



Susan Katz Miller

BEING
BOTH

*Embracing Two Religions in
One Interfaith Family*

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For my loving interfaith family:

My parents, William and Martha

My husband, Paul

My children, Aimee and Ben.

And for Reverend Julia Jarvis and Rabbi Harold White,
my pastor and my rabbi.



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The Kaleidoscope

EACH YEAR, MY EXTENDED clan gathers for a huge Passover seder in Florida. My eighty-eight-year-old father presides over the ritual meal, leading us through the prayers and songs of religious freedom. The family at the table includes believers, seekers, and secularists, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists, and those who claim interfaith identity. A Jewish nephew who is about to become a bar mitzvah and a Catholic nephew who just received First Communion compete with my interfaith son to find the traditional hidden matzoh. We are a joyous, motley crew, intent on celebrating together.

In twenty-first-century America, we live in a kaleidoscope of religious identities: complex, swirling patterns of faith, spirituality, heritage, and practice. Many of us attend more than one place of worship. We change our religions more than once in a lifetime. We may believe in God or not but still seek spiritual experience inside and outside of churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples. And we are marrying across traditional lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and religion.

In the midst of this religious flux and flow, interfaith couples are making a new and controversial choice: raising children with both family religions. As an interfaith child and an interfaith parent, I feel exhilarated by this new fluidity, empowered by the transition away from restrictive either/or identity labels and into the inevitable and more expansive both/and future.

Americans are leaving behind traditional single-faith identities. Almost a quarter of us attend religious services of more than one faith or denomination, according to a 2009 study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. “The religious beliefs and practices of Americans do not fit neatly into conventional categories,” that study concludes. At the same time, according to Pew researchers, more than one in four American adults change faith affiliation at least once, and that rises to almost half of us if it includes denomination changes (for instance, from Lutheran to Methodist).

Meanwhile, the proportion of religiously unaffiliated Americans has grown rapidly—to almost 20 percent of the population. And yet, the majority of those 46 million unaffiliated adults believe in God or a universal spirit. This seeming paradox—belief in God without religious affiliation—will not come as a surprise to those in interfaith families, many of whom have rich spiritual lives but do not belong to a church or synagogue. My family would be classified as religiously unaffiliated, even though we light *Shabbat* candles on Fridays, sing Christian hymns in church with extended family, and wrestle with theology as we educate our children in both religions.

I am not advocating for a “spiritual but not religious” rejection of community. The hunger for community, for belonging, is universal. As human beings who evolved in clans and tribes, we crave social networks. Religious community provides intergenerational bonding, the support of wise clergy, preservation of our shared history and texts, and the comfort of ritual—not to mention the arrival of casseroles in times of trouble.

I argue here that it is not necessary to share a single faith in order to share such benefits. In fact, I contend that it is indeed possible to raise children with two religions, and that both couples and children experience the distinct benefits of this choice. This book describes a grassroots movement of interfaith families claiming the right to create their own communities beyond a single creed or dogma, bound instead by respect for both Judaism and Christianity and a desire to explore the similarities, differences, and points of historical and theological connection. In these pages, I seek to answer three questions about this movement: Why are intermarried couples choosing two religions for their children despite pressure to choose only one? What are the benefits and drawbacks of raising children with both family religions? And how do these children feel, as they enter adulthood, about their interfaith education and complex religious identities?

Growing up Jewish, I learned that no choice made by parents can eliminate completely either the challenges or the gifts of being born an interfaith child. Each pathway—choosing one religion, choosing two religions, choosing a third religion, choosing no religion—has advantages and disadvantages. Books, outreach programs, and couples groups sponsored by religious institutions push, with varying degrees of subtlety, for couples to choose a particular pathway. Here, I acknowledge my own bias as I argue for the legitimacy of the pathway that works for me, my husband, and my children: doing both.

Clergy often state that children raised with two faiths will be confused. The scant evidence they cite dates from an era when there were no interfaith communities. Some of those who claimed they were raising children with both religions were actually raising them with very little religion at all, in part because society disapproves of choosing both. Extended family mourned for the intermarried couple; clergy rejected them. In short, many early attempts to raise children in two religions were doomed by lack of support.

A child raised in a community of supportive interfaith families, with clergy from both traditions, has a very different experience from a child raised by parents who are isolated by their interfaith choice. My own two teenagers have been loved, challenged, and guided by a rabbi and a minister working as a team. And they have been welcomed at church and synagogue by family on both sides. This book presents preliminary evidence that children raised in interfaith family communities can become sensitive and articulate interfaith spokespeople, drawing strength from two religions.

