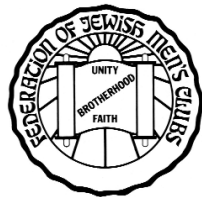


Journeys

STORIES OF INTERFAITH FAMILIES



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A Project of the
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Conversion is a religious experience and a religious process. Danny and I are very much on the same page with our ethics, our values and our goals in life. We have similar notions about God and faith. However, this does not translate into a conversion process for him. He embraces Jewish traditions and customs such as lighting candles on Shabbat and celebrating Passover. He is not yet interested in learning Hebrew or exploring the Torah in a deeper sense. As our children grow, this could change, but I would want any interest to come from him, not from my suggestions. Conversion is a deeply personal issue and one that I would never force upon him.

For me, it is more important that we share the same values than to be able to check off in a statistical box that we are both “Jewish.” I often wonder what the definition of a Jew is; one with a certain bloodline, a person who understands Jewish customs, one who studies Torah?

We are both happy to raise our children with a sense of Jewish history, Jewish ethics and Jewish traditions. Our children will be taught to read Hebrew and the Torah. They will learn to understand the Holocaust and the importance of Israel. For Danny, however, he is content to give his support from the sidelines. I am thrilled that I have begun to raise our children as Jews and that I can continue to explore my faith with his support.

I never considered that I would have an interfaith marriage. I never imagined that I would marry someone who wasn't Jewish. I never planned on falling in love forever at seventeen. I can't say that I would want it any other way. I feel like I have the best of everything — a Jewish family, children who know that they are Jewish, and a strong and wonderful marriage to the man that I have been in love with for fourteen years.

Journeys

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Introduction

The Conservative Movement is maturing and as a result is demonstrating an increased flexibility and understanding of its members' needs as it strives to address the challenges posed by a changing population. This pamphlet is one of many that have come to the attention of the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs Keruv committee in the past few years. It reflects the attempt of our congregations to acknowledge a growing population within our midst and to create a legitimate place for them in our communities.

The autobiographical essays in this pamphlet reflect the life experiences of some of our members and some of our children. It demonstrates the tensions they experienced as well as their quests for resolution and fulfillment.

It is our hope that a great many of our congregations will download this pamphlet from our website and distribute it as widely as possible. The Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs would like to thank Howard Schreiber, FJMC Keruv Consultant, for recognizing the importance of publishing and distributing this pamphlet.

*Rabbi Charles Simon
July 2007*

Andrea and Danny

When I was in high school and dating a very tall, blond-haired, blue-eyed and not Jewish boy, my father sat me down and we had a long talk. He was concerned that I would marry a non-Jew. He talked about how challenging marriage can be and that it is easiest to come from the same background. He went on and on and on as Dads are prone to do. He spoke about children and identity. Being all of seventeen and very wise, I retorted, “Look Dad, I’m seventeen! What are the chances that I am going to stay with this guy for all of college and marry him? This is my first boyfriend, give me a break.” My Dad considered this for a while and agreed. The chances were slim that we would stay together. I was about to start at Dartmouth and he would be studying architecture in Illinois in a five-year program.

Six years later, that same boyfriend was sitting across from my father at lunch asking for his blessing to have my hand in marriage. Danny and I had decided already to raise our children as Jews. My father gave his blessing and impressed upon Danny that although he was pleased that our children would be Jewish, the most important thing for them is that they have a strong sense of history and identity.

Danny and I have never truly considered that he would convert to Judaism. To convert would mean to redefine himself in a way that he is not yet comfortable doing. In many ways, converting would pull him away from his own family. Danny was brought up Christian, but with not a very strong sense of religion. However, certain rituals are still important to him such as trimming the Christmas tree at his mother’s house and exchanging gifts. To convert would mean to him a rejection of his family’s traditions. Especially since his father passed away four years ago, his mother would feel a sense of loss if Danny publicly rejected the traditions of his childhood.

lit menorah candles, hunted for afikomen, read the Sabbath blessing over bread and wine, and waved from the bima as they sat beside their uncle at his installation as synagogue president. Our Jewish nieces came every Hanukah bearing gaily wrapped presents, one always carefully tied with Christmas ribbon in a sign of respect for a Catholic aunt with her own tradition. Small things, you say? Perhaps. But we live in a world where religious differences threaten our very survival. How can we begin to heal a broken world if we cannot bridge differences in our own homes?

