

Interfaith Families Offer Hope and Promise to All of Us

Almost eight years have gone by since my first rabbinate and in all that time no other issue has occupied "front and center" more often than those surrounding interfaith families. From the Jewish parents who lament that their children have "married out," to the grandparents who worry about Brit vs. Baptism, interfaith family concerns have often centered on the negative. Families have the mistaken idea that somehow or another a child who falls in love with and wants to marry her/his "B'shert," a person who is good, kind, intelligent, loyal, moral and honest has made an awful mistake because this wonderful person isn't Jewish. I've heard it all.

"We're just delighted with our daughter-in-law to be. If only she were Jewish."

"Of course we support their choice but how will they raise the children?"

"With all of the difficulties young couples face these days, shouldn't they make it easy on themselves and find someone from their own religion?"

"He's Catholic, but thank goodness he doesn't practice."

"Oy vey, what will Bubbe say?"

Notwithstanding current research that demonstrates, among other things, that marriage success is more dependent upon shared values than on any other factor, including shared religion and, as I read in a recent book, "Two Jews Can Be a Mixed Marriage," just because a couple shares a religious background doesn't necessarily mean that their beliefs and practices are identical or even similar, many Jewish families approach the holiday season with the "December Dilemma" frame of mind. Yet, for interfaith families, the Christmas/Chanukah season need not be a problem. In fact, it can be blessing.

In dozens publications, marriage experts Sheri and Bob Stritof point to a set of facts that debunk the negative stereotype of the interfaith family. The Stritofs site a landmark study conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA) that was reported in the December 2001 issue of the Journal of Family Psychology:

Here is the good news for interfaith families:

* "Couples that participate in and find meaning in religious holiday rituals such as decorating the home for the holidays or lighting candles may be making their marriages stronger."

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* "Couples were more satisfied with their marriages when they found meaning in shared religious holiday rituals."

* "Religion is related to marital satisfaction through the meaning created in shared rituals."

* "Such rituals are often passed down from one generation to the next, which played an indirect role in predicting current relationship satisfaction." (Seems as though "L'dor v' dor" works in interfaith families, too!)

* "In the context of a changing society in which marriage is a vulnerable institution, religious ritual practices may preserve relationships and serve as a positive template for future generations."

And the study concludes on a note that couldn't be more positive. The authors write, "whereas popular culture paints a picture of religious holidays as a prospect for marketing and materialism, our findings suggest that couples embrace the symbolic aspects of celebrations and value the opportunity to reaffirm their beliefs and relationship."

Rather than a "December Dilemma," I believe that we Jews can embrace interfaith families as our "December Opportunity." These families are our Jewish treasures. Why? Not only will our children born into interfaith families hear about, respect and appreciation for difference, they will see this behavior in action as their interfaith parents share religious traditions. Interfaith children have the unique opportunity to learn tolerance, acceptance, appreciation and respect in the best way that anyone learns anything -- By example, -- which has been the method of choice by many, including Judaism's greatest teacher, Moses.

As the holiday season approaches I encourage you to do two things. First, share this article with your interfaith children and grandchildren. Then, look around your neighborhood, your school and your office and encourage the interfaith families you know to join Chavurah Ner Tamid's interfaith holiday celebration. "Share the Spirit of the Season" with interfaith moms and dads, sons and daughters. Open your heart to this beautiful world of difference. After all, we don't live in the shtetl anymore.

Blessings and peace of the season to everyone,

Rabbi Barbara

Article: "Finding Meaning in Religious Practices: The Relation Between Religious Holiday Rituals and Marital Satisfaction," Barbara H. Fiese and Thomas J. Tomcho, Syracuse University; Journal of Family Psychology, Vol. 15, No. 4.

*Full text of the article is available from the APA Public Affairs Office or at:
<http://www.apa.org/journals/releases/fam154597.pdf>*

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