

Dovetail

A Journal by and for Jewish/Christian Families



The Daily Crunch: Interfaith Family Life

The Devil is in the details. We all want our families to be warm, nurturing nests that give our kids the strength and independence to become their own people. We want our relationships to be mutually supportive yet allow both partners room to grow and develop their own potential.

People who come out of such families, whose parents had such relationships, may shape a style that's an amalgam of their and their partner's parents' way of conducting family life. Those who are dissatisfied with the way they were raised may try to do the opposite of what their parents did.

But interfaith couples seldom have the luxury of such emotional or practical simplicity. We usually have to carve new channels for our relationships, blaze new trails for our families, that take into account two very different sets of religious, ethnic, and cultural expectations. What makes it especially difficult is that often those expectations are unconscious or at least unexamined.

An example of this sort of subterranean complexity comes from a study done by Dr. Joel Crohn, "Ethnic Identity and Marital Conflict: Jews, Italians, and WASPs," for the American Jewish Committee. One fascinating difference he found was in the way members of various groups use silence in conversation or argument. That is, if you clam up in a quarrel, does that mean you're giving in, or that you're holding out? Irish Catholics and Northern European Protestants generally use silence as refusal; Italian Catholics and

European Jews ordinarily use it as capitulation.

Reading this sparked a two-week discussion in my family. My husband and I, though religiously intermarried, were on the same side of this cultural divide: he's Jewish, and my dominant ethnic influence is Italian Catholic. Neither of us would dream of admitting to being bested in an argument; we just stop arguing. This, naturally, became our daughter's style as well. She, a Jew, married a Jew—but a convert from a Northern European background.

Now, to add to the complications, comes in gender conditioning. As so often in our culture, she's the more sociable of the two. When they were invited to a party, she often wanted to go, while he would as soon skip it. At a certain point in the discussion, he would go mute. She would assume she'd carried her point, and they were going to the party; he would assume he'd made it clear they were not going. Come

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the night of the party, they're each indignant: "But we discussed this!"

When I read Dr. Crohn's article, much in my own relationship with my son-in-law became clear. I shared this insight with the family, whose one common characteristic is the tendency to begin any conflict resolution with the ceremony of Assigning the Blame: in this case, whose cultural pattern was Right? We ranged from the assumptions of the Napoleonic Code (guilty till proven innocent) to English Common Law (what did St. Thomas More mean by not signing Henry VIII's divorce decree?). Then there's Catholic moral law, which according to Andrew Greeley holds that silence presumes consent. Of course, eventually we realized that there is no objective standard of correctness here, and that we should strive, as Jesus admonished (Mt 5:37), to let our Yes be Yes and our No be No, and not let silence stand for anything. It's

hard, though, to change patterns you've been shaped by from the cradle, patterns you could not question since you were never aware of them, as this issue's articles detail.

Then there's the broader question of relationships in the extended family. Though we may have worked out terms of discourse with our partners, or agreed on questions ranging from how to raise the children to what the family's style in regard to food, money, sex, humor, and other ethnically linked aspects will be, that doesn't mean our parents or other relatives are going to be able to adjust.

On the other hand, if we can share our insights with them, without assuming that there's something wrong with them if they have trouble adjusting, we have a chance of bringing them along on our adventure. 



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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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One Interfaith Family's Life

by Steve and Cokie Roberts

Cokie Roberts

[T]he last thing on earth we want to do is hold ourselves up as experts on this field. ... We are just people who've lived it, and lived it our way. ... [B]ut the fact is that we finally understood about each other that we had to work it out, because we couldn't live without working it out. And we talked it through, and cried it through, and all of that.

Now this is 1966. And I ... went by myself to a local priest I didn't know, and said, "I want to get married in my yard." And he said, "This is a real PR problem for the Church." This was right after Vatican II, and at the time my father was Majority Leader of the House of Representatives, and it was going to be a written-up wedding that would be "covered."

He said, "People will think if you get married at home, it's because the Church wouldn't let you get married in a church." I said, "Well, basically, that's your problem, not mine." And he said, "Well, I'll take it to the bishop." ... And, much to my amazement, the bishop said, yes, we could get married at home, and when I told my mother about this, it was a *fait accompli*, which was a good thing.

Her first reaction was, "Oh, Cokie, it'll just be like a party," and I said, "No, we will make it a real ceremony—it'll be a wedding." Then I told her that it would be very hard for Steve's grandparents, who had escaped from czarist Russia, with horrible pogroms and all of it, to go into a Catholic church. That was something that would be horrible for them. She got it immediately. And then her Christian self took

over and she said, "Well, then we'll do it this way, and that's fine."