WE ARE ALL INTERMARRIED

Whether Jews or Christians or Hindus or Buddhists, no two individuals have identical beliefs and practices; thus, every marriage could be considered an interfaith marriage. Many interchurch couples share some of the same challenges and benefits of intermarriage, whether the marriage is Baptist/Quaker, Lutheran/Unitarian, or whether it's an "intershul" Jewish marriage such as Modern Orthodox/Jewish Renewal. Even if both partners are Roman Catholic, they may not share identical beliefs on the power of prayer or the role of women in the Church. Even if both partners are Reform Jews, one may be an atheist and one a Kabbalistic mystic.

Most of the couples in this book are Jewish and Christian, but I believe their stories will inspire interfaith Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Pagan families. I focus on Judaism and Christianity not only because of my own experience as the middle generation in a happy three-generation Jewish and Christian family but also because Jewish and Christian families constitute the first great wave of religious intermarriage in America, on the forefront of creating programs to educate children in both family religions.

Interfaith marriage is the norm in many communities now, rather than the exception. The Pew Forum's 2008 *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* found that 37 percent of all Americans married or living with a partner are in interfaith (or mixed denomination) relationships. Some religious institutions feel threatened by the rise of intermarriage, queasy about the religious kaleidoscope. Many Jewish institutions and some Christian denominations, including Roman Catholicism, the Greek Orthodox Church, and Mormonism, have policies discouraging intermarriage.

And yet the intermarriage rate continues to increase. A 2005 report from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops found Catholics marrying out at a rate as high as 50 percent. The intermarriage rate for Jews married since 1996 was calculated to be 47 percent by the 2001 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS). There are over a million of these Jewish/non-Jewish families in America, a number that is growing by at least forty thousand each year.

The statistics on Jewish intermarriage have been both mourned and challenged; the NJPS study became so controversial that no new ten-year survey was done in 2010. Part of the issue has been the heated ongoing disagreement in Judaism over "Who is a Jew?" Are demographers to use the Orthodox definition (Judaism is matrilineal)? Or the Reform definition (either parent can be Jewish)? Or allow Jews to self-identify, even if they claim a second religion?

What we can say is that the majority of American children with Jewish heritage now have Christian heritage as well. In other words, children are now more likely to be born into interfaith families than into families with two Jewish parents. And Jewish institutions are just beginning to grapple with this fact.

Some Jewish leaders still call intermarriage the "silent Holocaust." Others

view it as an opportunity to increase the number of Jewish conversions or at least the number of Jewish children. When two Jews marry out, rather than marrying each other, the number of children with Jewish heritage doubles. “The ‘extended’ population of Jewish ancestry in the U.S. is continually expanding as a result of mixed unions,” observed demographer Barry Kosmin in a 2009 paper based on the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS).

Many now call for greater acceptance of Jewish intermarriage in the face of this demographic reality. Rabbi Arthur Blecher goes even further in his book *The New Judaism*, arguing that such marriages are not only genetically healthy for Jews but have been common throughout Jewish history. He contends that the low rate of Jewish intermarriage in the first half of the twentieth century was actually an exception, and that the panic over Jewish intermarriage today is caused in part by the abrupt transition from a period when American Jews were isolated as an immigrant culture, back to a higher rate of intermarriage in recent decades.

Some of us are audacious enough to believe that raising children with both religions is actually good for the Jews (and good for the Christians or for any other faith or denomination represented in the marriage). The children in these pages have grown up to be Christians who are uncommonly knowledgeable about and comfortable with Jews, or Jews who are adept at working with and understanding Christians. Or they continue to claim both religions and serve as bridges between the two. I see all of these possible outcomes as positive.

LIKE IT OR NOT, COUPLES ARE CHOOSING BOTH

For years, religious institutions have attempted to portray choosing both religions as completely outside the norm. And yet, 90 percent of intermarried Jewish families reported having Christmas trees, while over half of them also lit Hanukkah candles, according to an ARIS report as far back as 1990. But only in recent years have researchers begun to acknowledge the existence of dual-faith families as a significant category.

Faced with the failure to conduct any national survey of the Jewish population in 2010, individual Jewish communities around the country conducted their own local studies. Most of these studies measured the percentage of children being raised as “Jewish and something else” or “partially Jewish.” In other words, they acknowledged a separate category for children being raised with two religions. And they discovered that in some areas, more interfaith children are being raised with two religions than as exclusively Jewish, according to a compilation of these studies by the North American Jewish Data Bank. Such places included Minneapolis (33 percent “partially Jewish,” versus 30 percent “Jewish only”), San Diego, and Philadelphia. And at least a quarter of all children of intermarriage were being raised with two religions in places including Chicago, Saint Paul, and

Tucson. Meanwhile, the percentage of adults in “Jewish” households self-identifying as “Jewish and something else” or as “partially Jewish” in the New York area shot up from 2 percent in 2002 to 12 percent in 2011.

