

Intermarriage, a Personal Story

There are a lot of stories told in my family. My grandmother, my mother's mother, has been telling me stories about my ancestors since I was old enough to sit still for them. Her husband, my grandfather, often regales me with accounts of his time in the Air Force during World War 11. On the rare occasion when I see her, my father's sister will tell me stories of my grandparents on my father's side, who both passed away when I was very young. My mother and father both often recount stories for me about their childhoods, which were radically different, but both fascinating in their own ways.

There are two stories, though, that my parents didn't tell me until I was old enough to understand them. One is the story of what happened when my mother's parents met my father; the other is the story of what happened when my father's parents met my mother.

When my parents were living together but not yet married, my mother took my father to her parents' house for dinner. From the moment they entered the front door, the air was tense with hostility. My grandfather wore an undershirt with nothing over it; my grandmother seated everyone in the kitchen instead of the dining room. The conversation was sparse and edgy. My mother's parents clearly disapproved of my father, a fact lost on neither of my parents.

The mirror of this story is more similar than not. My father's parents were much more polite than my mother's; appropriate clothing was worn, and dinner was laid out as it would normally be for a guest. But my grandparents were cold and unwelcoming to my mother. The crux of the evening occurred when the four of them were sitting in the living room and watching the evening news. Without a word, my grandmother picked up a pillow and hurled it across the

room at my mother. Just as silently, my father grabbed it out of the air before it could strike my mother. When telling the story, my mother will pantomime for me the way she looked just after that incident—frozen, eyes wide, hands clutching at the sofa. She laughs after relaxing the pose. My father grins. The mutual disapproval of both my sets of grandparents has never really fazed either of them.

"After all," my mother always adds affectionately, "everything was forgiven when you were born."

When I was born—I, the daughter of an Ashkenazi Jewish woman, and an Irish man who was raised Catholic. That cultural and religious divide was the reason for the mutual hostility between my parents and their parents, and that divide has made me who I am today.

Each intermarriage is different, and my parents did what worked for them. My father had not practiced his Catholicism since college; he has always been a stalwart Democrat, and much of the conservative dogma of Catholicism troubles him. My mother, who was more tied into her family than my father was to his, had never really practiced or learned about Judaism, but wanted to have some sort of religious tradition in the family she would be starting. So my parents were married in October of 1981 by a rabbi (my father wore a *kippa* and smashed a glass under his shoe) and promised to raise their children as Jews.

I was their first child, born in June of 1984, and I had a Hebrew naming ceremony when I was eight days old. But my parents could not school me in anything more than the basics of Jewish life; my father was completely unfamiliar with Jewish ritual, and my mother, having grown up in a mostly secular family that was too poor to send either of their daughters to religious school, knew only the most elementary aspects of a Jewish home. In addition, my

mother remembered the childhood alienation that came from being one of the few Jews in her neighborhood, and so was determined to provide me with parts of Christianity she envied as a child.

So I grew up celebrating a myriad of holidays and holy days: Passover was spent at my grandparents' house; on Easter morning, my sister and I hunted for plastic eggs filled with candy; during Channukah, we lit the menorah, and on Christmas morning, we opened presents. I always knew I was Jewish, but I never knew exactly what that meant. That all changed when I entered the third grade and my parents enrolled me in Hebrew school.

Since then, I've had a love affair with Judaism, both the religious and the cultural aspects. I begged my parents to join a synagogue, and we did when I was ten. I became a Bat Mitzvah on one of the proudest days of my life, and I was confirmed on my sixteenth birthday. I now take Hebrew classes here at Brandeis University and am planning to take my first trip to Israel within the next year. Although I do not attend services while at school, as I dislike them and often become homesick for my synagogue back home, I have a strong sense of my own religion and faith.

