

# **Inside Intermarriage On-Line Guide**

By Paula Brody

## **Part 1, Chapters 1-4**

*Inside Intermarriage* is a much needed book. It is an open, honest, and poignant account of a Christian dad becoming a part of a Jewish family. The way Jim Keen nurtures the Jewish identity in his two daughters provides an important point of view. Through Jim's voice, we encounter the very real challenges of being a husband and father who is fulfilling his commitment to nurture a Jewish family while maintaining his own faith background. Jim's voice provides guidance, humor, and empathy to all who read this book.

*Inside Intermarriage* is essential reading for interfaith couples, whether they are dating, engaged, married, or married with children. The book is also a helpful resource for both Jewish and Christian parents, grandparents, siblings, and extended family who wish to increase their sensitivity to the challenges faced by their loved ones who are inside intermarriage. *Inside Intermarriage* is also critically important for professionals who work with interfaith couples. Clergy and educators of all faith backgrounds, marriage counselors, family therapists, and many others will benefit from this inside look at the challenging issues interfaith families face.

*Inside Intermarriage* and this accompanying online guide focus on the need to resolve issues and keeping communication open in an interfaith family. Indeed, communication is the key to working through issues in any relationship, and it is particularly true in interfaith relationships. This online guide is designed to help strengthen communication and resolve difficult issues for couples, their parents, and the professionals who work with them.

This online supplemental guide is written in three different sections. It offers guidance to (1) the partners in an interfaith relationship, (2) their parents and extended family members, and (3) professionals who work with couples and/or their parents to resolve the issues that may emerge in family's life. Written by a professional who trains clergy, educators, and other professionals to support the needs of interfaith families, this guide is designed to enhance the experience of all who read *Inside Intermarriage*. This guide offers suggestions gleaned from years of working with hundreds of interfaith couples and supporting their parents through various stages of family life.

## **Chapter 1. When We First Discover Our Religious and Cultural Differences**

*Whatever the backgrounds and circumstances, whatever the geographical origins, for some reason or another, Jews and Christians often find themselves falling in love. That's why you're reading this book. (page 7)*

### **1) For Interfaith Couples**

As your relationship grows and deepens, keep religion an open topic of communication. As you learn about each other, such as where you grew up, family traits, and experiences, it is important to learn about each other's religious backgrounds. Do not be afraid to talk about the differences in your religious backgrounds.

An easy way to begin this communication is for each partner to talk about the religious behavior of their grandparents and their parents, as well as their own religious behavior. *What are the significant religious behaviors that you recall as you were growing up, in adolescence and in adulthood?*

Begin a dialogue by using the cycle of the year to talk about holiday celebrations you remember as you experienced them in your family. *What are your memories of various religious holiday celebrations?*

Another tool is to talk about life-cycle celebrations, such as birth, growth ceremonies, marriage, and death, and how you remember these significant markers occurring in your family. *What do you remember about baptisms, b'rit milah, first communions, b'nei mitzvah, weddings, funerals, and other life-cycle moments you experienced in your family?*

All couples get "extra credit" points for great communication if they can talk about their belief in God with one another! *How do you experience the presence of God in your life?*

As you talk together, listen carefully and learn something new about your partner. Then, tell your partner what you think might have been significant "nuggets" that shaped your current religious identity. This communication exercise is about getting to know something new about each other and your experiences growing up. It is not about the experiences you want to pass on to your children; keep the topic of future children taboo for the time being as you do this exercise. Remember, the intent of these discussions is to understand each other's past—not to plan your future. Let decisions about your future, especially decisions about raising children, stay in the future for now.

## **2) For Parents and Extended Family**

Many parents have an image of whom their child would marry, sometimes since their child was born. A parent's image of Mr. or Mrs. Right is often different from the person your adult child imagines. As a parent, it can be difficult to feel that you are now losing control of your adult children's decisions, especially the critically important one of who will become their life partner. Even if your adult child finds the person who, in your opinion, is the perfect soul mate, it is difficult to let go of your "child" and have your son or daughter transfer some of his or her primary family loyalty and love to that soul mate and that person's extended family. Your adult child's marriage, even in ideal circumstances, may still feel like a loss in some ways. If your adult child chooses someone who does not meet your image of the person you imagined they would marry, you are apt to feel an even greater sense of loss.

So, how do you cope with that loss? Be open to getting to know the person your adult child has chosen as a life partner. Look for the many positive qualities that person possesses, the very qualities that caused your child to fall in love with him or her. Observe the ways they as a couple express their love to one another and observe the

happiness and fulfillment your adult child experiences from this relationship. Focus on the good characteristics that your potential son- or daughter-in-law does possess.

As for resolving religious differences, keep reading *Inside Intermarriage*. Suggestions for keeping communication open with your son or daughter and his or her partner are found in the subsequent chapters of the book and this supplemental guide.

