

The Challenges of Interfaith Marriages

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Next week, Wednesday at sundown, the Jewish observance of Passover begins. For centuries the story that has been told on that night and the subsequent nights is one that is central to Jewish identity. It is a story of a people on the outside of society, enslaved, oppressed, who go out into the desert and wander in exile for 40 years, trusting that the God who called them to exile will redeem them as part of a special and covenanted relationship. In the desert they are fed, though not gourmet meals. Manna falls from heaven; water must have sprung from wells. Anxious and impatient rebellions among the people are put down and the people are, eventually, brought home to a promised land -- the land of milk and honey of their dreams.

Again and again when faced with oppression, prejudice, suppression, ridicule, disenfranchisement, the Jewish people went back to stories like this one and the one of the Maccabees' fight at Masada -- stories that told of victory and redemption in the face of overwhelming odds and near-extinction. "Where does Israel get the strength -- the chutzpah -- to go on believing in redemption in a world that knows mass hunger and political exile and boat people?" writes Rabbi Irving Greenberg. "How can Jews testify to hope and human value when they have been continuously persecuted, hated, dispelled, destroyed? Out of the memories of Exodus! 'So that you remember the day you went out of Egypt all the days of your life' (Deuteronomy 16:3). The Jewish tradition takes this biblical ideal literally" [*The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*, A Touchstone Book: New York, 1988, p.37].

Beginning in about the 1960s, Jews, as well as people of many different races and ethnic backgrounds, began mixing with increasing ease and increasing numbers at secular universities, in comfortable suburbs, and in the workplace. With this increase of interaction and mutual acceptance came one inevitable reality of human life: The people who were living and working and studying side by side fell in love. Absent barriers that would have kept them apart, in their separate communities, they were left considering making a life together. So, of late, the number of intermarriages has increased. Pakistani Muslims have fallen in love with Irish Catholics. Indian Hindus have met and married Swedish Lutherans. Goan Catholics have been swept off their feet by Dutch-American Unitarian Universalists. And the list goes on. The American melting pot has thrown us all together and we are now grappling with how to make these interfaith, often mixed-culture, marriages work -- saving what we love about who we are, and not losing or destroying the marriage in the process.

The issues that come up within these unions come up almost immediately. To begin with, in some faiths, like Judaism, interfaith marriage is forbidden. In the book of

Deuteronomy, Chapter 7, Moses tells his people: "When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you ... you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them ... for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods."

If that religious prohibition doesn't dissuade you from intermarrying, then you have the challenge of telling your family and friends. Entertainers George Burns and Gracie Allen were an interfaith couple. She recounts the time she told her parents about this man she was going to marry and his Jewish faith. Her parents listened, nodded their heads, and then her mother said: "Well, maybe he'll get over it."

Well, assuming he or she doesn't "get over it," you have some issues to face. The first is the wedding. No better ritual has been devised to raise all the questions couples would like to avoid -- money, family and, of course, religion. So do you have Uncle George the judge perform the wedding? And if he does, will your Catholic mother-in-law think the marriage doesn't count, or will this bring shame upon one branch of the family? And is a judge's ceremony what you dreamed of when you pictured your wedding day?

Carol and I met with a number of interfaith couples a few weeks ago to ask about their struggles, and we heard some of their stories about the wedding. Will his parents come if you do the wedding in a synagogue? Will hers come if you do it in a church? Will anyone come if you do it outside and have two officiants -- both renegades in their own religious communities? Ask most couples, and especially most interfaith couples: The honeymoon ends when the wedding planning begins.

There are as many solutions as there are couples.

In our case, we had two weddings -- one in the Unitarian church I served in Washington, D.C., with a Unitarian minister and an Episcopalian priest, both friends of ours. Then, six months later, we flew to India for a Catholic service. There were some catches. For instance, I had to promise not to get in the way of my husband exposing our children to Catholicism, which I never would.

