

# Chapter 1. Finding My Way

A fellow parent in an interfaith marriage once said something that haunted me through most of my research on this book. At a time when I felt totally awash in conflicting notions about how to help my daughters get the most of their dual heritages, she sighed and said

You know, if we didn't have so many preconceptions about what we're supposed to be and do, the matter wouldn't be so difficult. She was right, but it took, months of confusion and self-doubt to understand the meaning of her words.

The subject of Jewish/Christian families has undergone a transformation. By the very fact that there are approximately 1.25 million adults who are part of (or, until divorce, who are part of) interfaith marriages, and probably at least that many interfaith children today, it's clear that times have changed dramatically. The widely accepted statistics, which are, in fact, "guesstimates", based on a number of nationwide demographic studies conducted by Jewish organizations, indicate that in 1960 fewer than 6 percent of Jews getting married chose a non-Jewish partner. By 1985, however, the percentage rose to over 30 percent in most American cities and to 60 percent or more in others. And by 1990, the year of the most recent and most comprehensive Jewish population survey, the national percentage of Jews marrying non-Jews had climbed to 52 percent (with another 5 Percent marrying converts to Judaism). When the results of the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey are released sometime in 2001, they are expected to show that the rate of intermarriage has climbed above the 52 percent mark.

According to Dr. Egon Mayer, professor of sociology at Brooklyn College, who has conducted four major studies on interfaith marriage (and is presently in the midst of a fifth) for the American Jewish Committee, there are a handful of reasons for the dramatic upsurge "Firstly, the sheer movement of Jews away from densely Jewish areas to places where they've encountered larger numbers of non-Jews has led to more intermarriage. This is a demographic factor. Secondly, the non-Jewish world became more accepting of Jews, so that Jews moved into residential, educational, and professional environments—non-Jews were more hospitable. This is a factor of social climate. Thirdly, the increase in divorce has been a very important factor. It's hard to put a number on it, but it's apparent that second marriages are more likely to be intermarriages than first ones. It's been suggested by sociologists, in fact, that a previous divorce is one of the strongest predictors of intermarriage".

The skyrocketing increase has led researchers like Dr Mayer, who is also professor of sociology at the City University of New York's Graduate Center and director of research for

the Jewish Outreach Institute, to conclude, as well, that the number of interfaith children will have a major impact on American society in the not-too-distant future. “If current statistical population trends continue, it is not inconceivable that by the year 2050, the descendants of Jewish Gentile intermarriages will constitute a major group of American Jews”, said Mayer. Even more immediately for Jewish and Christian families, it means that increasing numbers of grandparents, in-laws, stepchildren, cousins, and friends are intimately tied to those, like my husband and me, who are dealing with intermarriage on a day-to-day basis.

Fortunately, in the last decade the insights into the dilemmas, triumphs, and everyday revelations that are part of Jewish/Christian lives have begun to emerge and solidify alongside the carefully gathered numbers. Between 1990 and 2000, no fewer than six thoughtful books, a half-dozen independent academic research projects, and a national grassroots organization have added breadth and depth to the body of literature and thought about interfaith families, often displacing previously accepted assumptions and ignorance.

My daughter Rachel was the first to introduce me to the legacy of outmoded thinking and ignorance that complicated my own attempts to deal with this subject, One Saturday morning when she was five years old, our family was sitting around the kitchen table for breakfast and my mind was miles away, thinking about this book. Offhandedly I asked Rachel, “What religion is Daddy?”

“Resligen?” she asked. It was obviously a word that hadn’t been used in our house too much

“Religion, Rachel,” Jordan said, matter-of-factly.

“I don’t know,” she answered, whereupon Jordan said, “Daddy is Jewish.”

I reminded her that Mommy’s Christian.

“Chrisligen?” Rachel asked, having caught on to the new game. But then she pointed to herself with both hands, and her face clouded over. Looking back and forth between us, she asked slowly, “So what am I, Rachel?”

I heard Jordan say, “Both,” and I held my breath. “Both” was supposed to be the terrible word, the choice that parents make when they are avoiding responsibility and settling for a superficial religious education that makes for an ignorant, confused, and totally neurotic child. Children need clarity and concreteness, don’t they? They need to belong to one group and have one religious identity, don’t they? Actually, I didn’t have a clue what children needed in order to be well adjusted and comfortably sure of themselves. Rachel seemed

happy enough with Jordan's answer as she went on eating her eggs but I decided it was time to reach out to the experts and see what they had to say to help parents be more confident and spontaneous in these typical situations at home. I assumed the supposed experts would have wise words to offer on this matter and that my own understanding would develop very logically and calmly after hearing or reading their comments. The process didn't quite work out that way

As I began my quest in the late 1970s, the literature in the library became my first source of information about interfaith families, and reviewing those early depressing surveys often felt like sifting through a pile of gray stones to get to an occasional fleck of gold. Time and again, the writings conflicted dramatically with my own sense of the gifts I was giving my children

Because Jordan and I were raising Rachel and Georgia in an environment that was animated by friends, relatives, and celebrations from two different cultures and religions, we felt we were giving them such an abundant, joyous introduction to life's possibilities. We were proud that we offered them a stable home with parents who loved each other and value each other's differences, and though we'd never sat down and carefully worked out our plans for raising them religiously, we assumed we'd handle the matter as it developed. At the moment, we welcomed any and all Jewish and Christian experiences that seemed to come our way. We expected our daughters to grow up to become resilient, happy, well-adjusted, and much richer and wiser for having been raised with our Jewish/Christian duality.

