

Dovetail

A Journal by and for Jewish/Christian Families



Special Interfaith Families: Different Faiths, Same Sex

When my husband and I were doing research for our book on intermarriage, it occurred to me that it might be interesting to look at interfaith experience in same-sex marriages. Since so often the knottiest questions and most challenging situations come from ethnic and cultural differences that usually underlie religious differences, would the same tensions be found when the male-female dynamic—with its culture-bound expectations—was absent?

For instance, in our culture, tending and nurturing extended-family relationships are usually felt to be the province of the woman. At the same time, Jewish families tend to be more tightly meshed, with higher expectations of frequent contact and intimate communication, than is common among Christian or secular gentile families. We knew from our own experience that this cultural difference could cause conflict in heterosexual interfaith marriages: my Jewish mother-in-law was insulted if I didn't call her every day that we were staying in the same town (and my sister-in-law, who lived in the same town, in fact called her every day). My own mother would have thought there was something wrong if I'd kept phoning with nothing in particular to say.

Another example: we had found, early in our marriage, that our attitudes towards the role of extended family in our financial lives were different. Ned thought nothing of asking his mother for a loan to tide us over a tight period; I would have had to be much closer to starving to go to my parents. Conversely, his mother expected

to be consulted when we made major financial decisions, and to be apprised of our financial situation generally. My parents changed the subject whenever we mentioned, for instance, Ned's salary or what we were going to give as a down payment on our house. We discovered, reading a (now out of print) monograph by Dr. Joel Crohn,* that these were common ethnic patterns: Jewish families, even where there isn't much money, tend to think of it as family money, to be managed cooperatively; non-Jewish families tend to think of each couple as an economic unit, ideally independent except in crisis situations. But I wondered how much my family's attitude had to do with other cultural stereotypes, in this case the feeling that wage-earning is primarily the man's job, so to interfere or even take an interest in our finances would be to imply that my husband was not a good provider?

I only interviewed three gay/lesbian interfaith couples for that book, so my results were certainly unscientific

* Author of *Mixed Matches: How to Create Successful Interracial, Interethnic, and Interfaith Relationships*; Fawcett Columbine, NY 1995.

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and anecdotal, but it looked as though the same ethnic and cultural differences persisted in such relationships. The experience also confirmed my notion that looking at the interplay between same-sex couples can throw issues that also affect heterosexual couples into sharper relief.

When a raised-Christian (she later converted to Judaism) partner of a Jewish woman said, speaking of her partner's mother buying them an entire set of china without consulting them, "I totally couldn't deal with it," many of my interactions with my own mother-in-law became clearer—and funnier.

Looking at same-sex interfaith couples can also give us insight on the attitudes of religious institutions and our place in them. I have heard more than once of same-sex couples who had relatively little trouble finding a rabbi to officiate at a binding ceremony, whether they called it a marriage or not, only

to be refused when the rabbi discovered one partner was not Jewish. Christian clergy, contrariwise, typically find the same-sex aspect a greater stumbling block than differing faiths. I would speculate that this contrast is due to the higher emphasis in Judaism on community, so that someone with different traditions poses a threat, where Christianity historically focuses on individual salvation, so that conduct considered sinful or aberrant is a greater danger than interpenetration with another faith group.

Whatever the nature of your interest in the challenges facing such couples, we hope that all our readers—heterosexual and homosexual—will find this issue useful and interesting. The article on conflict as opportunity should give us all food for thought, in interacting with our religious institutions and with individuals with whose choices we might not agree. ▀

Mary Helene Rosenbaum

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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.

Dovetail (ISSN 1062-7359) is published bimonthly (6 times per year) by: The Dovetail Institute for Interfaith Family Resources, 775 Simon Greenwell Ln., Boston, KY 40107; tel 800-530-1596; fax 502-549-3543; Email di-ifr@bardstown.com.

A one-year subscription is available for \$25 from the above address. International subscriptions are \$35.00. Single issues are available for \$4.50 each. (Michigan residents please add 6% sales tax on back issue orders.)

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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Interfaith and Same-Sex Marriage: Differences and Similarities

by Charles D. Lippman

Interfaith heterosexual couples and same-faith, same-sex couples each face problems unique to themselves. But when a couple is both interfaith and gay or lesbian, their problems are compounded. And, although the vast majority of rabbis of every opinion about interfaith marriage and same-sex marriage have argued that these are two totally different issues that must not be confused, we learn from the couple that falls in both categories, the same-sex interfaith couple, that these two groups do share crucial common experiences.