All went well, I would say. Everyone felt honored. It cost us a bit more money, took a bit more time, but all in all it was a small price to pay, and in fact enriched the experience of marriage for us both. There are annual reminders of the peace we negotiated then. Every year, for instance, on May 1st, the anniversary of our wedding in D.C., my parents call to wish us a happy anniversary. Every year, on December 28th, the anniversary of our wedding in India, my in-laws call to wish us a happy anniversary. To each her own!

Where the issues and challenges of interfaith marriages or unions come up even more markedly is if and when children enter the picture. It's not unusual for rather secular men and women, who blissfully leave the faith of their upbringing behind, to find themselves feeling feelings of obligation, hope, even deep loss and sadness when that faith risks being obscured or forgotten in an interfaith relationship. Just as you dreamed about what

your wedding day would look like, so too do most of us dream about what family life will look like -- the holidays we will celebrate, the rites of passage that will bless our children's lives, the image of the whole family worshipping in one place together on high holy days.

Joan Hawxhurst, the author of *The Interfaith Family Guidebook*, says that all marriages or unions are interfaith. "Even when people practice the same religion," she writes, "they have different images of God, experiences from their own background, levels of intensity, and ideas about how that religion should be lived out." That's true. We all face some of this negotiation, but it is even more complicated and potentially painful for couples that don't practice the same religion. Finding a way through all of this that preserves the union, and respects what is most important to each of the people in it, can be one of the biggest challenges of interfaith marriages.

One of the big issues that arise is a sense of loss of legacy: "No one will carry on the Lutheranism that has been in my family for four generations." Or if you are Jewish, Shaker, Parsi, the sense that your intermarriage is adding to the gradual disappearance of your faith. According to Egon Mayer, a Brooklyn College sociologist and leading expert in the field, somewhere between 30 and 40 percent of Jews were marrying outside the faith in the 1980s. Moreover, in cities like Denver and Phoenix, those figures might be as high as 70 percent. The fear that thousands of years of history and heritage -- that incredible legacy we talked about earlier of a people fighting oppression and slavery and enduring with dignity -- the possibility that this might die out because of *your* surrender of the Jewish faith is a significant fear. "You are completing Hitler's work," Rachel Cowan, co-author of a book about interfaith marriages, was told as she and her Jewish husband traveled through Israel.

Interfaith couples face layers of loss and struggle. There is the personal loss of giving up what was familiar and cherished. There can be the censure or regret from a family that wonders why they didn't raise you to be someone who would marry within the faith. And, in the extreme case, there can be a haunting sense of obligation for the survival of a faith felt by those whose faith communities are shrinking.

How interfaith couples make their way through this is varied. Sometimes one or another converts. Sometimes one surrenders the family rituals to the other's faith tradition, but protects the right to his/her own faith. Sometimes both surrender their faith and raise their family outside of religious communities. Many, however, find a way to honor both traditions. Many of those folks end up here, where our commitment is to help them expose their children to the best of what they each bring to the union. So many couples here are interfaith that it is one of the central descriptives of who we are and how we serve the world.

Barbara Heisler Williams, who is from an interfaith marriage, told a story at our gathering of interfaith couples about her son, Sam, and his best friend, Matthew. Matthew is Chinese. His dad was raised Unitarian, and Matthew's family attends the Morristown

UU Fellowship, or used to. Matthew and Sam were 3- or 4-year-olds when Barbara overheard their conversation in the back of the car:

Sam: Matthew, who in your family is Jewish?

Matthew: No one in my family is Jewish.

Sam: Well, who in your family ever *was* Jewish?

Matthew: Sam, no one in my family was *ever* Jewish.

Sam (confused): So, why are you a Unitarian?

There are interfaith couples that are here because neither of them felt fully comfortable in the faith communities in which they were raised. There are others here because they see it as a middle ground. This is a place that doesn't claim that any one religion supersedes another and where both can be honored. I would expect most folks are here because of a little bit of each of those reasons -- because the place from which you came doesn't fit you anymore *and* you want a place where both of you can be comfortable.