Then the question was where to get a rabbi. We had a priest; my uncle was a Jesuit, which is always helpful. But then we kept trying to find a rabbi—keep in mind this is 1966. It was essentially impossible. But there was this underground: "I know one who does them." So, I was calling a lot of people. One of them was working in the Johnson White House. And I called him up, and ... I said "Rabbi so and so?" and he said, "I'll call you back from a pay phone." Well, it turned out he would do them, but he wouldn't share the stage with a priest.

Finally, my mother-in-law, Steve's mother, says to me, "You know, Cokie, I find this whole search for a rabbi distasteful." I'm thinking "You find it distasteful?" She said, "Really, in our tradition the rabbi is just a learned man. I think it would be nice if you asked a learned man, like, say [former Supreme Court justice and then-ambassador to the UN] Arthur Goldberg." So we did. He was a friend of the family, and we asked him to participate. So we were married at home under a *huppah* [Jewish wedding canopy] on Saturday after sunset with Arthur Goldberg and a Jesuit.

That has been a wonderful beginning, a beginning that involved the whole community and joint communities that became one community to support us in the difficulties of marriage.

Steven Roberts

[Years later,] when we went to our own children ... —we hadn't really talked to them a whole lot about

Steven Roberts is a writer and journalist, currently at US News, but for many years before that at the New York Times. He is also a television commentator on Public Television's Washington Week in Review. Cokie Roberts is a commentator on both ABC television and National Public Radio. Cokie, whose mother, former congresswoman Lindy Boggs, is the U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, is a Roman Catholic; Steve, the grandson of ardent Zionists, is Jewish. Cokie has recently published the autobiographical We Are Our Mothers' Daughters (William Morrow, 1998).

This article is excerpted from the transcript of the Roberts' keynote address 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. To order the complete transcript (\$10.95) or video (\$24.95) call 800-530-1596.



*Steve and Cokie Roberts
DI-IFR Conference 1998*

this—our son said, “You know, it was really harder for us than it was for you because each of you knew who you were. You knew what tradition you were part of. We were experiments, not you. We were the ones who in many ways had to figure out the new traditions.” And he was quite right about that.

Each of us in this room figures out how that is possible for ourselves. No formulae, no magic rules, no codes written on the wall. But the idea that it is possible, that’s so much a part of the wonderful mission of an organization like Dovetail: to tell people like those parents who were so frightened of the unknown, so unsure of where their place would be, that it is possible.

Cokie Roberts

[W]e are not on a soapbox here. What has worked for us was to be inclusive, and to do it all. We’re not saying that works for everybody. We’re not prescribing any more than we want other people to prescribe for us. Or proscribe.

We don’t want to make light of it in any way. If families threaten to cut you off, that’s very serious. Living without the extended family and the joy of the family and the support and the history and the love would be terrible. I can’t imagine it: living without either of our families. It would be an awful way to live. Those are very serious questions.

Steven Roberts

In some ways we’ve been lucky because the sum of our marriage is more than just the sum of two religions. Each religion has enlarged our lives. So often, when people think about mixed marriages, they

think about sacrifice. And yes, there are certain sacrifices. But there are so many more gains, and people don’t grasp that, they don’t understand that you become more than yourself. You’re not diminished by this experience, you’re enlarged by this experience.

I remember sitting in church on Christmas Eve ... thinking, “I’ve been enriched by being part of this. Not just this night, but the family I’ve married into, and particularly my wife.” So many of the qualities that I most love in Cokie and want my children to emulate come from that place, come from those experiences. It is not as though the Church is an alien force that we have to overcome; it was an enriching force that I want to enhance in the lives of my kids.

I don’t know what the final lesson of this all is. I think it is that prayer and family loyalty and family love and deep respect for family traditions goes a long way towards getting us through this wonderful journey. I found in the end looking back that it’s a journey that strengthened us enormously, and taught us a great deal, through all of the pain and all of the trouble that we went through—four years of lots of tears before we decided we could try to do this.

I’ve always believed it strengthened our marriage, that living through and talking through and coming to understand each other taught us whole a lot about tolerance, about understanding the other, about giving in. I’ve often said that you can measure a successful marriage by the depth of the teeth marks from biting your tongue. 

From Estrangement to Reconciliation

by Donna Lee Semelmaier

May God bless and keep my sister Beth ... far away from me! I know it's a direct takeoff from *Fiddler on the Roof*, but it was precisely how I felt about my sister, from whom I'd been estranged for over 15 years. The cause of our estrangement? Religion.