There is no question that intermarriage takes a greater bite out of Jewish identity than the Jewish community is comfortable with, but each and every interfaith marriage represents an opportunity. Better to seize it than ignore it.

From Inter-Faith to Choice of Faith: One Family, Three Perspectives

First Perspective: Becoming a Jew Steve

My odyssey toward Judaism began when my wife, Joan, and I decided to marry and begin a family. I came into our relationship with a strong belief in God and an upbringing that stressed regular attendance at worship services. Throughout my childhood, I found that our family participation, including extended family, provided a wonderful bonding and learning opportunity for all generations. When I married, I wanted the new family we were creating to have this bond, along with the strong moral and ethical example that I believe organized religion can help provide.

Joan and I chose to raise our children in Judaism to take advantage of her family's closer proximity than mine, and thus gain the intergenerational bond I mention above.

We had been married nearly 17 years when I converted in August of 2001. Our children were 14 and 10 years old. From the beginning, our home was Jewish, but I continued to attend church services on Sundays. For the last ten years before my conversion, however, we had all been living exclusively as an increasingly observant Jewish family . . . in part to avoid confusing the children and in part because I found it difficult to devote time both to our Jewish community activities and to church.

Joan's participation in the synagogue community had grown, becoming significantly greater in the last several years. Added to that was our preparation for our daughter's Bat Mitzvah — a process that had started about two years before and culmi-

nated in May of the prior year. With all of this, I felt some estrangement from the strong Jewish identity and participation my family had developed.

In the fall of 2000, Joan asked me to consider conversion. Initially, I believed I was incapable of what I then perceived as giving up my past. But over the winter I spoke with many people, both Jewish and Christian, and came to a better understanding of my heartfelt beliefs and the overriding importance of my family's "wholeness." During my quest, I discovered that much of my being already meshed with Judaism. I have a strong belief in God and in the daily and regular observance of ritual to help tune us into God's expectations of us. For me, though raised as a Christian, there never was a "trinity." I truly never understood the concept of the holy ghost, and my relationship with God was not through Jesus. I value a more direct relationship with God, which Judaism offers.

The importance of community in Judaism — how everyone is expected to come to know, care about, and help with what others need — also is ingrained in me. I value the emphasis on learning and education, on the quest for greater understanding of what life should be. These things are essential to my everyday thoughts. What's more, the family time surrounding Shabbat and other holidays is truly beneficial to all of us.

By February, I'd moved from thinking that conversion was an impossibility to knowing that it was inevitable for me. I was ready to tell the children, Joan's family and — most daunting — my family. At the dinner table one evening, I told the children my intentions. From my daughter came a squeal of disbelief, but the obvious pleasure in her expression was priceless. She, who always seemed to take a logical and distant view of religion, was nonetheless touched by what she felt was a significant shift on my part to strengthen us as a family. My son's reaction was calm and measured. And it was beautiful, as it

respected each other's life choices. All we had to do was work out the house rules. If we decided that a Christmas tree could co-exist with a kosher kitchen, who could say otherwise?

It was easy for us then, although it was not always easy for those around us. The Jewish side of the family had more trouble with the marriage, and perhaps they had more at stake. They had done everything right: Sunday school, kosher home, synagogue memberships, summers in Israel, and clear, consistent warnings on the dangers of intermarriage. But you can tick off every box on the checklist of Jewish identity, and children will still follow their hearts. What then? We offer a few lessons learned.

Families — and communities — grappling with intermarriage might remember that soft landings are better than hard ones. If you err on the side of inclusiveness, you stand a greater chance of keeping intermarried families within shouting distance. In a world where all Jews are now Jews by choice, Jewish communities are no longer bound by geography, and synagogue budgets are seriously strained, then the message is critical. But message is of little use if the audience has drifted too far away to hear it.