The early observations on interfaith marriages and children, written in the period between the late 1950s and the early 1970s when intermarriage started its sudden and steady increase, were relentlessly gloomy. I wondered where the sociologists and clergy found such an array of troubled families. When I looked around at the interfaith families I knew, I saw couples getting along much like any other, and the children seemed as lively as their religiously homogeneous peers. But the thirty-year-old books and articles never seemed to come across anyone who was reasonably well-adjusted. They specialized in the interfaith marriages that were marked by conflict and irreconcilable differences, and though they didn't write as much about the children (because the population was still relatively small at that time), they were unanimous in their insistence that mixed marriages are not well adapted to rearing children.

What happened to them, supposedly, were a rash of identity problems and other disturbances, such as alienation, anxiety, marginality, and low self-esteem. One of the more intelligent surveys *One Marriage, Two Faiths*, completed by James H. S. Bossard and Eleanor Stoker Boll in 1957, combined most of the common observations into the most elaborate

and dispiriting portrait of all

In their conclusion, Bossard and Boll wrote that it has been pointed out that people who make interfaith marriages apparent realize that children will cause problems or will have problems. The lower birth rate and higher rate of childlessness among such couples suggest this. A part of the difficulty is caused by a primary function of the family-to pass down the cultural the heritage. When the parents are of different religions, the family is a cultural mixture and the child is torn, in choosing his religion and philosophy of life, between two sides of the family. This results not only in ‘taking sides’ within the family, but in inner conflict for the child. The divisiveness extends to brothers and sisters as well as to parents and tends to separate them even when they grow up, marry, and have their own children who are reared in various faiths.

As my research progressed, I found more up-to-date material written in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but it communicated the same feeling of danger and alarm, as if interfaith families were inevitably connected to something sad or destructive and little could be said to recommend them. Because rabbis and the representatives of most Jewish organizations were deeply concerned that interfaith marriages were dangerously eroding the Jewish community, their writings usually had an anxious and sad tone that also bore no relationship to my own positive delight and curiosity about being part of an interfaith house-hold. In a bookstore I picked up *The Real Anti-Semitism in America* by Nathan Perlmutter and Ruth Ann Perlmutter. Thumbing through its pages, I discovered the extreme prediction made by a Jewish leader from Boston named Philip Perlmutter that “if trends continue, America will become one big dull glob of people who won’t even know they had a grandmother.” And in the final conclusion of the significant American Jewish Committee study called *Intermarriage and the Jewish Future* (1976), researchers Egon Mayer and Carl Sheingold wrote that “the findings summarized above tend to reinforce the fear that inter marriage represents a threat to Jewish continuity.”

The few Catholic writings didn’t associate interfaith marriage with “fear” and “threat,” because, understandably, extinction wasn’t a concern for an American Catholic population of 52 million that didn’t have to recover from a Nazi Holocaust fifty years earlier. The ecumenism from Pope John XXXII’s 1965 Vatican II also softened the church’s official position on Catholic/Jewish marriages and the raising of the children. Though rare, there were some compassionate treatments of the needs of the interfaith family that mentioned divorce and the children’s emotional tensions only in passing, and never as certainties. A 1973 book called *When a Christian and a Jew Marry*, written by a priest named Ronald Luka, was one of those welcomed works.

The Protestant literature was no help at all. When I began work on this book. I couldn’t

find a contemporary word on the subject. The best that well-intentioned advisers could offer me was a classic written in 1954 by the late Episcopal Bishop James A. Pike. Called *If You Many Outside Your Faith*, it was preoccupied with the crises of Protestants marrying Catholics—a hot topic years ago. In his final summary, Bishop Pike included Jewish/Christian marriages, however, and arrived at an all too familiar conclusion: “Sufficient has been said to suggest the idea that a mixed marriage is not a good thing.”

Given the shabby resources of the 1970s and 1980s, I was astonished to revisit the literature in 2000 and find an explosion of supportive, balanced books that had come out since I wrote the first edition of my book in 1987. Couples themselves had finally begun to share their stories and their insights gained from actually being part of a dual-faith family. I felt tremendously gratified that I had been one of the pioneers at the beginning of this great outpouring of thought and creative energy devoted to raising interfaith children.

With the publication of *The Interfaith Handbook* by Judy Petsonk and Jim Remsen in 1988, the long-held taboo against suggesting that interfaith marriage might actually work began to be dispelled. Petsonk and Remsen, both journalists with personal experiences in interfaith relationships, describe their impetus to write “inter-marriage takes place in a curious force field, with alarm on the Jewish end and near-silence from Christianity.... We decided to step into this force field because we saw the need for an independent, nondenominational handbook to help couples make their way through the emotional and practical issues that arise.”

With regard to child rearing, they assert that “Whether you raise your child in one religion, two religions or no religion has little or no impact on her mental health”. But a crucial factor must be present: Both parents must agree with and stand behind the religious pattern that you have chosen for your home. “What a far cry from the doomsayers and critics who maintained with supreme self-assurance that raising children in two faiths was a certain path to disaster.”

Similarly, Mary and Ned Rosenbaum confounded what had been the conventional wisdom that kids in interfaith families are inevitably confused when they wrote *Celebrating Our Differences: Living Two Faiths in One Marriage* in 1994. The Rosenbaums—she is Catholic and he is Jewish—have been happily intermarried thirty-six years, have raised three confident and successful children, and have counseled hundreds of couples considering interfaith marriage. Their heartfelt conviction that “keeping two faiths strong while not weakening the marriage bond is hard work...but we think the results are worth it” offers interfaith couples both a challenge and a model for meeting it.

One of the clearest harbingers of the change which took place in attitudes and ideas about