Personal Issues

The defining characteristics of interfaith and same-sex couples are constitutionally different. Unless one believes that marriages are *bashert* [forged by destiny], or that sexual attraction must always end in marriage, heterosexual interfaith marriage is a choice freely made by a man and a woman. Couples meet and at every step of the way they decide either to continue their relationship or to end it. Any opposition to the marriage by family and friends is predicated on the fact that marrying a person of another faith is a conscious choice. For much of Jewish history, in which marriages were often arranged anyway, marrying an individual who was not Jewish was just not a possibility, and, if it were, a decision was virtually always made not to marry the non-Jew, or perhaps even not to marry at all. Limiting the choice of marriage partners to Jews in no way compromised the individual's essence, even though it undoubtedly sometimes caused emotional trauma.

Not so for same-sex couples. While marriage ceremonies for them are, of course, essentially optional, same-sex relationships themselves are an expression of the very sexual nature of the individuals. As Rabbi Paul Menitoff, Executive Vice-President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (Reform) recently wrote to his colleagues, "Choice is the major factor that defines the difference between interreligious and same gender ceremonies." Whether a result of nature, nurture, or a combination of the two, homosexuality for men and women is not a choice any more than heterosexuality is. To be sure, people have often stayed "in the closet," sometimes marrying a person of the opposite sex and repressing their natural sexual desires because of deeply ingrained societal and familial expectations. But today, gays and lesbians have gained more acceptance than in the past and have more freedom to express their sexuality in the way in which they live their lives and present themselves to the world.

Institutional Issues

The Reform rabbis, who have debated the issue of interfaith marriage so many times and who took on the issue of rabbinic officiation at same-sex marriages of two Jews at their recent conference in Greensboro, have, as a body, accepted homosexuality as a normal expression of human sexuality. As Rabbi Menitoff wrote, "It is neither an honor nor a disgrace to be either heterosexual or homosexual. It is simply a matter of who we are." And so, officially, the Reform Movement endorses the marriage of any two Jewish adults, regardless of gender,

*Charles D. Lippman is rabbi of the Temple of Universal Judaism-Congregation Daat Elohim in Manhattan, a temple with a special outreach to interfaith families. Ordained at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (Reform) in Cincinnati, he has officiated at interfaith marriages since 1973 and began co-officiating with non-Jewish clergy the following year. He has performed same-sex Holy Union Ceremonies since 1983 and, in October 1999, he officiated at the first same-sex wedding ceremony to be performed live on the Internet. Outspoken on the issue of interfaith marriage, he has been interviewed on CNN and in **Newsweek**. Readers have seen him in recent issues of **Modern Bride**, **InStyle**, and **Martha Stewart Living**. Rabbi Lippman is also Senior Chaplain and Coordinator of Spiritual Care at the Jacob Perlow Hospice at New York's Beth Israel Medical Center. He will be a presenter at "But What Am I? Children and Interfaith Families," DI-IFR's June 23-26, 2000 conference.*

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while it continues to oppose rabbinic officiation at interfaith ceremonies uniting two individuals in marriage, whether they are heterosexual or a same-sex couple.

There are, however, many Reform rabbis who are uncomfortable with same-sex marriages and want no part of them, and those who refuse to officiate at same-sex marriages are not necessarily the same rabbis who turn away interfaith couples, so, when a couple that is both same-sex and interfaith looks for a rabbi to officiate at their wedding, they quickly learn that their choices are few. I have officiated and co-officiated at interfaith marriages for almost 30 years and at same-sex marriages for almost 20, and when a same-sex interfaith couple finds me, even in the supposed bastion of liberalism that is Manhattan, it is as if they have found a hidden treasure. Our meetings often begin with a painful narrative of what they have been through in their rabbinic search, often including rejection by the rabbi of their youth, by "straight" rabbis unwilling to officiate at a same-sex ceremony, and by openly gay and lesbian rabbis who would be happy to marry any two Jewish adults. Their gratitude at my willingness to officiate at their ceremony is always prominent.

