

Interfaith Marriage: Lessons I Have Learned

by Rabbi Ellen Jay Lewis

I am the product of a mixed marriage; so are we all. When my parents married, they married not only each other but also two Jewish traditions. In my parents' marriage, the German Reform tradition of Newark's B'nai Jeshurun (my mother) merged with the Russian Orthodox tradition of Jersey City's "Bergen Avenue shul" (my father) and created an observant Reform family. It was a mixed marriage which worked.

I am joking only a little when I claim that both you and I are the products of a mixed marriage. The particular form of my parents' mixed marriage may differ from yours, but I have observed that every marriage is an intermarriage on some level. Every marriage involves the joining of two people who come from two different families; every marriage has issues which need to be resolved in order to meet the needs of both partners. Each marriage chooses its own arena for conflict. In one marriage, the arena for conflict might be that he likes to get to the airport two hours before flight time, while she prefers to arrive as the plane is taxiing down the runway. In another marriage, the arena for conflict might be that she's a morning person and he's a night person, or she's from the North and he's from the South.

In a same-faith Jewish marriage, the arena for conflict might be the religious one despite their shared heritage; he might like to go to services while she doesn't, or she might want to keep kosher and he doesn't. In interfaith marriages, the arena in which conflicts are acted out is often the religious one; underlying issues get played out in the question of whether to have a Christmas tree or whether to go to Grandma's for Easter. Even marriages between two Jewish partners contain religious surprises and require understanding and compromise; how much the more so when you are trying to reconcile two divergent faiths in one marriage.

Too often in the press and in common parlance, the issue of intermarriage is reduced to dire statistical predictions about the demise of the Jewish people or to heated debates on why rabbis should or should not officiate at such ceremonies. For the purpose of this article, neither of those issues interests me. Issuing doomsday statements about the future of the Jewish people will not prevent people from intermarrying; trying to persuade rabbis one way or the other will not change what already exists, that is, that there are rabbis who do perform intermarriages and rabbis who do not. What interests me more than who does the interfaith wedding is what happens to the interfaith marriage.

I have been working with interfaith couples for twenty years. In that time, I have discovered that I am not only their teacher, but also their student. My first memory of being taught by an interfaith couple came as a result of my student-rabbi experience in Pittsburgh. "Why are Jewish holidays so depressing?" asked Susan, the Lutheran-born wife of a cantor's son. "How are Jewish holidays depressing?" I asked her, thinking of the joy of Purim, the awe of the High Holy Days, the freedom of Pesach, the thankfulness of Sukkot. "Well," she said, "Take Passover. We go to my mother-in-law's house. When my father-in-law died ten years ago, she entered into a state of permanent mourning. She wears dark clothes. The seder is in the dark dining room. All the shades in the house are always drawn. It's all so depressing." As I listened, I came to understand that it was not Pesach which was depressing, it was her mother-in-law who was depressed. And so from Susan and her husband, I learned my first important lesson from an interfaith couple: *There is no such thing as "Judaism" in the abstract; there is only Judaism as people experience it.* In a joyful family, Judaism will be expressed joyfully. In a depressed family, any holiday, whether it is Passover or Thanksgiving, will be experienced as depressing.

My job with them then became clear. Susan needed me to help her understand that Passover is supposed to be a joyful celebration. What is more, her born-Jewish husband needed to learn the same lesson. The congregational seder could offer them a different approach to observing Pesach; "Introduction to Judaism" classes could stimulate them to develop their own family's way of celebrating the holiday. The Judaism their children will experience will be a joyful Judaism, far different from what their father knew as a child.

I have said that Susan and her husband were the first interfaith couple to teach me something I have found to be useful in working with Jews-by-birth as well as Jews-by-choice. About fifteen years ago, after having continued to work with other interfaith couples, I felt that I had reached the limits of what I could do for them individually. It seemed to me that they had much to learn from each other. I called a psychologist in Dallas where I worked at the time and suggested that together we run a synagogue-sponsored group for interfaith couples. My friend's goal was to help people learn how to have better marriages; mine was to show them that, as a rabbi and representative of the Jewish community, I cared about them and wanted them to feel comfortable in a Jewish context. Our most basic mutual goal for the group was to provide them with effective communication skills and an arena for discussion of their issues. That first group was so successful that, once I moved up to New Jersey in 1985, I continued running groups for interfaith couples. Once again, I could not have anticipated how much they had to teach us.

There was Arielle, a woman raised as a Protestant whose father had been a non-practicing Jew and whose husband had been raised in Conservative Jewish household.