My family considered itself conservative Jewish. Our Jewish self-identification was strong, but there were strains in the family. My sister Beth, almost five years older than I, battled constantly with my father. Both had fiery personalities, with little inclination to back down. When Beth left in 1968 to attend college, her rebellion culminated in expulsion from school, a first marriage to a Christian, and—worse than all other acts of defiance—conversion to Christianity in her early 20s.

My parents were devastated. My mother spent hours with our rabbi wondering where she had gone wrong. My father stormed and raged, threatening to disown Beth, although he never went that far. And me? I convinced myself that my duty was to make up for all the pain my sister had caused my parents. I presided in judgment over my sister and found her wanting. I sat *shiva* [Jewish mourning ritual] in my mind and proclaimed her dead in my life, telling people I was an only child.

We met rarely. Family reunions were few, uncomfortable, nervous. No one spoke of religion, fearing to bring the hurt and anger up to the surface. Conversations were stilted and superficial. We were related, but not a family. It was to take a crisis of immense magnitude to bring us back together and start us on the path to reconciliation. The crisis

came in January 1996, when my father was diagnosed with terminal inoperable pancreatic cancer.

An Olive Branch

I decided to do whatever was possible to ensure that Dad's dying would be peaceful. Beth and I must reach a truce, at least to the point where we could be in the same house without causing each other and my parents more stress. And it would have to be my move, because—I am ashamed to admit this—when Beth had attempted to make contact with me in the past, I had rebuffed her.

I wrote her a long letter, a difficult letter. To reach the present, I had to explain my interpretation of her past. I had to confess my denial of her, my efforts to “make up for her” in my parents' eyes. I worried that, given our very different personalities, we might never be friends, but I wanted to create a new relationship with her, one which started with a clean slate.

I was fortunate. My sister Beth was more forgiving of me than I had ever been of her. She agreed to start in a new place, to work together to make Dad's death easier. She did explain, however, that her feelings toward Dad were still hostile. The effort she was making was for Mom's sake. She also wrote that one of the reasons she had converted to Christianity so many years before was that the God of the Jews appeared harsh and angry, much like our father. She had needed more love and understanding, a gentler God who “suffered the little children to come unto” Him. I could understand. While my problems with Dad were never as extreme as Beth's, I too had suffered the lash of his temper and lack of control.

An Army Brat who grew up on various military bases in Germany, Donna Lee Semelmaier returned to America to attend Brandeis University, graduating Magna cum Laude in 1977. She retired in 1996 on a medical disability from the Federal Civil Service after spending 17 years as a Contracting Officer for NASA at its Ames Research Center. She has published several works in the San Jose Mercury News, an essay in “Writer's Guideline and News,” and a creative nonfiction piece in Yosemite: A Journal for Members of the Yosemite Association.

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My father proved extremely resilient. He opted for a pain management program, contracted himself out to hospice, and, much to his glee, made liars of his doctors by living for 13 months after his initial diagnosis. During this time, the family mended relationships between parents and children, and between sisters. Dad died on 23 February 1997.

I gave the eulogy at his funeral and maintained that Dad's dying year was his greatest gift to his family, a gift of "Shalom: hello, good-bye, and peace." He had brought us closer than we'd been in years, starting us down the path to reconciliation.

The path was not an easy one. We stumbled along the way. Our continued lack of discussion about religion was a major obstacle. Beth and I began tentative generic talks about a "Higher Power." She was very active in Al-Anon and had reached her own understanding. I, on the other hand, while adamantly culturally Jewish, couldn't decide between one day and the next whether God even existed, considering the sorry state of the world.

But the discussions never delved deeper, not until I wrote the story below as an assignment for a creative writing workshop.

**The Story:
THE LAST SEDER
(abridged)**

By early afternoon, before the influx of relatives and friends, our dining room table was set for the seder: both leaves in, the good Rosenthal china, freshly polished sterling silver. Each place had its own Haggadah. The Pesach plate was in the center of the table, carrying

the representations of our slavery. And of course Elijah's Cup was prominently displayed.

Those were the outward symbols of last seder to be held in the Semelmaker home. The seating arrangements around the table bespoke another story. Normally, the two daughters of our family sat near the foot of the table, ready to help my mother serve the meal which arrives in the middle of the service. But on this night, only the elder child, the one who had converted to Christianity during her rebellious early 20s, sat by my mother. I, the younger, the Jewish child, sat at my father's right hand. Somehow we all knew Elijah would not visit us this night and that my father would not live to see the coming of the Messiah. Dad was ill with cancer, and it was my duty, when he needed to rest, to step in and continue the service. The Passover seder, celebrated continuously for so long, could not be stopped in the middle to cater to a dying Jew.