Perhaps this rejection by rabbis is the most common experience shared by interfaith and same-sex couples and is felt particularly keenly by couples who are both. True, neither interfaith marriages nor same-sex marriages are accepted by traditional Judaism, but the Reform rabbis rejecting all these couples do not accept traditional Jewish law, *halachah*, as binding anyway. Reform, as the most

liberal organized movement in Jewish life, is based on the notion that Judaism has survived because it has adapted to the world around it. So rejected couples sometimes understandably wonder whether they are being treated arbitrarily by these spiritual leaders at this moment of their greatest need and vulnerability.

At a Friday evening service at our temple a few weeks ago, during a discussion called "Changing Trends Among Rabbis Who Officiate at Interfaith Marriages," a recent bride asked perhaps the most salient, basic rhetorical question of all. I had co-officiated at her wedding to a non-Jewish man after they had been rejected by her rabbi, and now they belonged to my congregation. "Who are these rabbis to judge us?" she asked. "Whether we're interfaith couples or same-sex couples, what gives them the right, what gives anyone the right, to decide whether our marriages are valid or worthy?"

Every couple contemplating marriage faces hurdles. But interfaith and same-sex couples frequently face opposition from every quarter, and they have often been forced to confront their actions and to justify themselves and even who they are before family, friends, and clergy, all of whom are theoretically there to provide them with comfort and open arms but who all too often extend their hand to keep a distance and to reject. As a rabbi, I believe that all those who are fortunate enough to connect with another in a meaningful, intimate, loving way, partners who are interfaith or same faith, heterosexual or same sex, deserve dignity and respect as people created in the image of God. 

Conflict As Opportunity

by Abby Mendelson

There is a congregation of our acquaintance with a history of differing about which psalms to sing at what time of year. When they hired a new minister, he walked into the long-standing conflict. During his first worship service, one side shouted, "Sing this!" while the other side hollered, "Sing that!"

"Well," the minister said, surprised by the vehemence with which both arguments were presented, "there is certainly reason on each side. But in the interests of peace, let us ask: what have you done before? What is the custom of this congregation?"

At that, one congregational elder stood, bowed his head, and said, "Minister, this IS our custom."

Conflict is Necessary

Unfortunately, not all conflicts are so benign. Indeed, there is little doubt that much intra-congregational conflict is far more fierce, and is universally viewed as something bad. In her "A Few Learnings," Mennonite conciliator Carol Schrock-Shenk writes that congregations should remember that "it is critical to believe that conflict is natural—and that belief allows us to learn the skills necessary to deal well with it. . . . Because we need conflict. We need our differences.

"Look at Genesis," she adds. "It's a study about the origin of conflict. God threw caution to the wind and created the most unimaginable diversity—in which conflict is inherent. Look at the food chain, for example, or at humans. We are given both individual uniqueness and the freedom to make our own choices. You want conflict? That's

the recipe for it. If I were God, I think I might have gone with a plan that has a little less diversity, a little less chance for things to go awry. But God didn't. And in the end, God said, 'It is good.'

"So that we have to remember that conflict is holy ground," she continues, "that God is present in powerful ways—if we choose to be open. Remembering that allows us to ask, 'What is God saying to us?' rather than, 'What went wrong here?' Through our frustration and confusion [we must remind ourselves] that we are a community discerning God's will in the midst of our differences—not enemies fighting for victory."

"Conflict avoidance is incredibly stultifying," agrees Minnesota-born Rabbi James Gibson, who often gives sermons on conflict resolution. "It nullifies human experience."

Given the right outlook, then, conflicted congregants come to such a realization, sooner or later. First, however, they need to exercise patience. Typical is the reaction of one man who, entangled in a bitter congregational dispute, said, "I am not going to let them make me react. I am going to pray for them until I can honestly feel love for them. However, this may take awhile, so I better put some pillows under my knees."

Adds national conflict mediator Ronald Kraybill in his "Conflict Habits: Divided by Conflict vs. Bound Together by Conflict," each person in the conflict should "initiate affirmation of fellowship, pray for openness, [realizing that] God will speak and work through us if we each do our part."

Abby Mendelson is a writer for Conflict Resolution Center International. For further information, contact Paul Wahrhaftig, president, at 204 Thirty Seventh Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15201-1859; tel 412-687-6210; fax 412-687-6232; email paul@ConflictRes.org; URL: <http://www.ConflictRes.org>.