In all of these communities, adding together the categories for “raised solely Jewish” and “raised partially Jewish,” yields a majority of interfaith children being raised with some connection to Judaism. Rabbi Blecher, based on his own experience with over one thousand intermarried families in the Washington, D.C., area, concluded, “It is rare for a child of intermarriage, even someone living a Christian life, not to identify as a Jew to some extent.”

Sociologist Steven Cohen of Hebrew Union College labels the children of Jewish intermarriage who claim more than one religion as part of what he calls the “borderland Jews,” a term with a kind of Wild West flair that appeals to my rebellious side. However, this term has the same limitation as “half-Jew” or “partial Jew”—all these labels define us by Jewish fraction while ignoring the rest of our (Christian or other) identities. The panic over Jewish continuity dominates both the research and the discourse on interfaith families.

Despite the significant number of parents choosing both religions for their children, until now, this choice has received little attention in the press or academia. Often, as I mentioned, these families have been accused of hastening the destruction of Judaism. And yet, many of these parents feel they are helping to preserve Judaism, or other minority religions, by educating their children in two faiths, rather than no faith, or only with the “default” religion of Christianity. My children have only one Jewish grandparent. Would it have been better for them, or Judaism, or the world, if I had raised them without any Jewish education?

THE JOY OF BEING BOTH

The vast majority of books on intermarriage have focused on the challenges of interfaith life. While I am well aware of these challenges, in this book I set out to tell a different side of the story: how celebrating two religions can enrich and strengthen families, and how dual-faith education can benefit children. In addition to interviews, I conducted two original surveys: one survey of 256 interfaith parents with children in interfaith education programs throughout the country, and one of fifty teens and young adults raised in these programs. On the basis of the accumulated wisdom of these parents and children, and the teachers and clergy working with them, I make the case here that we are raising interfaith ambassadors, not lost and confused souls. As testament to the fact that interfaith families are feeling a new confidence in celebrating two religions, most of the people quoted in this book were willing to use their real names. (In a few cases, I used first-name pseudonyms instead.)

I begin with my own story of growing up Jewish in an interfaith family, and then describe why my husband and I joined the grassroots movement to form interfaith family communities. I explore the specific benefits of choosing

both religions and then address the most common objections to this choice. I profile couples that have chosen this pathway, and the clergy and teachers who support them. I describe interfaith birth rituals, coming-of-age rituals, and education. At the heart of the book, the first generation of teens and young adults to graduate from interfaith education programs relate their own experiences. And finally, I explore the next wave: Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist interfaith couples.

My intention is to share the joy that I have found in “being both.” I am motivated by the tremendous spiritual strength and comfort I feel when sitting with my Christian husband and my two interfaith teenagers, surrounded by over a hundred other interfaith families, singing and reflecting together in a community that provides each of us with equal rights and responsibilities. In this setting, it does not matter whose mother or father (or grandmother or grandfather) was which religion. It does not matter who had, or did not have, a bris or a baptism. There are no prohibitions on which of us can read a text, or sip the wine, or touch a ritual object.

My own journey has convinced me that interfaith children, no matter what religious education they receive, no matter what religious labels they choose, embody two cultures and two religions. I argue that American religious institutions must acknowledge, rather than ignore, the reality of dual-faith identity and the children who represent the flesh and blood bridges between religions. Is it unfair to expect interfaith children to play this novel role? Is it a risky experiment to educate children in two religions, a leap into the unknown? I don’t think so. Instead, I think being both may contribute to what the mystical Jewish tradition of Kabbalah calls *tikkun olam*—healing the world.

Claiming My Interfaith Identity

WHEN I WAS A week old, my Episcopalian mother secretly baptized me in the kitchen sink of our walk-up apartment on Beacon Hill in Boston. She had promised to raise Jewish children, and yet there she was, in those first sleep-deprived days of motherhood, dripping water on my forehead. She says she simply wanted to hedge her bets, to give me every possible protection. I also suspect that my baptism comforted her in a last moment of connection to her churchgoing youth, on the cusp of her transformation into being the mother of a Jewish family.

Weeks later, not knowing that my mother had already performed the ritual, my grandmother quietly performed my second baptism in her own kitchen sink. And then my mother's sister graced me with a third private and unofficial baptism. My mother, aunt, and grandmother did not admit, even to one another, what they had done until years later.