Don't make the mistake of assuming that an intermarried Jew is to be written off and that the non-Jewish spouse doesn't have contributions to make. Several Conservative synagogues gave Dennis the cold shoulder early in our marriage; he entered B'nai Israel with great trepidation, afraid that if he found no succor there, he was out of options. The warmth and welcome he received washed over Karen as well, it was both a gift and a redemption, and it made many things possible.

Remember, too, that the difficulties inherent in interfaith marriages can be made harder or simpler by the reactions of families and communities. Our Catholic nieces and nephews have

Lessons Learned

If the story of our courtship and marriage were the plot of a novel, most readers would have lost patience long before the denouement, and we wouldn't have blamed them. We nearly bailed ourselves.

In 1974, when Dennis met Karen, she was a 17 year-old University freshman from the Northeast and he a 19 year-old sophomore hailing from roughly the same geography. We met, dated, married, and have, thus far, lived happily ever after. Meeting and marrying out of the University is an exceedingly ordinary story — thousands can tell it — made exceptional only by the length of time it took us to get from point A to point B. We finally married in 1991; during that time, four presidents sat in the White House, the Berlin Wall collapsed, and Communism toppled. Children born the year we met were choosing colleges the year we married. By anyone's standards, 17 years is a long time to date.

We had, of course, an interfaith relationship, but it was the interfaith part — not the relationship part — that held us up. From the day we met, we were almost perfectly aligned; we respected and supported one another, had complementary strengths and compatible interests. We shared a work ethic, read the same non-fiction and laughed at the same jokes. But a divide existed between Dennis, an observant Jew, and Karen, a Catholic, as wide as the local highway that separated our home addresses. What is the net gain if you have to forfeit identity for friendship and love? It was a great divide indeed, and one we did not have the tools to bridge.

After much angst, a really smart woman broke the logjam by pointing out that we had already done all the hard stuff. Love and support were non-negotiables, she observed, and we already nailed those. In two decades of dating, we had always

offered a ringing endorsement for my decision as something right for our family (and for the father/son bond that that I knew would be all the stronger as we approached his Bar Mitzvah with all of us as Jews). His words were, "I am proud of you Dad," with a huge smile and a hug.

From my wife I felt only support for me all along, for whatever my decision might be, and obvious joy at the outcome. Her family, always supportive of our interfaith relationship, was more thrilled than I imagined at the news and most even came into town for the conversion graduation and celebration. My parents were quietly supportive of what they knew to be in the best interest of my nuclear family. Yet I do ache over their pain at what they perceive to be losing me to another religion when they put so much love and faith into raising me in the United Church of Christ family.

In my heart I know that conversion is the right decision. In my mind, family's and friends' reactions have made the correctness of the decision only clearer. Since that moment, I have looked forward to lifelong, continued learning of the ways and rituals of Judaism; undeterred family involvement in the B'nai Israel congregational community; and, someday, full participation in events at the synagogues that my children and their families will attend.

Second Perspective: The Supporting Role Joan

"This evening, I promise to continue loving you, growing with you, learning and sharing with you. I promise to be faithful to you, to be there when you turn to me, and to turn to you when I need your help. I will share your successes and disappointments and of course the many

dreams that drive you toward accomplishment. And I will share mine with you.

“Steve, we both have many strengths. It is up to us to band our strengths together, that we might do good for ourselves and for others. Each of us must offer strength when the other is weak. We must not engage each other in a battle of strengths, but respect each other for what we have to give, for what we pursue individually, and for what we share.”

These were among the vows I made to my husband when we married in November, 1983. When Steve chose to become a Jew — after nearly 17 years of marriage, establishing a Jewish home and education for our children and making a community for ourselves within the B’nai Israel Congregational family — those vows continued to serve us as they had throughout.