Citations in this article:

"A Few Learnings" is a section of a keynote address delivered by Carolyn Shrock-Shenk to the Public Mission Team Consultation of the American Baptist Convention, Oct. 30, 1999.

"Conflict Habits: Divided by Conflict vs. Bound together by Conflict," by Ronald Kraybill, Mennonite Conciliation Services Mediation Training Manual, (1995) pp 232 - 3.

"Welcoming Conflict: Conflict Resolution as a Creative Process," by Rosalind Diamond, manuscript 1991.

"Ritual for Letting Go," by David Brubaker, *Conciliation Quarterly*, Vol 7 #4, pp. 6 - 9 (1988).

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As such, some say that intra-congregational conflict should be viewed as a blessing, as a great opportunity for a deeper understanding of oneself and others, for an appreciation of and participation in the faith community, for congregational growth, and, eventually, for healing.

"When lightning strikes the forest," Jewish educator Sender Ben Tevey reminds us, "the resulting fire can be horrific. But it also clears out much dead matter that impedes new growth. So it is the fire—the conflict—that brings forth change."

How to Heal

How do we begin to *welcome* conflict as opportunity? As Rosalind Diamond, a California-based conflict resolution mediator, has noted in her "Welcoming Conflict: Conflict Resolution as a Creative Process," "The first step ... is assisting people to see that conflict is ... an inherent part of our human condition... full of creative potential, [bringing] forth a profound commitment to empowering each other, and to encouraging the utilization of all of our constructive capacities as human beings. In fact," she adds, "*it is not possible to have closeness without times of conflict.*" [Emphasis added.]

"Many people define the word 'peace' as the absence of conflict," comments Midwest-based Methodist minister Larry Homitsky. "That's wrong. Conflict is healthy—when it, like peace, is the *balance* of all tensions. After all, if a body is *completely* without conflict, or tension, it's dead. It's the same with a congregation. You need creative tension for growth. Put another way, if all the

congregants feels things are fine, status quo, they have already started to decline."

As an example of health-giving conflict, Reverend Homitsky cites one congregation which was terribly embroiled about where to build a new parsonage. While the conflict was not the bitter, schismatic kind, it was painful enough. Yet without it, he says, and the self-definition it gave the congregation about its goals and objectives, three years later the congregation would not have enjoyed its enormous success: its first preschool, after-school, contemporary service—and 160 new families.

Finally, as mediator David Brubaker writes in his seminal "Rituals for Letting Go," conflict should end with the parties acknowledging the hurts, proclaiming their good intentions, stating a clear desire to restore good relationships, making—and receiving—necessary apologies, and, perhaps most important, planning an appropriate ritual of reconciliation.

Only then can the conflict reach its necessary apotheosis: when success is on the rise and the healing begins. 

Same Sex, Different Faiths: One Family's Story

by Elizabeth Ahmann

TW and JD met twenty years ago and were friends for five years before deciding to become lifelong partners. They have two sons, ages nine and five. I (Elizabeth Ahmann [EA]) met with them to discuss being a lesbian "interfaith" family. They asked that their initials be used rather than their names.

EA: Tell me about your religious backgrounds.

JD: I was raised in a liberal Reform Jewish family. At that time, it was rare for girls in my Temple to be Bat Mitzvah. So none of us went to Hebrew school, but my sisters and I all went to Sunday School and were confirmed. When I was young, we went to temple for high holy days, but we didn't go to services every week. We celebrated the holidays with our extended family around us. Gradually, my family and I drifted away from being religious, as family member after family member got cancer and religion was not a source of comfort. My father never really believed in God, which seemed odd to all of us when we were younger. After my sister died, my father went to temple during the period when we were sitting shiva. It was the first time he had been to temple in years. He came back crying because he had felt no connection at all to the rabbi or the service, and nothing had helped or comforted him. That was a major breaking point for all of us. Now my parents don't celebrate all the holidays anymore. In fact, they probably stopped when we went away to college. My parents might light Hanukkah candles if we are visiting, and they might be invited to a seder, but I am the only one in my family who regularly celebrates the holidays.

TW: I was raised Southern Baptist. My parents sent us to church because they thought it was important for us as kids, though they didn't go themselves. Initially I went to church with an open heart, eager to learn everything and to know and live the teachings. In fact, the evolution of my own spiritual life, an evolution that has taken me away from organized religion, started as a child when I did go to church on Sundays. Wanting to deepen myself spiritually has led me to where I am today. I feel I have incorporated and gone beyond that starting point my parents gave me so many years ago. However, I am sure my mother would not understand that.