As a mother myself, I have nothing but empathy and gratitude for my mother's brave but covert gesture. These are the sacred duties of a mother: to love and to protect her child and to transmit her history and culture. I think about my parents now, frail in their old age, still fiercely loyal to each other, still deeply in love. Together, my parents have made it impossible for me to view interfaith marriage as a dilemma, a problem. Instead, they bequeathed to me their joy and a sense that in joining together two or more cultures, we share in an act of creativity and inspiration, an act of defiant spirituality and love.

One could theorize that my secret baptisms were the gestures that launched me on a journey beyond the labels and boundaries of religious institutions. Perhaps because I was blessed with tap water and illicit prayer, I was destined for an alternative pathway, drawing from both sides of my religious heritage.

But then, consider the more traditional pathways taken by my three younger siblings, all of them also secretly baptized: one is raising Jewish children, one is raising Catholic children, one prefers Buddhism. The lesson of my family may be that no choice by parents, no set of rituals, can guarantee a particular religious outcome for children or grandchildren, given the inevitability of intermarriage and the increasing religious fluidity of our culture and of our world. Children, whether or not they are interfaith children, go out into this world and make their own religious choices.

NO PATHWAY IS PERFECT: RAISED IN ONE RELIGION

After performing her secret baptisms, my mother held strictly to her commitment to raise us as Jewish. She never once took us into a church. When my parents got engaged in 1960, clergy of every stripe were urging couples to choose one religion—as is still the case today—and that is what my parents did. My mother threw herself into the project, becoming the perfect “all but conversion” parent of Jewish children in an interfaith family. She learned to cook matzoh balls and even took Hebrew classes so that she could follow the prayers when she accompanied us to synagogue. My siblings and I learned Hebrew, and became bar and bat mitzvahs.

My parents worked hard to make us Jewish, in part because they knew our status was questionable in the eyes of the Jewish community. According to traditional Jewish law, or halacha, Conservative and Orthodox Jews do not consider the children of Christian mothers Jewish, and my father’s Judaism—Reform Judaism—is, well, chopped liver. In the 1960s, individual Reform Jewish synagogues tended to accept the small number of children of intermarried Jewish fathers, including me and my siblings, without having a concrete policy on the subject. But I am sure my parents thought that by sending us to Jewish religious school, celebrating Jewish holidays, taking us to shul (synagogue), and abstaining from church, they could convince the world we were “real” Jews.

In Sunday school, we embroidered yarmulkes and matzoh covers, we prayed for Israel during the 1967 war, we read Anne Frank’s diary and wept over the Holocaust. How could we be anything but Jews? And in 1983, the year I graduated from college, the efforts of our family seemed to be rewarded when Reform rabbis voted to accept the children of Jewish fathers as Jews, provided that the children were raised scrupulously as Jews, as we had been.

I believe my parents made the right choice for our family in that time and place. In the 1960s, when intermarriage was still unusual, without the possibility of finding or forming a community that would support them in giving their children access to both religions, they made a necessary and logical decision. I experienced the benefits of being given a single religious identity but also the drawbacks.

In a different era, in a different place, faced with the same decision, I have made a different choice. I am raising my children as interfaith children, educating them in both of their cultures, in both of their religions. As interfaith marriage has become common among Jews, a growing number of families are refusing to choose one religion. These families are giving priority to the full intellectual exploration of both religions by their children. They want their children to feel proud, rather than conflicted, about their dual heritage. And they are forming communities of like-minded interfaith families to support them in this decision.

Will raising interfaith children with both religions doom Judaism? My children are only quarter-Jews by “blood,” and it is even the “wrong” quarter according to Conservative and Orthodox Jews, because it comes through a patrilineal line. The logical choice might have been to choose to raise our

children Episcopalian, the religion of three of their grandparents. Nevertheless, I see no reason not to give my children as much education in, and love for, both religions as I can. Maybe they will end up marrying Jews and choosing Judaism for their own families. Maybe they will end up Buddhists, or Unitarians, or Catholics. But they will never say that I withheld knowledge about their Jewish, or Protestant, heritage. Indeed, I cannot imagine suppressing such a compelling story.

PIONEERS IN INTERMARRIAGE

Emanuel Michael Rosenfelder, my German Jewish great-grandfather, was a circuit-riding rabbi serving Jewish communities up and down the Mississippi River in the late nineteenth century. While overseeing a Jewish orphanage in New Orleans, he met my great-grandmother, whose parents had both died in a yellow fever epidemic. Together, they fled the tropical swamplands and moved upriver to Kentucky. My grandmother, Aimee Helen Rosenfelder, was born in Louisville in 1896 and moved to Pennsylvania, to the little town of Honesdale in the foothills of the Poconos, to marry my grandfather, Edward David Katz.