During the time when Steve was deciding whether to convert, he explored his feelings and studied Hebrew with our good friend Jill, may she rest in peace. Because of the knowledge base she gave him, when Steve now attends synagogue services he follows the prayers in Hebrew, in addition to reading the English translations as he always has done. At first I, sitting by him, ensured that he could find where we were on the page, pointing out interesting aspects of the prayers and answering his questions. This is just one example of how I offer strength and share in his dreams and accomplishments, as I promised to do when we began our journey together.

Another recent example: I had always led our Seder, but in the year he was studying for conversion I invited Steve to lead it with me. He used his new Hebrew reading skills, announced to my extended family that he was converting, and fully enjoyed his increased role in our Jewish family life.

gram sponsored by the Regional Rabbinical Assembly (Conservative Movement). Even though I am Jewish, I found the conversion classes to be very educational. In addition, a warm feeling permeated the atmosphere of the classes. At the end of the instruction period, I went with my future daughter-in-law to the Mikveh and to the conversion “graduation” ceremony. In the course of this process, I asked my future daughter-in-law how she reached her decision to convert. She responded, “I love your son. I see how you live and how important Judaism is to you. Also, there were Jews in my family many years ago, so I was familiar with Judaism. I wanted to be a part of this way of life.”

My son and his fiancé were married here at B’nai Israel. They are affiliated with a synagogue in the town in which they live. Their children go to Hebrew school and are involved in Jewish activities.

When our son first approached us about his relationship, my husband and I tried our best to be sensitive to his feelings and needs, as well as those of the young woman. We think it paid off in the end.

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As my children were growing up, I never imagined that my husband and I would have to face the dilemma of intermarriage. When my son was doing his residency at City Hospital, he met a young woman who was a nurse there. They started dating. My husband and I were concerned about what the outcome would be of this relationship. Our son was very well aware of our feelings about marrying outside of our faith. As we saw the relationship becoming more serious, my husband spoke to our son about our feelings. My son replied, “Dad, please trust me.”

Although we strongly disapproved of our son’s interdating, we weren’t going to lose our son because of our differences. I remembered something that our Rabbi said to me: “When biology enters, theology leaves.”

I tried to keep in perspective my son’s attachment to this woman in light of our feelings. The young lady was very sweet and caring, and one that anyone could like. The only roadblock in our minds was the fact that she wasn’t Jewish. We saw the relationship becoming more and more serious, so we questioned our son again as to the direction in which this relationship was headed. His reply to us was the same, “I asked you to trust me. She is going to convert to Judaism.”

We asked our son how the young woman’s decision came about. He said that when things started to get serious, he told her in no uncertain terms that the relationship would go no further unless she was willing to convert. Obviously she agreed and arrangements were made for her to go through the conversion process.

I accompanied my future daughter-in-law to many of her conversion classes. The classes were part of the conversion pro-

Steve and I share a love of learning, and I found that I could most effectively support his decision by learning with him. As we have many times, we will continue to attend family education programs at B’nai Israel. What’s more, I encouraged Steve to participate in the observances and programs that were usually left to me alone: attending Shabbat morning services and the “Lunch and Learn” sessions that follow, for example. With Steve’s commitment to living as a Jew, he takes a heightened pleasure in these opportunities to participate and learn. And I, in turn, of course take greater pleasure in them because they are shared.

We already had the tradition of our family Shabbat dinner, holiday and festival observances, and participation in our children’s religious experiences, from religious school events to chorale performances. As I, together with our children Sally and James, have continued in every one of these moments to exhibit to Steve our respect, admiration and pride in his decision to become a Jew, we have supported him.

Steve certainly received the message of support when he made his decision. “I’m proud of you,” were the beautiful words that James spoke when Steve told the children of his plans to convert. Sally was giddy with pleasure and immediately told all her friends the news. After I had hugged, listened and not pressured Steve while he struggled with what he should do, I celebrated with him when he knew this was the right choice — and his choice.

But most important, we tell him and show him every day, both directly and indirectly. The children have shown interest in what Steve has learned and continued pleasure at the new level of unity he is was able to bring to our family. Borrowing from my son, I frequently tell Steve how proud I am of the decision he made and the ever-more-enriched Jewish life he is creating for himself and for all of us. And we talk about things

Jewish — what’s happening in Israel or in our local community — with a greater sense of shared belonging. In essence, I continue — as does Steve — to make the kind of life together that we vowed we would.

