

# C O N T E N T S



Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
A Special Note for Parents	xiii
A Special Note for Jewish Community Leaders	xv
A Special Note for Rabbis	xvii
1 The Facts and Where You Fit In	1
2 Navigating a Relationship Before Marriage	9
3 Relating to Parents, Grandparents, and Siblings	25
4 Making Decisions about Children	37
5 The Holidays and What to Do about Them	47
6 Life-Cycle Events	67
7 Nurturing the Jewish Spirit and Soul	79
8 Marrying Later in Life	91
9 Special Interfaith Situations	99
10 The Option of Conversion	105
Epilogue: Interfaith Marriage as a Journey	117

# 1

## THE FACTS AND WHERE YOU FIT IN

If you have decided to marry someone from a family whose religion is different from your own, you are far from alone. Many have made that same decision before you, and many more will make it in the future. Of this, there is no debate. It is true, however, that the numbers of interfaith marriages in this generation are greater throughout North America, irrespective of religious community, than in previous generations. (While I use the term “marriage,” I recognize that there are lots of different kinds of committed relationships, and I include all of them as well.)

In the past ten years, over half of the marriages involving Jews have been to partners not born Jewish. At least one third of the three million Jewish families who identify as such in the United States have a head-of-household (this includes men and women) who was not born Jewish. About one third of the families who are members of Reform congregations are interfaith families. And over 50 percent of the children born into Jewish families in the last decade have one set of grandparents who is not Jewish. There is no reason to believe that these percentages are going to become smaller in the years

ahead. This is no one's "fault." It is simply a fact in contemporary American Jewish life, a result of the open and free society that we have come to know and enjoy in America. It is another milestone in the exciting path that the Jewish people have traveled throughout our history.

These are the facts, and you are now part of these statistics. And these are the feelings that come with joining this set of numbers. As Susan Weidman Schneider, the editor of *Lilith* magazine, has observed, "Interfaith marriage is a phenomenon viewed by some Jews and Christians with alarm, by some with curiosity, and by the partners themselves as a name for their situation that represents only some of the many challenges they face in living together. The partners must at some level deal with their own and each other's feelings of loss of continuity, betraying ancestors, creating complexities in the lives of children alive and yet-to-be, of competition, anger, rejection."<sup>1</sup>

While some people bemoan interfaith marriages for a variety of reasons, including issues of race and a feeling of personal betrayal, we must all recognize that intermarriage is a result of Jewish *success* in America, not its failure. Many of our grandparents sought refuge in this country because of its democratic ideals. They fought for equality and an end to quotas in immigration, education, the professions, and even social clubs. They fought hard to belong, to make it easier for their progeny. We in this generation are the beneficiaries of that success, but we also bear its burden and responsibility. However, the facts of history alone do not tell the story of people's lives. For example, at one time, many Jews entered into interfaith marriages as a way of escaping the Jewish community and "passing" into the larger American society. This is no longer the primary motivation for most interfaith marriages. Few of the cultural, educational, social, or professional barriers for Jews that once motivated intermarriage remain as barriers. Similarly, there was limited social interaction between Jews and others, and fewer non-Jews were willing to marry Jews. Few people elected to become associated with a minority that had so many restrictions placed on it. This, too, is no longer the case in America today.

## WHAT IS AN INTERMARRIAGE, ANYWAY?

“Intermarriage” is a term that sociologists use to describe a marriage between two people, one born into a particular faith and one born into another faith. Some people like to make a technical distinction between an *intermarriage*, where a conversion has taken place, and an *interfaith* or *mixed marriage*, where there has not been a conversion. In this book we use most of these terms interchangeably, as do most people. While these terms may present an unwelcome description of your relationship—perhaps one that you might even reject—it is a term that the Jewish community has thrust upon you. Labels are a fact of life for those who intermarry.

