

Family Feud Faith: Raising Children in an Interfaith Marriage by Leah Katz

Driving me home from school one April day in the tenth grade, Mom tried to ease into discussing the essay she had found on my dresser. My heart began to race; I knew exactly what she was talking about. The essay was only a little paragraph I had written during an impromptu writing session at my Jewish religious school on “The Religious Values My Parents Have Taught Me.” “Now that’s a fun topic,” I had mumbled under my breath before starting to write the essay. Mincing no words, I slashed my parents for being, in my eyes, two religious hypocrites. Now tears streamed down Mom’s face as she sobbed, saying how much she and my father love my sister and me. I love them too; I would never intentionally do anything to harm them. I had only written this essay for therapeutic reasons; no one else was supposed to read it. I just had needed to get my frustrations out about my insecure religious identity. My mom was raised in the Catholic faith and my dad in the Jewish faith. Dad insisted before they married that Mom agree any future children be raised Jewish. My mom consented, and that was that. The words “religion” and “children” were never spoken in the same sentence again—at least, until the children were born. Once I arrived, however, their simple plan didn’t hold up. Sometimes I wonder if my parents were really that naïve, for their hasty arrangement was no more stable than the birdhouse I had once made with Popsicle sticks and Elmer’s Glue. My experience demonstrates that a couple raising children in an interfaith marriage must carefully and thoroughly discuss beforehand every detail about the religious education of their children if they want their children to be secure with their identities.

Not surprisingly, when one is dealing with children, open views often become narrower. It didn’t take any time to see the monumental flaws in my parents’ agreement. After I was born, my mom’s promise conveniently slipped her mind, and she started hinting that she would like me to be christened (a service welcoming a baby into the church). My dad stood his ground, insisting I have a Shul (a service giving a baby girl her Hebrew name). Couples often “struggle with this issue” because the place where the child’s first religious ceremony is held often determines their “future place of worship” (“Department”). I guess this principle is true: I had a Shul, and I currently worship at the synagogue where my first religious event took place. Nevertheless, from the very beginning, it was apparent that Mom was already regretting her decision.

Neither of my parents was raised in the most religiously tolerant environment. Mom was told that Jews were “Christ Killers,” and Dad was told that the Catholics were “Pope and Saint Worshipers.” With these old stereotypes ingrained in their minds, my parents didn’t attempt to learn the truth about each other’s religion. A couple’s “respectful attitude toward each other’s religious background not only helps the marriage but will also have a positive impact on [their children]” (“Department”). Trying to explain the differences about their parents’ religions to a child can prove to be difficult, especially if they are uninformed. As a result, many well-meaning parents either ignore or circumvent the issue, leaving the child with unanswered questions or unsatisfactory answers. I remember trying to ask my dad why we believe in one G-d, “Adonai,” but Mom prayed to G-d “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” My dad had no idea and quickly changed the subject to, “So...what did you learn in school today?”

Many experts maintain that children from interfaith marriages should be raised in one place of worship, for “such a decision serves to minimize children’s confusion about religion and facilitates religious and spiritual development” (“Department” 2). As may sometimes happen, my parents started to go in different spiritual directions; my mom had stopped attending her Catholic church, opting for a non-denominational Christian path, and my dad’s Jewish faith had likewise started to wane. In fact, he became more open to Christianity. For one year, when I was in fourth or fifth grade, I was attending a Jewish religious school during the school year and a Christian Sunday School during the summer. I don’t remember much about Sunday school, except for one unsettling lesson. The teacher told us, “You must spread the word of Jesus; because of him you aren’t going to hell.” Well, talk about confusing an elementary school kid! I had heard the word “Jesus” only when adults uttered a frustrated, “Oh Jesus!” Also, the Jewish faith doesn’t include the concept of hell; all I knew then was that hell was a bad word. I felt terrible about not doing what the teacher asked. I had always been taught to obey the teacher, but how could I, when I didn’t even know what she was talking about?