There were other clues, but few members of the family knew to look for them. My sister's Christian husband was celebrating with us, but my Jewish husband was not. His is a more personal, intimate belief in God; he does not allow formalized ritual into his life. I sat by my father, alone, spinster-like, without much-needed support from my husband. His absence was commented on, but I made no excuses for him.

During the ceremony, I became aware of a shimmery illusionary depth to the scheme of the evening. We at the table were captured as the images in Leonardo da Vinci's fresco of "The Last Supper." My father, like Jesus, the Paschal lamb, awaited his death. My mother, though his wife, was cast in

the role of Mother Mary, helping him through his last days. I, like John the beloved disciple, leaned close to my father's breast to comfort him and to be comforted by him in return. I couldn't decide who played the role of Judas, the betrayer: my sister, who was open in her rejection of all things Jewish, but was present out of filial respect; or my husband, whose absence I could explain neither to myself nor to my relatives.

I snapped out of that frozen moment, returned from the inverted fresco of my spectator's eye to my place at our dinner table. The service continued through the night, as it had for centuries. My mother reached the closing prayer:

The Passover seder is now complete.
Its traditions, rules and ceremonies—
All have been faithfully observed.
As we were privileged to celebrate it tonight,
So may we always be worthy to do so.
Thou, Pure One, who dwells on high,
Gather us into a mighty congregation.
Soon may Israel, the seed of Thy planting,
Redeemed, come singing to Zion.

But my mother could not read the final line of the prayer and fled weeping from the table. Again, it was left for me, the younger daughter, the Jewish daughter, to complete the transition, and cover the heavy awkward silence by saying the final, painful words: "Next year may we celebrate in Jerusalem."

I've spent much time thinking about that particular seder. I have come to

the conclusion that the image of Jesus's Last Supper cannot be superimposed upon us. My father was no Paschal lamb; I, no Saint John the Beloved. No one betrayed Dad, neither my sister nor my husband.

But I, I have finally come to recognize the true meaning of the last Semelmaker Passover. The celebration of the seder is now discontinued within this strange, fractured Jewish family of mine. I have no children; I do not fulfill my duty to remember our deliverance from slavery and teach it to the next generation. I am instead a representative of another era, transported into a different period of my Jewish past. I have become a nameless woman of the time of the Diaspora of Nebuchadnezzar, weeping by the River Babylon, mourning the loss of my own personal Zion.

The Aftermath

Proud of this story, I sent copies to my mother, my sister, and my favorite uncle. The responses roared back at me, violent as a shock wave. My mother loved it, but cried because she identified with me. My uncle was aghast at my insensitivity in sending a copy to Beth. "Didn't you think that this could be more than a little hurtful for her to read?" he questioned me via E-mail. I admitted total thoughtlessness.

I awaited Beth's response. When it came, it was clear, concise, rational, almost coldly clinical. She obviously had spent a great deal of time on it. I later learned she discussed it with my mother prior to sending it to me.

"... I am disturbed by the continued evidence of how judgmental you are of me and others," she wrote. "Although we have only discussed

Each One Reach One

(with apologies to Mahatma Gandhi)

Most interfaith families know at least one other.

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what my personal spiritual beliefs are in a general way, I have shared with you some of my struggle coming to terms with a higher power. I know that I have never indicated to you in any way that I 'reject all things Jewish.' That could not be farther from the truth. Whether or not I practice the Jewish faith, I have never denied or rejected my heritage or my Jewish ethnicity. For a number of years I considered myself to be a Jewish Christian, but I haven't considered myself to be 'Christian' for well over a decade. I will grant that you probably were unaware of that."

I'll say I was unaware! Because we never discussed religion, both my mother and I always assumed Beth was still a Christian. How could we possibly have known differently?

Beth went on: "Your presumption that Al (her current husband) is a Christian hurt him. Just because someone is a Gentile, does not presuppose that they are Christian. One's spiritual beliefs do not always fit into neat little categories, and having a 'God of one's understanding' becomes a private, not a theological matter—as reflected in all formalized religion. But it does allow for attending various services and rituals when to do so will give comfort and support to those that do accept them. In addition to the Judaic/Christian principles, in their pure form, Al has also been extremely influenced by the spiritual teachings of Zen Buddhism, Native American, and Shinto beliefs."

In defense of my story, I responded that it takes place on a specific date in time, when we had not yet started our discussions on religion. My

perceptions, while erroneous, were valid in the framework of the story.