Third Perspective: The Next Generation
Sally

(Confirmation Essay)

Everyday, whether I am walking through the halls at school or praying beside the glow of candles at Shabbat dinner, I am reminded of my heritage. Judaism emerges through every facet of my environment, surfacing from a background in a Jewish home and practicing Jewish traditions all my life. In Conservative Judaism, a person has the opportunity to explore his/her own meaning of being a Jew, and this view can shift and be manipulated infinitely. This is the meaning of “Israel,” or “Wrestling with God,” and Conservative Judaism embraces it.

In my life, being a Jew and finding a meaningful root for my beliefs has always been a struggle. A person cannot expect to participate in none of the Jewish rituals and have no beliefs about God, and still be called a Jew. To me, someone who participates in every ritualistic component of Judaism but feels no compelling faith also includes very little of what Judaism is meant to be. Consequently, Judaism has always been a struggle for me, as I have constantly wavered in my religious feelings and faith. To me, being a Jew means following the principles and morals outlined in a Jewish environment, and struggling with the mental capacity needed for such leaps of faith and discipline as Jewish beliefs entail.

My Jewish heritage has been a part of me since birth, when the nursery I was brought into to begin my life displayed a

Torah as Yosef and Hanna was called for her Aliyah as the daughter of two Jewish parents. The magnitude of this blessing was realized by everyone in attendance, especially Hanna, who cried tears of joy as she spoke from the Bimah, stating that my father “chose to become a part of this community with all of its responsibilities; he chose to be counted and in turn, blessed me with the greatest gift by being on this Bimah today”.

As Hanna’s Bat Mitzvah is only the beginning of her journey into the Jewish community, so too for Joe, for Sandi and me as we now move forward as a fully Jewish household in the B’nai Israel community.

and worked well for us, there was a potential problem facing us as Hanna was becoming a Bat Mitzvah in August.

I was more than happy and willing to “handle” all of the traditional Jewish preparation for this milestone and celebration alone. However, I was deeply concerned about Joe’s role in this process as a non-Jew. In the spring, I simply asked Joe to think about the role he wanted for himself in Hanna’s Bat Mitzvah. Did he want to sit on the sideline supporting her or did he want to be an active participant? We consulted with our Rabbi, who was tremendously helpful. He reviewed all of the possible scenarios of participation in the Bat Mitzvah if Joe did or did not convert, he provided information about an Introduction to Judaism course through the Conservative Movement, and he asked Joe to go home and think more about it. Over the next few months, Joe realized that he had a spiritual soul which was lacking a sanctuary for expression, that he had great respect for Jewish life, philosophy and social activism. It then became evident that he truly wanted to be a full member of the Jewish community and an active participant in Hanna’s Bat Mitzvah. It was with this commitment that he and I both attended the Introduction to Judaism course during the year leading up to the Bat Mitzvah.

We had a weekly “date night” of Jewish education which was utterly joyous for both of us. We connected to each other in a stronger way than either of us could have imagined. While Hanna was very busy preparing for her own Bat Mitzvah and attending so many of her friends’ Simchas, Sandi helped Joe with his Hebrew reading. Joe completed the course one and a half weeks before Hanna’s Bat Mitzvah and was able to sit before the Bet Din and go to the Mikveh five days beforehand. During the Thursday morning Minyan when Hanna had her Aliyah, Joe received his chosen Hebrew name — *Yosef* — amidst tears of joy streaming from both of us. The morning of Hanna’s Bat Mitzvah was the first time Joe was called to the

small mezuzah on the doorway. Since then, the traditions and Jewish creativity of my parents have taught me to think about my Judaism, and consider it daily as a part of family and a part of my being. My family has made transitions in its religious practice just as I have made transitions in my level of faith and questioning. I have always gone to Hebrew school, and even at the age of two I was attending B’nai Israel’s nursery school. Many years ago, my parents decided to kasher our kitchen when it was reconstructed, marking the beginning of a more serious family outlook on our religion. Since then a weekly tradition has developed every Friday night on Shabbat, when the family gathers along with as many friends as would like to visit, and we say the prayers and enjoy the meal. Shabbat is therefore fun and anticipated, including many small, fun details such as telling about our week’s in turn and catching our first pieces of challah with salt being pitched across the table. Every Friday, the dinner table becomes a place of laughter and fun, often being shared with non-Jewish or non-religious friends who can also enjoy the Jewish tradition my family embraces.