Although new evidence suggests that the majority of American Jews no longer hold interfaith marriages in total disdain and are choosing to just accept them as part of the Jewish communal landscape, the idea of an interfaith marriage or of interfaith dating is still considered a major “problem” by the organized Jewish community—that is, by community leaders. While many scholars debate the reason for the change in attitude among the general Jewish population, it appears to me that married children are less under the direct influence of their parents than in previous generations. As people marry at later ages, they exercise more independence. There is also a latent fear that the criterion of in-faith marriage may prevent them from marrying at all. As one man in a small community in the far West told me, “I want to marry someone who is Jewish. But I don’t think that will happen for me. I have not met any Jewish women, and I’m not getting any younger.”

Your dating life is not necessarily determined by the faith community you were born into. Instead, you were probably drawn to your partner for a first date (and second date and beyond) by common interests and shared values. The fact that the faith community of your family of origin may be different from the community of the person you have come to love might today have about as much relevance as the fact that your ancestors might have immigrated to North America from different foreign countries. While

ancestry certainly had relevance back then, such distinctions may no longer have any conscious bearing on your life, either on the decisions you make or in how the community at large regards you.

Today more people meet their future partners and spouses in the workplace, rather than in college, as was the case in the last generation. People partner and marry later in life. Couples have children later. There are higher rates of divorce, second marriages, and blended families. Thus, even the college experience (and the important work of Hillel and other organizations) has less impact on the phenomenon of interfaith marriage today than it had in previous generations. People meet and fall in love. They meet at work, at parties, and in lines at the movies. No measure of Jewish education will prevent such meetings from taking place.

#### MAKING THE CASE FOR OPTIMISM AND INCLUSION

I believe in the sacredness of family life and want to reduce the factors that destabilize marriages. Also, I recognize the reality of interfaith marriages and acknowledge the real challenges that interfaith couples face. I believe that once a decision to marry has been made, the Jewish community has the responsibility to do all it can to help that couple and embrace the new family that may emerge.

Some critics of intermarriage may not consider what individuals are facing and feel that they have a “higher calling” to oppose it. These critics think that wholesale condemnation will change attitudes and behaviors. That alone, they believe, will discourage the practice of Jews marrying outside their faith. The higher the intermarriage rate, the more poisonous becomes their vitriol. Studies show that this approach is ineffective in most cases. Personally I think it is wrong, morally and practically.

The statistics are real. Between 65 and 75 percent will not raise their children as Jews, reducing the likelihood that their children will learn about the Jewish tradition. That branch in a four-thousand-year-old tradition will be cut—an unfortunate trend for those of us who believe in the value of Jewish life, learning, and community. It is

this trend that I am working against—not the particular makeup of couples and their families. Unwittingly, the Jewish community has contributed to this trend by simply accepting it. If the community is unwilling to do anything to change these results, the trend will continue. I believe that by opening the borders of the Jewish community, and by breaking down the barriers that have been erected to prevent interfaith families from entering, we can actually help maintain Jewish family life for a wide variety of family constellations in the process.

Jewish life has endured for four thousand years or more. It has evolved and changed and faced difficult times. The Jewish community is concerned about its continuity and survival. Make no mistake about it: I am just as concerned. I support Jewish communal institutions and want to make sure that they welcome our children, intermarried or not, because I believe that intermarriage is not the end of Jewish continuity. As a matter of fact, I think that intermarriage has the potential to add people and their talents to the community. So I see intermarried families and their children as a potential gain to the Jewish community, rather than a loss.

Placed right in the center of the Torah, in a section that has come to be called the Holiness Code because it sets the standard for Jewish behavior and is therefore among the first texts taught to young Jewish children as they embark on their Jewish education, comes the text that has framed Jewish attitudes for centuries: “The stranger that lives with you shall be to you like the native, and you shall love him [or her] as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:34). There seems no question in the mind of Torah Judaism about how we are to act. And just to make sure that we understand the importance of this core value, the verse ends with “I am the Lord your God.” It therefore becomes a signature text for the Jewish community. By adding this divine seal at its end, the Torah text communicates the message quite strongly, making sure the reader makes no mistake about the origin of this command. Thus, the notion of inclusion as advocated in this book has divine origins and is completely consistent with the

attitude toward what the Torah calls the stranger (non-Jew) that has informed the Jewish psyche for four millennia.