However, I was impressed by Beth's discourse. It was thought-provoking and devastatingly honest. I realized that throughout the year of Dad's dying and since his death, I had reached acceptance of and respect for Beth's and Al's beliefs; I just never got around to telling them so.

Where do we stand in our current lives? I have come to believe that my story, while causing short-term offense, ended up serving an important function as a catalyst to get my family talking about what we each believe here and now. Mom talked to Beth about the consequences of her conversion: for example, when she dies, she cannot be buried in a Jewish cemetery. Mom and I spoke of our years of assumptions and presumptions about Beth's belief system, admitting we had behaved with ignorance and prejudice. Through these discussions—via phone, E-mail, and letter—Beth, Mom, and I have reached new understandings and acceptance of ourselves and each other.

My regret is that it took us so long to reach this point. How many years did we waste by refusing to discuss uncomfortable subjects? I urge the members of all families who experience religious differences: Someone—anyone—take the step, break the silence. Speak and listen calmly. Be predisposed toward reconciliation, not toward judgment. May you and yours also be able to move past estrangement and into the peace of reconciliation. ▀

Double Trouble: Twin B'nai Mitzvah

by Bruce Walker

Any Bar or Bat Mitzvah is work, study, and a bit of stress. Things are not easier for interfaith families. My wife, Pauli, and I do not have an ordinary Jewish/Christian household. First, we have kids—a lot of kids. Between the two of us, we have seven: my 21-year-old son, Justin, who is at college; her 15-year-old twins, Alex and Bobby, and her 13-year-old, Hunter; and our sons, Trevor, age 6, and Zachary, age 2, and last, but certainly not least, our Audrey, age 4 and the only girl!

The Parents

When we met, in 1988, Pauli was a non-observant Jew. She lived with her small boys in Tulsa, and occasionally attended services at Temple Israel, but that was about all. She was, however, concerned that her boys grow up understanding that they were Jewish. Her first marriage had ended rather messily, and her ex-husband had turned from a sedate Episcopalian tradition to a much more ardent Baptist style of practice.

Although Pauli was definitely Jewish, and she had been to the Oklahoma City temple during her youth, she was not very familiar with Judaism. Pauli's parents came from a small town in rural Oklahoma, with just one other Jewish family, and her folks were more likely to set up a Christmas tree than a menorah.

After we started going to temple, her children began taking Hebrew classes at the synagogue. I began to read a great deal about Judaism (I read about a book each week for several years) and we started celebrating Hanukkah at home and Pesach at the temple. Although I eventually

returned to the traditional Episcopalian church setting that I had enjoyed when we were in Tulsa, for years the temple was my religious life as well.

The Children

When our first child, Trevor, was born six years ago, he had a Bris in our home. Then when Zachary was born in 1996, he had a Bris as well in his pediatrician's office. By the time of Alex and Bobby's B'nai Mitzvah, we had become closely involved in the life of the Jewish community in Oklahoma City, particularly the children's activities at the temple.

The twins had started studying Hebrew at the synagogue in 1992, and by the beginning of 1997, they were—sort of—ready for their B'nai Mitzvah. To say that they had struggled through Hebrew class is an understatement. They did, however, plug along and get through.

There were other hurdles as well. Pauli's ex-husband, David, was by now a very devout Baptist, and no one was exactly sure how he would react to the B'nai Mitzvah. He had not exactly accepted the twins' Jewish heritage. He had to talk to the rabbi, and the two of them would have to work things out. They did.

At the B'nai Mitzvah itself, a lot of the work was divided up. The twins split up the Torah reading. David and I divided the ceremonial duties of the father: David carried the Torah out, and I returned the Torah after the reading. Both of us were quite awkward.

I could see how much the ceremony meant to Pauli. The twins had been born prematurely and had significant

Pauli Loeffler and Bruce Walker are 43 and 46, respectively. Both are attorneys, although Bruce works for the Oklahoma Department of Public Safety as the Grants Coordinator and Pauli works as an Assistant Educator at Temple B'nai Israel. They live, with many children and many pets, in Edmond, Oklahoma.

developmental problems when they were young. Pauli and I had worked with them on their reading skills all through elementary school. Now they were up before the congregation reading from the Torah.

Pauli, who had never had much of a Jewish life growing up, was now sitting beside me at the *bimah* [dais], making a bit of temple history. Even I was getting a little misty, as Bobby and Alex read the Hebrew that had been such a struggle for them during the last few years. Then it was over. They had done it. There was a small denouement: Audrey was named before the congregation (prompting the rabbi to remark, of our two-year-old daughter, "Makes you wonder what they called her before now").