Their son, my father, William Emanuel Katz, became a bar mitzvah in 1937 at Temple Beth Israel, a one-room white clapboard building on the banks of the Lackawaxen River. At seventeen, he left Honesdale to study chemical engineering at MIT. He interrupted his studies to serve as a radioman on the Pacific island of Tinian during World War II, then returned to Boston, earned a graduate degree, and joined a small water-treatment company in Cambridge, where he worked for over fifty years. Tenacity is my father's most notable quality. He never left his first job, and he never gave up on the woman he wanted to marry.

Blonde, blue-eyed, and beautiful, Martha Elizabeth Legg had graduated from Sweet Briar College, a women's school in Virginia. Yet beneath this traditional Protestant exterior, my mother had an adventurous spirit. As a comparative religion major, she had studied Eastern religions as well as the Bible as history, preparing her for a lifetime of comparative religion in an interfaith marriage. After graduating from college, my mother took a job as a social worker in a Boston hospital.

One rainy night in 1953 at Boston's Logan airport, Martha and Bill found themselves vying for the one taxi left at the stand, and then sharing a ride to Beacon Hill. Martha was aware from the start that this man with curly red hair and owlish horn-rimmed glasses was Jewish. He, in turn, took note of her prim tweed suit and sensed from their first meeting that she hailed from a different tribe. For seven years, they dated on and off in the lively singles scene on Beacon Hill. The issue of religious difference slowed their courtship, but at last, in 1959 they became engaged.

Even though my mother had agreed to raise Jewish children, finding a rabbi was not easy. My father first approached Rabbi Roland Gittelsohn of

Temple Israel, the Reform synagogue where my father had been a longtime member. He recalls the rabbi saying, “I’m sorry, I can’t marry you unless your wife is going to convert.” Which she was not going to do.

My mother has not forgotten that day: “I was there, and I was mad as a wet hen. He treated us as if we didn’t know what we were doing. And I was twenty-nine, and Bill was thirty-five, and I thought, ‘He might have given us credit for having thought this out, you know?’” After a long search, they finally found a rabbi who agreed to officiate, with my mother’s Episcopal minister adding a blessing. I was born the following year, and over the next decade, my parents were fruitful and had three more children.

RAISED AS A JEW, WITH CHRISTIAN ROOTS

When I was five, we moved to the Boston suburbs and joined a new synagogue. Nevertheless, we were close to both sides of our extended family tree. At Christmas and Easter, we would visit my Episcopalian grandparents in Binghamton, New York. We opened mounds of presents under the tree, awoke to Easter baskets magically brimming with chocolate, feasted and sang at the holiday meals with my grandparents and cousins. My parents made clear to us that we could participate in these holidays, but that we were Jewish.

By traveling every Christmas, we avoided the question of whether or not to have a Christmas tree in our own house until my grandfather, my last Christian grandparent, died when I was sixteen. With most of her family gone, my mother felt very emotional about Christmas. Decorating a tree became an important link to her family’s past, and so we began celebrating a secular Christmas and Easter at home. By that time, three out of four of us were teenagers anyway, with our Jewish identities safely rooted, or so my parents hoped.

As a teenager, I felt solely and completely Jewish. In part, this was a tribute to my parents’ united front on our religious identity. On the High Holy Days in the fall, I was eager to spend long hours in the synagogue with my father, while my mother often attended one service with the younger children and then stayed home taking care of them. When I fasted with my father on Yom Kippur, I experienced how the light-headedness caused by an empty stomach, coupled with chanting and praying, could bring about an interesting alteration in consciousness, a sense of transcendence.

At the same time, I understood Judaism as being particularly compatible with modern scientific thought. I believed that the simplicity and rationality of Jewish theology had somehow inspired the multitude of great Jewish scientists. All in all, I felt lucky to be born into a religion that was spiritually, aesthetically, and intellectually satisfying.

STRADDLING THE LINE

Socially, the synagogue was another question entirely. Perhaps it was because

my mother never felt comfortable with the “real” Jewish mothers, but our family never seemed to fit in there. While my mother came with us to synagogue, she did not join in the more social activities at the temple: baking challah, or working for the “Sisterhood” selling Jewish ritual items. While I certainly did not see myself as Christian, or even, at that point, as an interfaith child, I knew I was different from my Sunday school classmates. I remember one day when the teacher drew a chalk line down the middle of the floor and asked us to pick a side. One side was for people who identified themselves as “Jewish Americans,” the other side for “American Jews.” It was clear to me that the teacher hoped we would choose to be American Jews—to place our greater loyalty with our religion and reduce our nationality to a modifier. It was also clear to me that I considered myself a Jewish American.