Around the time I entered middle school, things really started getting strange. My parents became involved with a group that soon began to control every aspect of their lives—including who their friends were, their political views, and even their religious beliefs. It all happened so gradually, and I still don’t fully understand it; however, after a year or two of being mixed up in this organization, my dad started attending the non-denominational church with my mom. Because of my parents’ influence, my sister was already claiming to be a Christian, even though she didn’t have the slightest understanding of Christian beliefs. With me, on the other hand, Dad soon recognized that I would have nothing to do with Christianity.

One night he took me to a play; I didn’t realize what it was about until the curtain opened and out walked “Jesus.” The entire crucifixion was re-enacted. I can still vividly picture the scene when Jesus is hanging from the cross, asking for help from G-d, his father. A million terrifying questions were racing through my mind. Before that night, I had had no exposure to the New Testament. How could G-d have a son? Why would G-d purposely let anyone die? I was petrified and had nightmares for weeks after that. I tried to put the experience out of my mind, and I must have done a good job. Only a year or two ago did something spark my memory, and I realized that the play must have been some sort of “Jews for Jesus” traveling act. Jews for Jesus is a relatively new organization whose members claim to be Evangelistic Jews believing “that God the Father is the author of eternal salvation, having loved the world and given His Son for its redemption” (“About” 1).

Needless to say, Dad’s most radical attempt to blend Jewish and Christian ideology was a flop. My horrified reaction was pretty normal; as Reverend Walter H. Cuenin explains: “A child cannot be a Jew and a Catholic at the same time.... Whatever tradition children are raised in, hopefully they would be exposed to the other faith and share to some extent in the rituals of that tradition. But as they do that, they need to know their own identity” (2). Sure, hanging stockings over the fireplace and hunting for Easter eggs would have been acceptable, but my dad had crossed the line. Did he really think I was going to buy this avant-garde mission statement after being raised in the traditional Jewish faith?

In addition to fighting this tremendous personal spiritual battle, I also worried about disappointing my family. As James Bossard and Eleanor Boll discovered in their research, “In the cases where children loved both the mother and the father equally, and yet had to deal with a religious difference between them and their families, the burden was heavy and bitter” (138). Growing up Jewish,

I constantly felt I was disappointing my mom and then later my dad. To this day, my family still doesn't celebrate religious events together. Mom and Dad continue to attend a non-denominational church, my sister doesn't go to any kind of services, and I still attend the synagogue my dad intended us to be raised in. I understand my parents must lead their own lives, but this need shouldn't have diverted them from their original plan for our religious upbringing. Even now, I feel that, having chosen to remain Jewish, I don't have my family's blessing. Only since going off to college have I been able to feel at peace with my identity. As Albert I. Gordon explains in his book about intermarriage, "Persons of mixed religions...are faced not only with the ordinary problems of human adjustment, but with the additional problems that have to do with the rearing of healthy, secure children who have the need to identify with some way of life they can call their own" (315-316).

I'm not trying to discourage people of different faiths from marrying and having children, for I've read many encouraging stories about couples whose interfaith marriages were successful because of their thorough communication and who were able to come to a genuine and sincere agreement about their children's faith. Perhaps my mom and dad were worried that too much probing into this uncomfortable issue might have further complicated their decision to marry. They had taken a tremendous risk in making that decision, facing disapproval from family, friends, and their respective religious leaders. I greatly admire my mom and dad, for amongst a sea of friends whose parents are separated, I feel blessed to still have my "complete" family unit. Nevertheless, complete isn't always followed by functioning. Although I occasionally tell my parents what I'm doing with Hillel (the Jewish student organization on campus), they show little interest. However, I have become my Jewish grandparents' sole pride and joy, while they treat my sister as a "second-class grandchild." My Catholic grandmother used to take my sister to mass, enraging the other side of my family. Sadly, I must admit that I agree with Cuenin's statement that "...when no possible agreement can be reached as to the children's religion, it may even be best if the marriage is postponed or even rethought" (2). My parents could have taken a number of steps to achieve such an agreement, such as going for pre-marital counseling, but they didn't, and my somewhat fractured family is the outcome. Perhaps a more open discussion between my parents could have prevented the awkward moments and feelings of estrangement that continue to affect me and my family today.

Works Cited

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