Then it was really over, and we were all sitting around a table at our favorite restaurant and looking at Alex and Bobby a little differently than we had before.

My other stepson, Hunter, will be having his own Bar Mitzvah in February, 1999. Unlike the twins, Hunter is a quick study. What was rough for them should be a breeze for him. Our two sons, Trevor and Zachary, are precocious and outgoing. They will probably have a much easier time than Alex or Bobby. And each Bar Mitzvah to come will be special. But ... maybe not quite as special, not quite as moving, as when 13-year-old twins, the first in a generation to become B'nai Mitzvah, sweated and strained before the congregation at the beginning of 1997. What Alex and Bobby had done was truly a once-in-a-lifetime event.

The Blended Family

How do we reconcile the interfaith aspects of our family life? My wife and I both try to learn as much as possible about each other's faith, and to "compete" in knowledge.

She corrects the rabbi at the synagogue where she works on what Anglicans do and don't believe, proudly pointing out, "My husband is a devout and very well-educated Anglican." I help my pastor understand what Jews believe, what *TaNach* [acronym for Hebrew Scripture] means, and so forth.

When my Christian son goes to temple with us at Pesach, I am careful to remind him that the things we do and say are very close to what Jesus would have done as a child his age. When one of my Jewish stepsons asks why I believe that Jesus was the Messiah, I can respond not with ignorance, attacks, bigotry, or fear, but rather as someone who has gone to temple with him for more than a decade.

And Pauli and I make it clear to all the children that this is a unique opportunity for them to learn, to see the world as other children can't. To learn, and to love, respect and celebrate the Blessed Creator of the Universe, who will always, as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, bless those who are persecuted, those who hunger for righteousness, and those who seek peace. Amen. 

Their Own Paths

by Liz Ahmann

My own religious background is Catholic and my husband's is Jewish. After we married, many people we spoke to and much that we read urged us to select one religion for our children; we were warned they would be too confused otherwise. Yet this felt untrue to us. We could look around us, in our own families, and see that a choice of one religion for a child does not necessarily guarantee a simple religious journey. Though I was raised in an observant Catholic family, I am the only one of six children who has any active religious practice at this point, and I have chosen a path outside the Catholic Church. My husband's cousin and his Protestant wife decided to raise the children in her faith. But when their oldest son became an adolescent, he declared that he wanted to be Jewish.

My husband and I made a conscious choice not to select a religion for our children. At the time our first child was born, we were attending an Episcopal church where the congregation shared some of our values and fostered a sense of community. I felt a need to have our daughter baptized—something about the symbol of baptism spoke strongly to me, perhaps out of my own tradition. My husband had no objection, and we had our daughter baptized in that church. My son was also baptized in the Episcopal Church.

Despite affirmatively choosing baptism for our children, I never felt baptism meant our children were specifically Christian or had to choose a Christian path. In fact, we also had a *mohel* circumcise my son, and, at our request, he conducted the circumcision as a reli-

gious ceremony, though he left off the final blessings that would have declared my son Jewish. So from the beginning of our children's lives, we have tried to blaze our own path as an interfaith family.

On the Journey

For the past few years we have attended a small church that comprises 15 families: 14 of diverse Christian backgrounds and then our family, a Jewish and raised-Catholic combo. We share responsibility for leadership, worship preparation, and Sunday school. Here our children are exposed to the Bible—Old and New Testaments—to the Eucharist, to Christian holidays, and to a sense of community.

Here also, because of my husband's leadership, our children, along with the rest of the congregation, have experienced various Jewish holidays. This year, we participated for part of the year in an interfaith Sunday school, where my daughter enjoyed discussing Old Testament stories and learning some Hebrew. We have celebrated various holidays of both traditions with our church, at home, with interfaith friends, and with my extended family. We say Sabbath blessings, which our children know and love.

Perhaps, then, it is no surprise that our children, ages seven and nine, strongly feel they are both Christian and Jewish. My husband and I have chuckled about this, joking that they don't want to give up the chance to celebrate all the holidays of both traditions. Maybe behind our chuckling has been a feeling that their identity as "both" is simply a child's childish view.

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A Fork in the Road

Earlier this year, my daughter faced the first dilemma of her own spiritual/religious journey. A Catholic friend of hers had invited our family to her First Communion. After attending this ceremony, and the family's celebrative party, my daughter began to wish for her own First Communion celebration. She and I began to prepare for the ceremony using a borrowed Catholic text that focused heavily on First Communion as a step in becoming part of a community. In many ways, the approach was lovely, but it did raise some issues.