But growing up as the child of intermarried parents was not an easy experience. Peers who knew me for years assumed I was Christian and would often be shocked when I mentioned attending Shabbat services. I often heard the words, "Oh, but you're only half Jewish," directed at me. Even my closest friends would sometimes refer to me as "half-and-half," which never failed to anger me. While I am ethnically divided, I argued, there is no part of me that is Catholic. I never even attended a Mass until I was on a family trip with a Catholic friend. I am Jewish by Jewish law, by upbringing, and by choice. I may not look Jewish, and my name might not betray

my religion, but I am not a second-class citizen in the Jewish world. I refuse to be pigeonholed by closed-minded people, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

Even in our Reform synagogue my family ran into problems. In sixth grade, we watched a video in Hebrew school about why we shouldn't date non-Jews, since that could lead to marrying non-Jews, and that would precipitate the eradication of Judaism. I was incensed—I was one of the best students in my class, and I was a product of the very practice they were trying to stamp out. When it came time for my Bat Mitzvah, the rabbis at my synagogue, whom I adored, informed my parents that my father could not come up to the pulpit and recite the blessings over the Torah. When my mother was finished crying, she vowed that if her husband couldn't do them, then neither would she. The irony of the situation, although none of us could see it at the time, was that my father has been more of a proponent of his children's religious Judaism than my mother has. Although my father has yet to officially convert, he can read Hebrew better than my mother can and can recite almost all of the traditional Shabbat prayers. He fasts on Yom Kippur and gives up grain products during Passover. He was the one who was most vocal about my sister's being confirmed. I was lucky in that aspect of my religious background; my father never secretly resented our rejection of Christianity but instead embraced Reform Judaism wholeheartedly.

Indeed, hearing the stories of others, I know that I've had a relatively easy time of it as a child of intermarriage. Sometimes spouses cannot settle on one religion and instead commingle the two, abandon both, or split their children up into different traditions. I am steady and secure in my religious identity, and because of the idiosyncrasies of Jewish law, no one can claim I am not a "real" Jew, as my mother has nothing but Jewish ancestors in her family tree. It is not so for

my friends who have a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother; even if they have been raised Jewish, they are still singled out for exclusion by Jewish law.

I rarely see any members of my father's extended family, so there is no tension between me and Catholic cousins, aunts or uncles. The only extended family I know is on my mother's side—I have two Jewish grandparents and five Jewish cousins (although one has married "outside the tribe"), all of whom have a set of two Jewish parents. Other children of intermarriage regularly have to deal with relatives of a different religion, which can cause enormous problems, especially around life-cycle events like circumcision or baptism, First Communion or Bar Mitzvah, and weddings.

Additionally, my parents have a happy, stable marriage. Children of interfaith divorce have even more conflicts to contend with. If children who were raised in their father's religion end up living with their mother after their parents' divorce, what becomes of their religious identities? Even if the mother in that situation is ready to continue raising the children in the same tradition, she may not be equipped to educate her children in a religion unfamiliar to her. In a less ideal situation, children may learn to associate their father's religion with a father who may be *persona non grata* with the parent who is raising them.

When I applied for a position at the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project, questions like these kept popping into my head. Couples going through difficult times often turn to members of the clergy for marital guidance. What of intermarried couples? Would a rabbi tell a distraught Jewish wife that she shouldn't have married a Gentile in the first place? Couples of certain religions often live together before marriage and use birth control, while couples of other faiths would never consider either of these practices. What of intermarried couples? Would a Baptist woman's

family shun her for living in sin with a Jewish man? Different religions prescribe men and women's roles in marriage very differently. What of intermarried couples? How would they define marriage to respect both of their upbringings?

That question—*What of intermarried couples?*—kept arising as I thought of the focuses of the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project. All the problems that I ran into as a child and all the ones I was fortunate enough to not have experienced are problems that real people are experiencing every day. About half of all American Jews nowadays intermarry, and while an outsider can take any view of their choice that he or she pleases, the fact is that these hundreds of thousands of marriages and the children of those marriages are not going away. There are lots of people like me, and like my parents, and we cannot always rely on traditional sources of information to learn what we need to know.

Hence, I have compiled this bibliography. I have gone through many texts on intermarriage and documented what can be found in the best of them. It is my hope that people considering intermarriage, people already in an intermarriage, and children of intermarriage can find resources here to help them through the inevitable joys and crises that life thrusts upon us.

So, *baruch haba'ah*—welcome. I hope this helps.

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