He could never have married a Jewish woman, he said, because he needed to rebel against his parents; but he could never have married a non-Jewish woman because part of him wanted to raise Jewish children. Arielle was a perfect choice for him. She, in turn, wanted to get in touch with the tradition which she saw as the source of warmth and love as a child in her father's family. She wanted to raise Jewish children who would never have the ambivalent identity with which she had been burdened. When it came time to join a temple, however, it was her husband's ambivalence which kept delaying the decision. "Don't rush," she told him at last, "I understand your conflict. I'll just take the kids by myself down the street to the Unitarian Church until you are ready to join a temple." He joined a temple within the week. This family was not "lost" to Judaism as the statistics might indicate; on the contrary, through the efforts of the then non-Jewish spouse, Judaism gained a whole family. This family taught me a second important lesson: *We need to understand and confront the ambivalence of the born-Jewish partner.* Working with these couples has taught me that this ambivalence of the Jewish partner is not unusual and crosses denominational lines. It does not belong exclusively or even necessarily to Jews raised in non-Orthodox households.

No one explanation of intermarriage will fit every situation. Obviously, as a rabbi I can only support and encourage Jewish observance at home and in synagogue. But the level of observance at home ultimately has less to do with creating future intermarriages than it does with the quality of the relationship between parent and child in that given family. Helping to raise committed Jewish children is not just a matter of how many Shabbas candles you light, although that is certainly important; what matters most is the emotional health of the family. Is the family heavily programmed toward creating a "perfect" child who gets the highest scores, has the right friends and gets into the best colleges at the expense of that individual child's needs? That child will be more likely to try to assert his or her independence by intermarrying than will a child who is loved and accepted for who he is rather than what she does. Is Judaism a source of love within the parents' marriage or is it an arena for tension? If the parental relationship, in religious as well as in non-religious areas, is a mature one, then that child will grow up wanting to lead a happy Jewish life as an adult.

I have learned a third lesson from these couples: *That the issue is rarely one of theology.* In the community of Jews-by-birth, the prevailing notion is that, as long as the non-Jewish partner does not believe in Jesus, the children can be raised as Jews and religious differences will not be a problem. Yet I have known couples where, although the non-Jewish partner did not believe in Jesus, the religious struggle between the couple was just as great. The problem is less one of theology and more one of how you create intimacy within a marriage. That is why agreements made

before marriage so often fall apart after the marriage occurs. Anyone who has ever been married know that actually being married is different from what you imagine it will be. I know many couples who have made agreements before they were married about how they planned to raise the children. They did so with good intentions; but how could they have known at the time that people's needs change within a marriage and that premarital agreements of any sort must be open to renegotiation if either partner is unhappy.

I learned this lesson from John, who had agreed before marriage to raise the children as Jews: "I thought it would mean that instead of dropping the kids at church on Sundays, we'd just drop them off at temple on Saturdays. I didn't know that it would mean that, if my parents came to visit during Passover and wanted to have a sandwich, they would have to eat it out in the back yard!" John and Karen had reached an impasse over whether to have a Christmas tree. The more Karen objected on the grounds that they had agreed to have a Jewish home, the more John's yearning for a Christmas tree grew, not because he had any theological connection to his Christian origins, but because Christmas had been the one time in his childhood when he had felt included in his family. The Jewish holidays raised those old feelings of being left out of his own family. Once John and Karen realized that the issue was not really about having a Christmas tree, they could make progress by addressing their underlying emotional needs. John and Karen taught me that the better a couple learns to work out what it means to be married, the more the religious pieces begin to fall into place. From them, I learned a fourth lesson: *Just because the non-Jewish partner has agreed to raise Jewish children may solve one major problem but may create another.* That non-Jewish partner who has rejected one faith community has not yet decided how or whether to participate in a new faith community. He or she runs the risk of being a permanent outsider, existing on the religious fringes of his or her family without finding a faith community of his or her own, feeling religiously empty and spiritually stuck. We in the Jewish community need to find a way to help our non-Jewish members process their own feelings about Judaism and, with opportunity but without pressure to convert, explore the possibility of Judaism as a faith choice.

And I have learned a fifth lesson: *That intermarriage cannot be "prevented" any more than you can "prevent" any other union between consenting adults.* We live in a society in which people are going to marry the person they want to marry, regardless of the persuasive powers of parents and rabbi alike. Interfaith marriages are not random any more than same-faith marriages are random. People choose their partners to help them finish the business of childhood. You can try to fight people's marital choices, but you can only lose. If, no matter your personal preference or theological conviction, you can accept people's decision and work with them, then you and the couple - not to mention the Jewish people - might both win.

Interfaith couples are not just statistics in a survey. They are not unique in the fact that they are interfaith but they are unique, each one of them, in terms of how they will approach dealing with the issue. Each marriage is different and requires different solutions. What works for one couple will not work for another. We need to respect the uniqueness of each relationship while at the same time offering programmatic outreach.

The Jewish community can help. All couples, both interfaith and same faith, can benefit from community support and outreach. Couples in which both partners are born Jewish can still be "interfaith" when it comes to making religious decisions and any other decisions required by marriage. Religion cannot be treated as an assumption in any marriage; like all other important things, it requires constant communication and evaluation if it is to be done well and to enhance a family's life. *Interfaith couples have reminded me not to make assumptions about Judaism and not to take Judaism for granted. For this, the final lesson, I am most grateful.*