My mother is a Fundamentalist Christian. For her, my being lesbian and non-religious, and having a Jewish partner, are all reasons to be worried about my soul and my place in heaven. In fact, she once wrote to me of her concern that I was possessed by Satan. It took me a while to decide how I would respond to that. I wrote a draft letter and edited it several times. I said that I felt that a lot of my strengths—including being honest and true to myself—were gifts that came from the religious values she instilled in me, and I assured her that I was not possessed by Satan.

Honesty was an expressed value in my family, yet when I was ultimately honest about my sexuality, it was too hard for them to deal with. Somehow that idea that it is okay for me to be who I am but not okay to express that fully in my life was not honest to me.

Although it has hurt that my mother chooses the rigidity of her beliefs over me, I have come to realize, with

Elizabeth Ahmann, ScD, RN has a background in nursing and public health. She is working as a consultant and writer so that she can work at home while homeschooling her two interfaith children, ages 8 and 11. Her family has enjoyed being part of the Interfaith Families Project in the Washington DC metropolitan area for the past two years, where her husband taught Hebrew and she helped with a Christmas play.

maturity, that her own social support structures may have made that choice necessary for her. We used to be close, so we have both lost the potential to deepen our relationship, and I think she feels that too. She doesn't visit her grandchildren—she simply could not visit our house because of who we are—so she only sees them from time to time and is missing out on knowing them well.

EA (to JD): How was it for your family to learn that you would become life partners with a woman, and a woman with a Christian background at that?

JD: I think that because my family is extremely liberal, T's fundamental Baptist, small-town background was more of a hurdle to overcome than the fact that she is not Jewish. I think there was some apprehension about what they would have in common with her, given our different backgrounds.

EA: Have religious discussions specifically come up with your families?

TW: One day, years ago when we were visiting my family, I had gone out, and J was sitting with my family on the porch, rocking, and looking out at the view of the lake. Out of nowhere, there was no conversation going on at the time, nothing leading up to it at all, my mother asked J, "So, do Jews believe in Jesus?" J handled it pretty well, but I have wondered why it came up then.

JD: I think I said, "I believe there was a man named Jesus and I don't believe any other part of the story." No one said a thing, they just sat there and resumed silently rocking.

I sat there as long as I possibly could, then I ran to tell T what happened!

EA: Tell me about your religious or spiritual lives now.

JD: I would say T is probably more spiritual than I am.

EA (to TW): How about you?

TW: I would say we are agnostic. I have strong spiritual beliefs, but they are hard to put into words without distorting them. We celebrate Christmas and Hanukkah, Easter and Passover, but our connections to these religious celebrations are very cultural in nature. My spiritual quest is not religious in nature. My beliefs are more naturalistic. For me the religious holidays are most meaningful in their root connections to the natural world—Passover and Easter for me celebrate that and mark spring, for example. We celebrate Christmas not as a Christian holiday; the birth of Christ doesn't play into it for us, although I do tell our children that I like that people are celebrating a baby's birth. We have a pagan tree, we do the Santa Claus thing, we read "Twas the Night," and we enjoy sharing lots of gifts with family and friends. We do tell the boys about the religious aspects of the holidays though. We say, "Christians believe this," or "Jews believe that."

They know that Grandma believes this certain thing, I was raised with that belief, and J was raised with another. And we teach the kids what is appropriate to say to which grandparent: "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Hanukkah," for example. This is a way to teach them respect for others and their beliefs, to be sensitive, and not to judge.

JD: The celebrations are also tied to our own past, traditions. Celebrating holidays was an important part of our family as a child. I want to carry on traditions that I celebrated as a kid. The traditions connect me to childhood memories and to family. Celebrating the holidays is also part of teaching our boys about all sorts of things. I want them to understand the basic meaning of the holidays. At Hanukkah, for example, we have latkes and songs, and I read them books about the holiday. I also want them to know the Passover story. I grew up with the Maxwell House haggadah. Every year I try to find just the right haggadah for the boys—a less militaristic orientation, and expressing things I believe in, but also not too long for them. Every year I think I should put together my own haggadah from bits and pieces that I like. And here we are again in spring and I haven't done it! Maybe when they are grown I will have time to finally put it together and I can pass it on to my grandchildren!