I wondered whether First Communion meant, for my interfaith daughter, a step toward the Christian faith. When I discussed this with her, she became upset. She was clear that she saw herself as both Christian and Jewish. While she definitely wanted a First Communion, at the same time she definitely did not want it if it would mean she was any less Jewish. She clearly had not previously felt any dilemma about her choice and was very stressed—almost anguished—by the question I had raised.

My husband and I concluded that, at age nine, our daughter was putting the world together in the way that made sense to her, and we would respect that. We decided to celebrate her First Communion as an important step for her, but not to consider it in any way a step away from her own full Jewish/Christian identity.

I began to think that perhaps the confusion was only mine and not my daughter's. I had been raised to see Christianity and Judaism as separate. Though I had never felt

I would push my children to choose one faith or the other, perhaps subconsciously I had expected they would eventually make a choice. Even though our family is both Christian and Jewish—and I have truly felt no conflict about that—I somehow did not see as clearly as my daughter did what a personal identity as “both” meant. I began to sense that my daughter's Jewish/Christian identity was not simply a childish wish to celebrate all the holidays, it was deeper. It was something about her as a person.

The New Path

Some months later, at an interfaith discussion group we attended, a woman spoke up about her upbringing as the child of a Christian mother and a Jewish father. Despite being raised as a Jew, she saw herself as both Christian and Jewish. I heard again in the words of this grown woman, herself a mother, the words of my daughter: words which I had thought a year ago were only possible in a child's conception of the world.

It has begun to dawn on me that my children do and will live a different paradigm of religious identity than I have ever understood before. They see themselves as both Christian and Jewish. This is the truth of who they are. Whether either of them later chooses one of these two traditions, or even some other, or whether they continue to forge their own unique spiritual paths as “both,” is yet to be discovered. For them it may never be as simple as selecting a religion, but neither would it have been that simple if we had selected one for them. Rightfully, the journey, the adventure, is and will be each of theirs to live. 

Interfaith Life By the Book

by Rachel Barenblat

I was brought up to think of the Jewish community as “People of the Book.” My grandfather cherished his books and his education, and he made sure we all knew it; his Czech medical school diploma hung proudly on his wall. Hasidic folktales told me about children licking honey off the pages of the Torah, to teach them the sweetness of learning. No two ways about it: books were important.

Which probably goes a long way toward explaining why, when my husband and I were engaged, the first thing I did was to buy a copy of *The Interfaith Handbook* (Judy Petsonk and Jim Remsen, Quill/William Morrow:1988) for my bookshelf. Although my husband and I had been dating for five years, I didn’t really understand what it meant to be interfaith. It wasn’t something my upbringing had prepared me for. So I bought a book.

The Interfaith Handbook has since been followed by half a dozen others on the same topic. Our religion bookshelf, which already looks like the wall of an absent-minded professor’s office (I was a religion major in college, with a focus on Judaic studies; he was a philosophy major who read a lot of Kierkegaard), now has an interfaith section on the top shelf. And the more I read about other interfaith families, the more at home I become with my own.

“At home” doesn’t mean we’ve figured everything out, of course. Planning a wedding that reflected us, in the face of two very loving but very different families, was a real challenge, and there are still big issues we haven’t resolved. Children,

for one thing. We know we want them; we figure there’s a good chance they’ll be tall, musical, and in need of glasses, with fine strawberry-blond hair (traits we share); but don’t ask us about their religious education. Or even the naming/welcoming ceremony we’ll have for them. Because we just don’t know yet.

But what’s comforting for me in my shelf of interfaith books is the realization that we share these struggles with every other interfaith family. Although members of my family attend every type of Jewish temple and shul in the book, nothing in my background prepared me to wrestle with interfaith congregational affiliation—but reading about other interfaith families makes it clear that we’re not alone.

Our daily lives are marked by vast stretches of agreement and an occasional compromise. We agree that we don’t feel the need for weekly religious services: my husband doesn’t seem to miss church, and on the occasions when I really need a synagogue (like the high holy days), I usually go with Jewish friends. We celebrate Rosh Hashanah by cooking a giant festive meal. We throw an enormous December multi-holiday party (we don’t often make red and green matzoh ball soup anymore, but his two styles of latke are to die for). We gather a motley crew of Jews, interfaith couples, and the occasional Unitarian atheist for Passover.

In general, my Jewishness is more evident in our daily lives than my husband’s Christianity, perhaps in part because he is the son of an interfaith marriage himself, and has roots in both religions. Sometimes I think Christianity doesn’t lend

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itself to having ritual objects in the home the way Judaism does—there are no Christian symbols in our house to match the Shabbat candles and kiddush cups, seder plate and spice box, menorahs and mezuzah.

