfaith families. Contact: Adina Davidson and Joel Nitzberg (617) 776-3235

**Michigan, Huntington Woods**  
Group called "Celebrating Differences" Contact: Miriam S. Jerris, Jewish Humanist leader, (800) 696-0380

**Minnesota, Minneapolis\***  
Twin Cities Support Group: Existing interfaith group. Contact: Joan Cleary and Jerry Helfand, (651) 698-7987

**Missouri, St. Louis area\***  
Starting an interfaith group. Contact: Joanne and Larry Eisenman, (314) 918-7992

**New Jersey, Northern New Jersey area**  
Interfaith Families of Northern New Jersey Contact: Emily Lachman, (201) 385-1836

**New Jersey, Hasbrouck Heights**  
Temple Beth Elohim: Congregation welcomes Jews and non-Jews. Contact: Rabbi Fredric S. Dworkin, (201) 744-3304

**New Jersey, South Jersey/Philadelphia area\***  
Bifairthful Families & Children Network: Group currently not active. Contact: Miriam Gilbert, (609) 753-1173

**New Jersey, Whippany**  
United Jewish Federation: Interfaith families educational program and support/discussion groups. Contact: Lynne Wolfe, (973) 884-4800 ext. 192

**New York, Long Island**  
Long Island Havurah (Fellowship) for Humanistic Judaism: Existing group stresses intercultural strengths. Contact: Leonard Cherlin, (516) 889-8337

**New York, New York**  
Temple of Universal Judaism: Participation is open to all. Contact: Rabbi Charles Lippman (212) 535-0187

**New York, Rochester**  
Interfaith Connection, Jewish Family Service: Contact: Michele Ruda Leve, C.S.W. (716) 461-2000, ext. 825

**New York, Rockland County\***  
Interested in forming an interfaith group. Contact: Eric and Elizabeth Kohlmeier (914) 639-9380

**Ohio, Cincinnati\***  
Interested in joining an interfaith group. Contact: Christine M. Segal, (513) 793-2866

**Ohio, Columbus**  
Gateways: The Jewish Interfaith Connection Groups and programs for grandparents, parents, interfaith couples, and families. Contact: Nancy Heiden, Project Director (614) 231-2731

**Ohio, Dayton**  
Jewish Interfaith Network: Interfaith group. Contact: Tonda Learner, (937) 439-4313

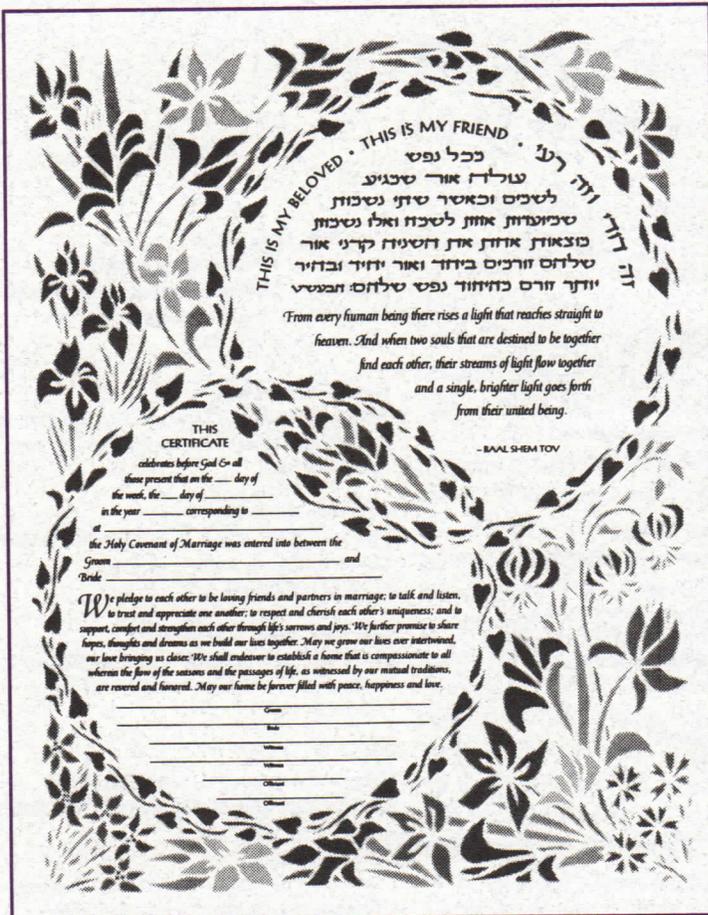
**Pennsylvania, Philadelphia Area**  
Jewish Converts & Interfaith Network: Support groups for grandparents, parents, interfaith couples, converts, and children. Contact: Lena Romanoff, Director (610) 664-8112

**Tennessee, Memphis\***  
Interfaith group. Contact: Jan and David Kaplan, (901) 767-4267

**Virginia, Northern Virginia area**  
Congregation Beth Emeth: Existing Interfaith group. Contact: Judi Cloutier, Outreach Coordinator, (703) 860-4515, Ext. 142

**Wisconsin, Milwaukee**  
Interfaith Connection, JCC of Milwaukee: Existing interfaith group. Contact: Joyce Gutzke, Interfaith Coordinator (414) 967-8218

\* denotes a group not sponsored by a religious institution.



## The Perfect Keepsake for Interfaith Couples

The Ketubah, or Hebrew marriage contract, has been a tradition since ancient times. The intent of this tradition is powerful and its meaning universal. A ceremonial and artistic document, a Ketubah witnesses a bride and groom's promise and commitment to love and honor one another.

Now, for the first time, a Ketubah is available in language especially suited to interfaith couples. Rabbi Allen Secher of Chicago adapted the text and collaborated with an artist and a specialist in typography and fine printing to create this unique piece. The poetic and egalitarian style clearly expresses an interfaith couple's commitment to respect each other's heritage. It is a beautiful art piece, a keepsake and an ideal gift to reflect your love and support.

- Send me the free, full-color miniature reproduction. I want to examine the colors and text before ordering.
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