I felt paralyzed when faced with this choice. What I wanted to do was to straddle the line. In retrospect, part of my paralysis came from my subconscious insecurity about trying to “pass” as a real Jew. Would I be outed as a half-Jew if I stepped to the wrong (though perhaps truthful) side of the room? Part of my paralysis came from the discomfort I felt when faced with labels, boxes, dividing lines, choices. I was already beginning to feel that the box labeled “Jewish” never seemed to contain my whole being. And I was keenly aware of the divisive implications of this type of litmus test. As a child of intermarriage and as a Jew versed in the history of the Holocaust, the act of separating people out based on their beliefs or religion felt very wrong to me.

The realization that Christianity could not be cleanly erased from our home or family narrative came gradually, through an accumulation of short conversations that rose, disconcertingly, to the smooth surface of the Jewish family life my parents had worked so hard to create for their children. One day in the early 1970s, I returned home from junior high and asked my mother, “But who do the Jews think that Jesus was?” My Jewish education had been so thorough that I could not imagine believing that Jesus was the Messiah. But in asking the question, I realize now, I was attempting to integrate the two worldviews present in our household: one overt, the other unspoken. “Jews might believe,” my mother ventured carefully, “that Jesus was a prophet, like Moses or Elijah. He just happened to live long after the Torah was written, so he’s not in it.”

That is precisely the answer I give my own children today. But at the time, I felt the need to test my mother’s opinion against an “authentic” Jewish source: the Hebrew teacher hired to tutor me in preparation for my bat mitzvah. When I related my mother’s suggestion that Jews might think of Jesus as a latter-day prophet, his face went crimson. “Jesus,” he muttered, “was a two-bit rabbi.”

This was probably my first experience with the sort of allergic response that many Jews have to the mention of Jesus, even as a historical figure. Considering the atrocities committed against Jews by Christians, this reaction is understandable. In some Jewish families, Jesus is the “J word,” a name

never spoken aloud. Children in such families grow up with the idea that Jews don't "believe in" Jesus, often with the vague impression that Jesus was a mythical figure. They do not have an opportunity to think about Jesus as a Jew, or the fact that both Christianity and Judaism changed dramatically in the century that followed his death.

OH, THEN YOU'RE NOT JEWISH

It was only when I began to enter the adult world that I started to encounter overt external resistance to my self-identification as a Jew. Despite the Hebrew, the bat mitzvah, and all of my mother's sacrifices, I began to meet people who told me that I simply wasn't Jewish. As a student at Brown University, I met many Conservative and Orthodox Jews from New York, steeped in the Ashkenazic culture of Eastern Europe and "the City." Having grown up in Protestant New England, I didn't know the difference between a bagel and a bialy (to start with, the bialy has no hole in the center). And again and again, I was told I didn't "look" Jewish—this said with varying degrees of hostility.

For interfaith children, the amalgam of race and culture and religion that is Judaism often causes cognitive dissonance. Despite the way I see myself—as a spunky little Jewish woman—Jews and non-Jews often remark that I don't look Jewish, perhaps because of my small "Irish" nose. The remark is never really welcome. From non-Jews, it feels like an anti-Semitic compliment, as in, "You were lucky not to get Jewish looks." When the remark comes from a Jew, I take it as a challenge, as in, "You don't even look Jewish. You aren't part of the tribe."

But the most persistent argument I faced was that I was not Jewish because Judaism is matrilineal, and my mother was not Jewish. Ironically, in the same years I faced the greatest rejection as a patrilineal Jew in college, Reform Jewish rabbis were working to pass the historic 1983 resolution allowing the children of Jewish fathers to be accepted as Jews. But this policy shift served merely to provoke the Conservative and Orthodox Jews I met on campus. Suddenly, I was the public embodiment of a bitter struggle between the different Jewish movements over "Who is a Jew?"

I remember a date with a pre-med student—a Conservative Jew from New York. Apparently, he thought having dinner with me was rebellious. "You're not Jewish," he informed me. "My parents would rather have me marry a *Falasha* [an offensive term for an Ethiopian Jew], than marry you." There was no second date. The racism inherent in his declaration only struck me later. At the time, I was busy being stunned by the rejection.

Matrilineal descent has nothing to do with religious belief, and everything to do with identity as a tribe. As a college student studying biology and deconstructing race in courses on the history of science, I found the concept of matrilineal Judaism infuriating. I knew that there were Jews of every ethnicity, some of them Jewish converts, and I was not going to accept

Judaism as a race.

In the university post office one day, a man from the Jewish Chabad movement approached me with a *lulav* and an *etrog*, the ritual palm frond and citrus fruit associated with the Jewish holiday Sukkoth. His intent was to bless Jewish students for the holiday. While Jews do not generally proselytize, this particular Orthodox sect is known for their global outreach mission to nonpracticing Jews. He squinted at my frizzy Jewfro, pale skin, and glasses, and asked, “Are you Jewish?”