EA: As a couple or a family, have you ever considered belonging to a church or temple?

JD (laughing): Well, certainly not a church like T grew up in! We did try a gay temple once, but it just wasn't a fit. Sometimes I think about taking the boys to church or temple but when the question comes up, it never seems quite right.

TW: For me, doing this doesn't seem honest if I am not sharing something I believe or providing them something they are asking for.

EA: Do you find any conflict in celebrating holidays of both traditions?

TW: The patriarchal aspects of the haggadah are just as distasteful to me as are the patriarchal aspects of the Bible as they inform a philosophy on which to build one's life. That is why we have created our own traditions as we celebrate the holidays. Bringing the family together to celebrate in our own ways, connects both of us to our individual roots.

JD: I have a little problem when the holidays come very close together. I don't like to have Hanukkah and Christmas decorations up at the same time for example. I think it is both a logistical and a symbolic problem for me.

EA: What about passing on religion to your boys?

TW: We have very strong values and we let our kids know how we feel about what we value. For example, we share that we value being honest and kind, and we share our view that every moment in life is important.

I want our boys to know that there are many possibilities for spiritual expression, and religion may or may not be part of that. We also want them to know that people make different choices regarding that expression and that one form is not right and another wrong. I feel understanding can deepen from many directions. So, we have never encouraged them in a religious pursuit, especially a single religion. We have never discouraged them either. Once when we visited my mother, my nine-year-old wanted to go to church with her. I said yes with trepidation because I remember being afraid as a child of the emphasis on hell and brimstone. But I decided it would be best to let him

go and to discuss his reactions and questions later. Both he and my mother were proud that he went. His overall reaction was that it was sort of boring, which is quite appropriate for his age in light of the material they were covering.

Recently, the same son has been asking a lot about Buddhism. We have a friend who has several books and statues of Buddha, and I think

this spurred his interest. I am trying to figure out what he wants to know, and we have checked out books from the library to help answer his questions. My philosophy is to support my sons' growing minds and expanding awareness, but I don't feel we need to put them in a specific place for that. They are innately spiritual, and that is to be nurtured and honored. 

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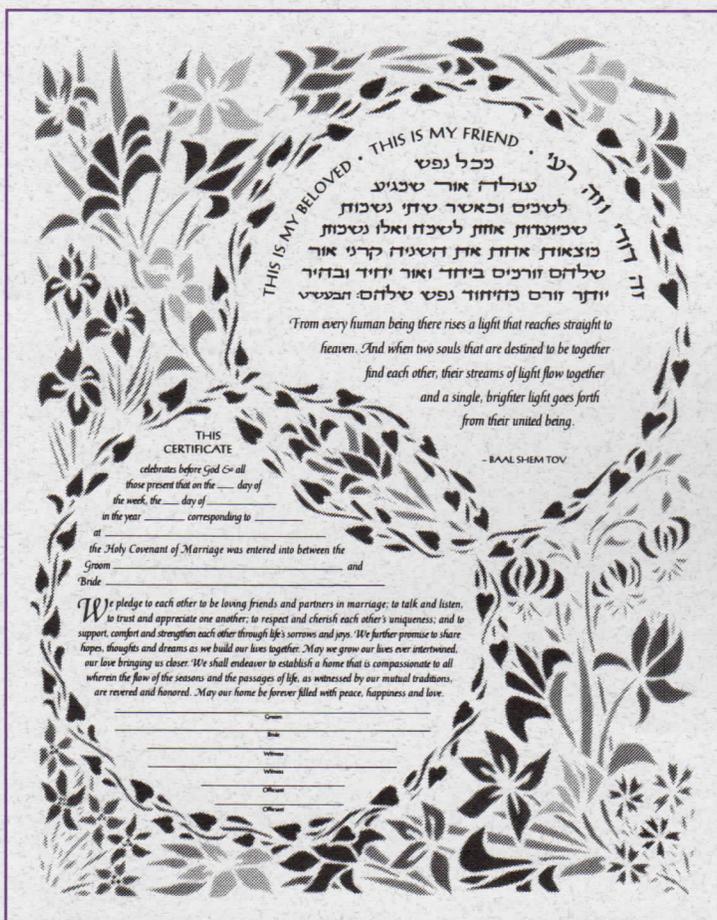
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