This makes our communities a bold experiment in pluralism. It is an experiment that is enriched by the fact that so many of our members are living that same experiment within their homes every day.

When Carol and I asked these interfaith couples what it was like for them to live this experiment, we heard some wonderful stories -- painful and funny both -- about the marriage, the blending of families, the dance around the holidays. For many there was still a deep sense of being "Catholic" or "Jewish" or whatever the faith of their childhood was. For others, the years had blended their identity. "I am a Jew-U," said one person. Another couple said they no longer considered themselves anything but Unitarian Universalist. And a few couples said they longed for more rituals and holidays that were distinctly their own -- distinctly UU -- safe, shared holidays that they could both own and pass on to their children, free of anything but joy.

Many resonated with the satisfaction and relief and joy in seeing the youth service in March. There is often, I think, an underlying fear that as interfaith parents, they might regret not having passed on enough of their own faith to fortify their children for life. Seeing how this faith community to which they trusted their children could shape these youths in such powerful ways, I think, assuaged that fear. These kids were well fortified for life.

Of course, passing on what was and is precious to you from the faith in which you were raised is still important. One man told the story about when his son asked him one morning to tell him about Passover. His wife was still asleep, so here in the cradle of morning was a chance to tell his son about his heritage. Filled with pride and joy, he launched into the story of the Israelites, the enslavement, the exile and the return to the holy land. The whole time, he noticed, his son's eyes were fixed on his face, intently focused on his father as he shared this story. Heart full, story done, he said to his son: "So, Peter, do you understand the story of Passover now?" Peter nodded, still staring at

his father's face, and then said: "Dad, do you know your bottom lip is twice as big as your upper lip?"

So there were wonderful moments, heartbreaking moments, and hilarious moments in this journey to shape what it means to be an interfaith couple or family. We try to pass on what we loved about the faith in which we ourselves were raised, and *it isn't always entirely clear how much gets through*. But we trust, and our youth showed us that it does get through.

My hope for all of us in this community is that we never feel that we have to give up anything from our religious or cultural background that is still important to us. Perhaps that is impossibly naïve of me. Perhaps we always have to give up something. However, I do believe that it is by bringing our heritage with us, from all of our different backgrounds, that this community grows strongest. Our own individual faith journeys brought fully to this place enrich the faith journeys we are all on together. "If you feel you can discharge your duties according to the dictates of your conscience," write Ned and Mary Helene Rosenbaum in their book *Celebrating Our Differences*, "and [if you can] live the life you believe God intended for you without feeling your partner is an obstacle or a threat, you can have a successful marriage. And it's possible. But it's going to be complicated."

What they say is a reminder of the challenges not only for each couple, but for this community as a whole. What we must do here together is make room all the time for all of what we each love that we bring from all that shaped us -- our ethnic heritage, our childhood religious faith, the faith we traveled through as young men and women -- and then weave all this richness into our sense of who we are as a community. It is possible, as the Rosenbaums wrote, and it is complicated. Issues such as calling this place a "church," though it honors the Christian history of this community, are among the things that can be barriers to interfaith couples feeling at home in this place. I hope, over time, we'll pull down as many of those as we can and make room, more and more room, for people whose complicated faith journeys bring them here, and who need us as much as we need them.

As our reading this morning said, "I am sending you into the wilderness to make a new way and to learn my ways more deeply ... Some of you will be so changed by weathers and wanderings that even your closest friends will have to learn your features as though for the first time. Some of you will not change at all. Some will be abandoned by your dearest loves and misunderstood by those who have known you since birth and feel abandoned by you. Some will find new friendship in unlikely faces, and old friends as faithful and true as the pillar of God's flame. Sing songs as you go, and hold close together."

Amen.