Rabbis as far back as the year 500 C.E. understood the dilemma we are facing. When it was not possible to finesse a particular biblical narrative in order to accomplish their task, the Rabbis emphasized the Jewish character of the Jewish partner in the relationship. Thus, they reminded us that Queen Esther observed Judaism (and the dietary laws) in the castle while she hid her Jewish identity during her marriage to Ahashuerus, the non-Jewish king of ancient Persia. Even so, the Rabbis accepted her marriage, particularly because it was this particular interfaith marriage that eventually saved the Jews of Persia from annihilation.

While the legal system the Rabbis developed remains rather complex, they considered Jewish law from basically two perspectives. The first perspective was called *behatchila* (*a priori*, before the fact), and the second was called *bedeavad* (*a posteriori*, after the fact). And they acted accordingly. They considered events and behaviors very differently before their occurrence as opposed to after they had already taken place. As a result, I would argue that once an intermarriage has taken place, the Jewish community has a responsibility to be welcoming and inclusive to you, the intermarried or otherwise bonded. Rabbi Rachel Cowan, author of *Mixed Blessings: Overcoming the Stumbling Blocks in an Interfaith Marriage*, wrote in an article in *Moment* magazine, “A marriage that looks like a step away from the community is often a confrontation with the importance of Jewish identity. The Jewish partner, gentile spouse in hand, may be forced to ask questions about Judaism [and personal Jewish identity] that two Jews never ask [of themselves].”<sup>2</sup> Our goal is to help both spouses, and their families, grapple with these questions.

## WHAT DO WE SUGGEST?

This guide presents a frank and honest discussion about interfaith marriages, their challenges, and their opportunities. While supportive of the decision you have made and supportive of you, it does not

disguise the truth, even when it may be painful or disheartening to hear. Joining two independent lives to form the beginning of a family is not easy and may be fraught with unforeseen difficulties. For the few lucky couples, an intermarriage will be no more challenging than an in-faith marriage itself. I like to say that intermarriages are like in-faith marriages, only more so. For most people, the road ahead will not be easy. It's important to say it aloud and read it in print so that there will be no misunderstanding. Each partner's values and sense of identity will be challenged. Family ties will be strained. Difficult decisions will have to be made, such as those regarding children. And you may question the choices you have made.

Intellectually, intermarriage demands work. You can't gloss over certain ideas and traditions on the assumption that your mate "knows what you mean." You will be learning about your partner's religion, and the need to explain yours may send you back to the books. Fortunately, there are more and more friendly resources that you may not know about.

This book walks with you through your relationship, starting with navigating your relationship before marriage. While this book is relevant to anyone involved in an interfaith relationship at any stage, most readers will probably pick it up early in a relationship. So we'll start right in at your first date and help you prepare for it, and even help you prepare to meet your future in-laws. Perhaps most importantly, we'll help you evaluate and reflect on the various aspects of your relationship, including the inevitable questions about the ceremony (who's officiating and who's invited), religious choices for your children (perhaps even before you are even thinking about children), and the options for conversion (should this be a choice that you consider).

While the language and tone of this book may seem easygoing, we emphasize that the subject is far from frivolous. In chapters that follow, we'll look at relationships with parents, grandparents, and siblings (and how they are affected—and even changed—by your interfaith relationship), decisions about children, which



holidays to celebrate and where to celebrate them, and life-cycle events that you will encounter in the course of family life. We'll try to help you create time and space for your own spiritual life and also take a hard look at the road ahead, honestly exploring the challenges that you will undoubtedly continue to face. Finally, we'll take into consideration those who may marry later in life and those whose family configurations may not reflect the main thrust of this volume, particularly gay and lesbian interfaith families, multiethnic/multiracial families, and couples who live together in committed relationships—and even have children—but do not marry.

While a book has to conclude at some point, the trials you face as an interfaith family will not. They may lessen over time, but you will continue to face many challenges over the course of your life together. Each new challenge may call up different aspects of Jewish religion and culture, as well as different personal needs. Thus, we include some helpful resources to provide you with further guidance and inspiration as you continue your journey.