I spat back, “That seems to be a matter of debate.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“My father is Jewish but not my mother. I was raised as a Jew, learned Hebrew, became a bat mitzvah.”

He started to walk away, mumbling, “You’re not Jewish.”

Boiling over, I shouted at his back, “That’s based on a biological fallacy. Don’t you know any genetics? The mother and father contribute equally to the child.” I knew that there was no point in arguing. But I couldn’t help myself. My period of innocent and enthusiastic Judaism was giving way to frustration at being told I could not be what I thought I was.

In this climate, I had no real way of solidifying my Jewish identity as a college student. Hillel House, Brown’s chapter of the national Jewish campus support organization, was intended as a safe haven for practicing Jews, many of whom found my existence as a half-Jew troubling. I steered clear of their celebrations.

Even when I returned to my childhood synagogue, I began to feel like an outsider. In the sixties and seventies, my formative years, Reform Judaism enjoyed a spirit of openness, reflecting the openness of American culture. Very few men wore yarmulkes, and almost no one besides the rabbi wore the fringed prayer shawl, or tallit. Whether one labels this period with the derogatory term “assimilationist” or with the positive term “inclusivist,” it did make it easier for our interfaith family to feel comfortable there.

But by the 1980s, Reform Judaism, which began in Germany, was being transformed by Eastern European Jews with more traditional roots. They brought with them the yarmulke and tallit, and more Hebrew. At the same time, the waning of American anti-Semitism emboldened Jews to become more public and more traditional in their practices. And the birth of Israel and the Six-Day War sent a strong current of Zionism through American Judaism. (Yet patrilineal half-Jews are not accepted as legal Jews in Israel and do not have the right to religious marriages or burials there.) So the increasing emphasis on loyalty to Israel, as well as the more conservative religious practice, posed a problem for me.

AN INTERFAITH WEDDING: CHOOSING BOTH

Alienated from what had begun to feel like an insular and exclusionary

Judaism, I was eager as a young adult to explore other worldviews. As fate would have it, in high school I met Paul Miller, an Episcopalian with a truly global spirit. By the time we got married, Paul had already lived in two Catholic countries (France and Haiti) and one Muslim country (Morocco). Paul feels most alive when immersed in other cultures, speaking other languages, discovering new ways of being in the world. Our family joke is that, stranded as a teenager in New England, he gravitated to the most exotic woman he could find: a half-Jew. We first began dating when I was fourteen, spent years living apart, sometimes on different continents, and dating other people, but always gravitated back to each other.

After college, I spent three years working my way up from fact-checker to full reporter at *Newsweek*, living in New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. When Paul was offered a job with a Catholic agency in Dakar, Senegal, we decided, after more than ten years of circling like orbiting planets, to get married. Suddenly, I had six weeks to pack a shipment of personal effects and 220-volt appliances, get tropical vaccinations, work my final two weeks in Washington, and plan an interfaith wedding.

In the midst of this flurry of prenuptial activity, my father bravely took on the task of approaching our rabbi about officiating at the wedding. While intermarriage is officially discouraged, each Reform rabbi makes his or her own decision about whether or not to witness such marriages. My father reported back with the rabbi's words: "I can't touch it."

A decade later, the rabbi who helped to reconnect me to Judaism explained to me that many Reform congregations prohibit rabbis from officiating at intermarriages in their employment contracts. But in that moment, the words the rabbi used seemed very personal: they labeled my marriage as something untouchable.

In the end, we had a strangely perfect wedding, witnessed by my husband's cousin, Reverend Rick Spalding, a Protestant minister and pioneering interfaith educator, and Rabbi Benjamin Rudavsky, a civil rights activist. This was my first experience with the creative thrill and jolt of power involved in designing an interfaith service. Choosing the elements to include in our wedding, rather than following a prescribed liturgy, imbued the words and rituals with a glow of meaning. It was the first time I felt both sides of myself represented in a religious service. But it would be years before I experienced this cohesion again. I still saw myself solely as a Jew, though perhaps a Jew on the fringe.

Many of our friends and relatives experienced our wedding as a symbol of hope for peace between world religions, a sign that love can overcome differences, and an education for those from both sides of the aisle. Galvanized by these ideas, we began to think about educating our future children in both religions, even as we left the United States to begin our married life as expatriates in Africa.

