

(The 'Half -Jewish' Conundrum)

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The 'Half -Jewish' Conundrum

Christmas Day in Jerusalem runs like any other day. Scattered church bells are the only reminder that much of the world is celebrating the birth of its messiah. In 2001, as a first-year rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College, I had a full day of class, including a forum on intermarriage.

I found it both ironic and disconcerting to be discussing intermarriage on Christmas Day. That morning I approached my professor to express my apprehension for the day's class: "I know we're talking about intermarriage, and, well, this is my first Christmas away from home." Registering his look of surprise, I explained, "My Dad's not Jewish, and Christmas was a really important time in his childhood, so it became an important time in my family. I'm Jewish, obviously, but Christmas has a lot of wonderful family memories attached to it."

Standing there, I did not know whether I could handle having classmates share their opinions about intermarriage on a day when I, a woman confident in her Jewish identity, wanted nothing more than to be sitting in my pajamas around a 12-foot tree covered in ornaments. Don't worry, I see the issue: a Christmas tree symbolizes a theology to which I definitely do not subscribe. But wanting to be around that tree was about being a part of my family's story.

Judaism teaches the value of telling stories. The experiences of past generations teach Jewish values, provide access to prayers and rituals, and bring children in to the family story. For me, as for a huge percentage of children growing up in the liberal Jewish community, the texts of Jewish tradition do all these things, except that they leave out half our family story.

Interfaith marriage hovers at the top of the agenda in the American Jewish community. Many discussions center on the question of whether rabbis should officiate at weddings of an interfaith couple: Will the couple raise their children as Jews if a rabbi performs the wedding? How can a synagogue be welcoming without blessing the marriage? If a rabbi does the wedding, should the text of the ceremony change?

These are all important questions, and they continue to be addressed by dozens of Jewish professionals, sociologists and authors. But there is a question that is not being raised often enough: How can we be sensitive to the unique needs of children of interfaith families being raised as Jews in our synagogues?

I have learned from years of working with religious-school teachers that the most common answer to this question is that to help children of interfaith families one should assume that the child's religious identity is confused and that they do nothing Jewish at home. Mentions of non-Jewish family celebrations should be ignored or giggled past, and low attendance or lack of attention should be forgiven due to their "family background."

Ten years ago I would have fought tooth and nail against this assumption. But I have lost some of my innocence. My colleagues and I have taught students whose custody arrangements leave them believing in Jesus every other week, students whose parents naively let them choose mom or dad's religion and students whose religious-school tuition is paid for by their grandparents because their parents don't want to make a decision about religion. I now know that even in the interfaith families who become active in Jewish life, religious identity is a challenge for both parents and kids.

I may have lost my innocence, but not my hope and not my conviction that our behavior makes a difference. Every family, whether it has two Jewish parents or one, enters our communal institutions with a unique religious identity. For children of interfaith families whom we find enrolled in our schools, our job is twofold: to reinforce their Jewish identity – as their parents do each time they send their child to religious school, and to be respectful of their larger family story.

Reinforcing Jewish identity begins with our language. I learned that the hard way as an elementary school student. On a Friday night the rabbi asked kids to give examples of why they loved being Jewish. The boy sitting in front of me raised his hand: "I love being able to say that I'm all Jewish and not half Jewish."

I don't remember how the rabbi responded to that comment, because I only remember my own discomfort. Was he talking about me? Was he proud that both his parents were Jewish? Was I not as good because my dad was not Jewish?

It was this incident that changed my vocabulary forever. I knew that I was no longer half-Jewish, and did not tolerate anyone calling me that. I was all Jewish, with one Jewish parent and one non-Jewish parent.

"Half-and-half" describes what you put in your coffee, a black-and-white cookie from the bakery or an Arnold Palmer drink. Half-and-half cannot describe someone's religion. We have an opportunity to embrace children of interfaith families as full members of our community by recognizing them as Jews, and not as half-Jews, and by encouraging them to identify themselves in the same way.

When you're a kid, half-and-half comes along with a certain status among other kids – mistakenly assuming that half-and-half means double the presents in December. As you grow older, half-and-half shifts from being cool to being inferior.

But if we merely eliminate from our vocabulary the phrase "half Jewish and half fill-in-the-blank" we are doing these children a disservice. In fact, that one step alone might make us forget that we have this special population in our community. The next step, after affirming a child's Jewish identity, is allowing them still to embrace the story of their non-Jewish family. To practice Judaism and not the other religion in a family does not necessitate negating that family's heritage and the values that their religion and customs instill in them.

I am not going to have a Christmas tree in my house, and I am definitely not going to have a Chanukah bush. But I went to my parents'

house for Christmas last year, and when I have children, they'll go too. My kids will know that the round red brocade ornament was made from the top of a pickle jar and fabric scraps when their grandparents were young and didn't have enough money to buy ornaments. And they'll know that the wooden farm and fragile plaster animals go back generations in grandpa's family. And they'll know that it's OK to love this part of their family history without threatening their Judaism. And at the same time, they will learn from these non-Jewish traditions the value of memory, of family and of sharing.

This solution, which I have come to over time, will not work with every family. For families with strong religious beliefs other than Judaism, celebrating family traditions without also making strong statements of faith may be difficult. Every family needs to find its own balance.

I believe that we can support and encourage interfaith families in their quest to share words of Torah with their children, as they raise their children as members of the Jewish covenant. I also believe that we need to give them space to share the story of their non-Jewish family, so they can see themselves not as half Jewish and half something else, but as Jews proud of their family history.

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