But we find ways of entering into each other's traditions. When my friend David visits on a Friday and he and I sing the entire kiddush, my husband joins in on the parts that he knows. When we attend midnight services at his high school chapel, on Christmas Eve, we sing carols together. He knows my family eats a potato as the "green vegetable" during the seder; I enjoy his mother's Easter dinners.

He read my copy of the Jewish-feminist classic *Standing Again at Sinai* (Judith Plaskow, Harper Collins:1990) years ago; I read *Mere Christianity* (C. S. Lewis, MacMillan: 1943), and I'm working my way through *A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament* (Rabbi Samuel Sandmel, Ktav Publishing:1956/1974), amused by the fact that we both have issues concerning St. Paul.

He went with me to a nephew's Bar Mitzvah last spring in Tennessee (the first of many, since there are eight nieces and nephews on my side of our family), and now owns his own yarmulke as my brothers do. I went with him to a cousin's christening last December in Connecticut, and marveled at the christening gown, made by his grandmother, that everyone in his family is christened in—well, the Christian side of his family, anyway.

It's easy for me to rhapsodize about how much we've learned from each

other, and how much we'll continue to learn in years to come (this June marks our first wedding anniversary)—but it feels a little bit like preaching to the choir. This is *Dovetail*, after all: you who are reading this are almost certainly interfaith, too. Which means there's no need to dispel your incorrect notions of what "interfaith" might mean, as there might be with a single-faith audience, or readership, or extended family.

But every interfaith family makes its own decisions about how to handle faith, family, and culture, and maybe it's helpful to someone out there to see how this one particular couple is doing things, at this particular time.

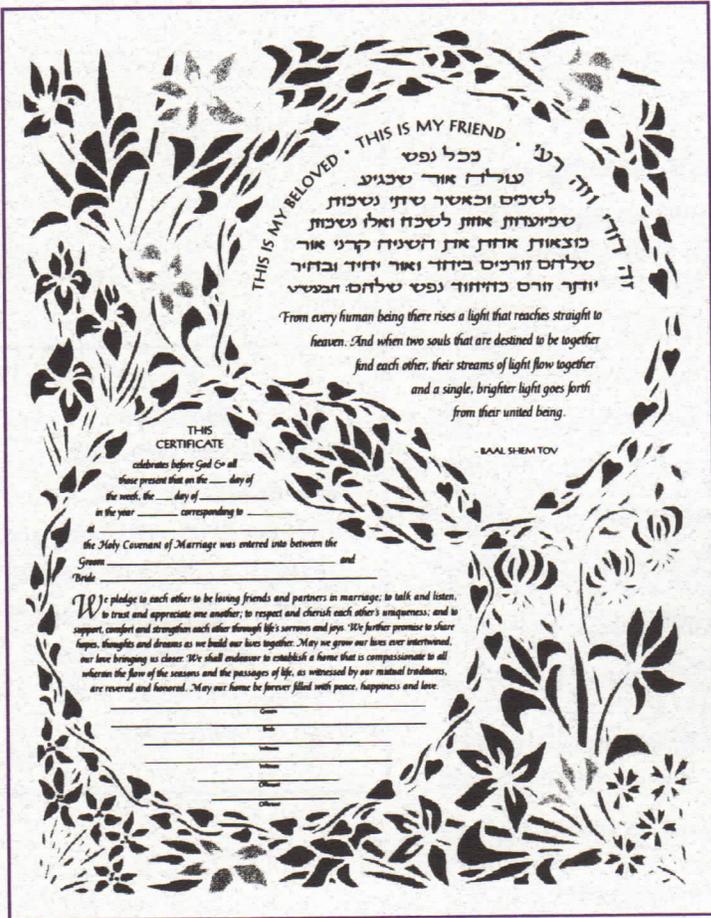
If I could only explain one thing about living in our interfaith marriage, it would be this: our interfaith life is composed of more than just trading books and holiday observances. Being interfaith isn't "about" me experiencing Christmas, or him experiencing Shabbat. Our interfaith life is about making the decision to respect each other's origins and each other's choices—and the decision to live with uncertainty. Is it hard sometimes, not knowing what the future will bring? Yes, it can be. But living in this kind of liminal space, in this threshold area between our two traditions, also opens us up to a lot of joy. 

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Correction

The price of the **Inter-Faith Seder Book** is not \$13.50, but \$9.99 (plus \$2.00 for shipping and handling). In addition to ordering by mail, orders may be placed by E-mail to Hrtage58@aol.com or faxed to 716-636-0645. Most credit cards accepted.



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