LIFE ABROAD: BEYOND CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM

Each adventure in my young adulthood seemed destined to push me closer to the moment when I would claim my interfaithness and choose this pathway for my children. Three days after our wedding, I found myself formulating a new identity as a nice Jewish girl, married to a Protestant boy, working for a Catholic organization, living in a Muslim country. The first year in Africa was lonely, as I struggled through full-blown culture shock. One minute I was a single woman with an enviable job. The next minute, I was a married woman living in Senegal, completely dependent on my husband, struggling to become fluent in French.

But in my second year, I began to fall for the giant baobab trees, the mangrove swamps, the lively fish markets along the beach. I conquered French and learned enough Wolof, the most widely spoken Senegalese language, to bargain for a mango in the open-air market. And I grew to appreciate the progressive form of Sufi mysticism practiced in Senegal, a predominantly Muslim country.

Three years in West Africa gave me breathing space to consider religion without feeling pressure from American society to label myself. Sometimes, Senegalese acquaintances would ask my religion and I would proudly proclaim my Judaism. Often, I would be the first Jew these African Muslims or Christians had met, and I was glad to make a good impression on behalf of my people, to serve as a sort of unofficial Jewish ambassador.

Removed from the tensions of American politics and Middle Eastern strife, I began to understand exactly how much Islam and Judaism share. Shortly after we arrived in Dakar, we found ourselves in the home of a Senegalese schoolteacher on the outskirts of the city, as guests for the Muslim holiday Senegalese call Tabaski (known in other parts of the Muslim world as the *Eid al Kabir*). Tabaski celebrates Abraham's sacrifice of a ram in lieu of his son. All day we sat, as friends and relatives came and went. The conversation was in Wolof, a language I didn't yet speak, but slowly, I began to understand that Tabaski is the Muslim day of atonement. Our host, dressed in a long damask robe, finally explained to me in French: "God forgives us for sins against God. But for sins against our fellow man, we must ask our forgiveness from our fellow man. So today, we go from house to house, asking our friends and family for forgiveness."

I was stunned. This was the exact language that Jews use during the High Holy Days of Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. I knew, intellectually, that Islam grew in part from Jewish roots. But after a lifetime of reading about Middle East strife, I was emotionally unprepared for this complete synchronicity. It seemed to me at that moment that, in actually traveling from house to house, asking forgiveness, these Muslims were celebrating the true spirit of the Jewish High Holy Days.

Our experience with Islam in Africa broadened my thinking beyond the "Christian or Jewish" duality that had dominated my childhood. I began to

understand the three Abrahamic religions as variations on a monotheistic theme. But although I began to see each religion as an equally valid system, I still saw them as mutually exclusive entities.

On our next overseas assignment, three years in northeastern Brazil, I discovered the possibilities of syncretism—how the simultaneous practice of two religions can yield a powerful synergistic effect. In Brazil, I was immersed in a culture formed through racial and religious mixing. Brazil is roughly the same size as the continental United States, with an equally diverse topography and culture. Both countries were built on the backs of enslaved African laborers, and both countries still struggle with this political and socioeconomic legacy. There is a huge difference, however, in the way the two countries responded to the African influx. In the United States, African culture was forbidden and suppressed, and through most of American history, we have continued to categorize people as either black or white, with “one drop” of African blood often enough to color a person black. In part because of this dualism, biracial children in the United States have had little choice but to self-identify as black.

As an interfaith child, I see parallels between the state of being interracial and the state of being interfaith in the United States. Society tags us with our minority status, no matter how fractional. And claiming the majority culture may feel cowardly—we do not want to abandon the minority. Caught between two identities in a binary system, we may feel marginalized and misunderstood.

In contrast, in Brazil a third of the population claims mixed-race heritage. While skin color is noticed in Brazil and has socioeconomic repercussions, people do not tend to self-identify as black or white. Fluid identity in Brazil extends beyond race to religion. About two-thirds of Brazilians are Catholic, but almost two-thirds of these Catholics (many of them “white” by American standards) also practice New World African or native Brazilian religions, such as Candomblé and Umbanda. While living in Brazil, we danced every year in what may be the greatest syncretic festival on the planet—Brazilian Carnival.

In the midst of this Brazilian religious and racial fluidity, the rigid boundaries of institutional Judaism came into stark relief. The only rabbi in town was a Chabadnik who rejected me as a Jew, excluding me from his community seder, while welcoming another American who had been raised Christian but had a Jewish mother.

By the time we moved back to the States, my connections to institutional Judaism felt tenuous indeed, and my mind was certainly expanded on issues of identity. While religious institutions often demonize the idea of religious syncretism, I began to understand that all religions have syncretic elements, in that they continue to evolve and change and influence each other—even Judaism. And I began to resist the idea that this blurring of boundaries, this religious layering, threatens the well-being of practitioners. It may threaten institutions, but that’s another story.