The most prevalent religious transition in my family, though it outwardly had little impact on our Jewish lives, appeared when my father converted from Protestantism to Judaism a year after my Bat Mitzvah. Inwardly, our family suddenly became more complete as our own, small Jewish community, and my personal religion evolved into a more serious and deliberated matter. Throughout every question, trial, and frustration in my Jewish life, I have known that Judaism will constantly be a ubiquitous presence in my life. I will always be aware of the significant force my Judaism and heritage had on my upbringing and will continue to have on me as a person and Jew in this society.

The Story

Joe and I first met and started dating during a very busy period in our medical training. I was raised in suburbia in a very traditional, observant Conservative Jewish home and never dated non-Jewish men. Joe was raised on the West coast, a non-observant Catholic with no exposure to Jewish people. When he asked me out, I accepted thinking that he was extraordinarily handsome, he'd be fun to talk to, we'd have an enjoyable dinner or two, but it was never going to extend into a long term relationship. Little did I know that we'd continue to date and end up marrying exactly four years from our first date!

Dating was not always easy. We connected professionally and socially and always shared great times together. However, deep inside, I had great angst about being with someone non-Jewish. I initially did not speak about him with my family and did not introduce him until we had been dating for over a year. Even then I made sure we had limited family exposure due to my personal uneasiness with our religious differences. Throughout this time, I never denied my Judaism and maintained a traditional level of Jewish practice in my own home, to which Joe was always exposed. Joe never seemed disturbed about this; he maintained a "neutral" position and had no particular religious practices of his own except for celebrating Christmas with his family. However, as more time passed, I felt the need to openly discuss our religious differences in order for our dating to progress. We were both very honest with each other. I made it clear that I could not compromise my Jewish ideology, traditions, or practices for matters of the heart! Joe didn't have a problem with me being Jewish but he wasn't sure he was ready or willing to take all of this on for matters of the heart! So we broke up for several months to have time and distance to think.

I was glad our feelings were out in the open but I was also miserable without him.

We started dating again after five months apart. This time, though, we were in a different place. I started to involve him more in "my Judaism" and he slowly started to participate. In essence, we were becoming a couple. During this time, we had greater exposure to each others' families, especially mine. My parents came to adore Joe. In fact, after two years of dating, both of my parents were encouraging me to marry him! These were the same parents who would never permit me to date non-Jewish boys in high school or college but now that I was in my early 30's, it was somehow OK. I asked them why and their response was clear: "You have established yourself in your career, you have lived on your own and have maintained an active Jewish home and life. We know you will always have a Jewish home and Jewish family and Joe is a very special, kind, generous and compassionate man." Once we came to a mutually agreeable "compromise": living in New York instead of moving to the West coast, keeping a Kosher Jewish home instead of decorating Christmas trees, and raising our future children as Jews without celebrating any Christian holidays, we were able to get married two years later! For my part, I did not make conversion to Judaism a condition for our marriage. In fact, I made it clear that I could not and would not ask him to do something that I could not do myself. I also made it clear at that time that should he ever contemplate conversion, I would welcome the opportunity to join him and support any educational process.

Both of us kept our promises . . . we have a Kosher Jewish home, we have been blessed with two daughters who have been raised as Jews and have been educated here at B'nai Israel. Joe has always been an active participant in Jewish observances at home as well as in synagogue and has supported the girls' Jewish education. Our girls have understood that Daddy was not Jewish by birth but that he had effectively been practicing Judaism all of their lives. While this was fine