### **3) For Professionals**

Professionals need to help couples in serious relationships ask the important questions about what their faith background means to them. Young couples need help in talking about their faith background and the distinctive characteristics of their religious identity.

Professionals can provide help through education or communication skills that foster conversations about differences in their belief systems. We can help begin the discussions that probe and clarify what an individual's religious background means in their life. This will enable the couple to articulate the importance of their religious background to their partner and, in many cases, to clarify it for themselves.

## **Chapter 2. The Relationship Turns Serious: Now What?**

*Though I had not yet figured out how we would resolve our differences, my biggest fear was less about tradition, children, and conversion, and more about whether Bonnie would decide that getting married was simply too complicated. I wanted—and needed—her dad's approval very much, too. (page 13)*

### **1) For Interfaith Couples**

Meeting the parents can be anxiety provoking in any relationship, but it may be more so when there are religious differences. Before the first visit, prepare your partner for what to expect, and be willing to serve as an ambassador. Give your partner a preview, not only warning of various family members' predictable behaviors, such as Uncle Jerry's bad jokes, but also describing your home, including details of the religious symbols to be seen there. Arrange the first visit with parents at a neutral time like a summer weekend rather than a religious holiday!

As your intimate relationship becomes serious, it is natural for you to begin to experience some feelings of divided loyalties between your new beloved and your love for your own family. This feeling of being pulled in two directions can manifest itself in many areas, such as: With whom shall I spend my free week of summer vacation? With whom do I spend Thanksgiving? It is only natural to feel pulled between your parents' needs and the needs of your partner. In addition, if your parents are overly expressive about their feelings about interdating/intermarriage, it can become hard to distinguish your parents' views from your own.

Religion is often a complex thread that ties each person to their family. Family memories are shaped by holiday celebrations. So many religious holidays and life-cycle rituals are celebrated in a family context that it is often difficult to sort out what your religion means to you as opposed to what your family means to you. These feelings of confusion are common.

A good way to begin to unravel these complex threads is for each partner in an interfaith relationship to ask the question: *What do I value most from my religious heritage as transmitted to me by my family?* Sharing the answer to this question may help to strengthen your mutual understanding of what you each value most from your religious upbringing.

It is common for your parents to feel that you are rejecting them and their values by intermarrying. They often are apprehensive that family traditions will not continue in the future. Sometimes they wonder if they will be comfortable and welcome in your future home. Reassure them. Believe it or not, your parents need reassurance from you.

Sharing the answer to the question above with your parents may also help them to realize that you value the religious heritage they gave you. This conversation will also help your parents realize that loving someone from another religious tradition does not negate the religious values they transmitted to you.

## **2) For Parents and Extended Family**

As parents, you will never get a second chance to make a first impression.

When your son or daughter brings home his or her beloved for a first meeting, will you focus only on religious differences, or will you get to get to know the person who seems to make your adult child so happy?

Will you be welcoming? Or will you disapprove?

If you begin to actually like this person, does it mean that you approve of intermarriage?

If you accept the relationship, does it mean that your values have changed?

What are the bigger issues? What are your dreams for your adult children's fulfillment?

Do you wish happiness for them first in a solid and loving relationship?

Interestingly, your adult children are still hoping for parental acceptance and approval. They want to make you happy but need to follow their heart as well.

If communication stays open between you and your adult children, as the relationship progresses, there will be plenty of time for honest discussion about religion. You may be wondering, "What religion will my grandchildren be?" but the first meeting of a potential son- or daughter-in-law is not the appropriate time to seek the answer to that question.

## **3) For Professionals**

Professionals can help play a pivotal role in helping interfaith couples untangle the complicated threads by which religion ties them to their families. Enabling each partner to clarify how they as adults feel about their religion versus how their parents feel about religion is exceptionally important.

Professionals also need to be there to help parents work through feelings of loss so common when their adult child falls in love with someone from another faith. Parents may feel rejection of their faith values when in actuality their adult child has strongly internalized these values. Parents will worry about the most frequent concern: What religion will my grandchildren be? Encourage parents to get to know their child's

partner first, recognizing the loving qualities that will enable him or her to be a loving partner and wonderful parent. After their adult children have resolved issues and made their decisions, parents will have the time to get the answers to their questions.

Professionals are vital to keep communication open between parents and their adult children, as intermarriage is apt to strain even the best of relationships, mostly due to fear of the unknown. Parents may want answers on issues yet unresolved by the couple in an interfaith relationship. Patience, understanding, and a loving commitment to work through the issues are needed by all parties involved. As professionals, our job is to help parents have patience with their unanswered questions and to enable the couples to work through their concerns so they have the answers that will work for their relationship.

### **Chapter 3. When Did I Become a “Non-Jew”?**

*It's a crazy feeling discovering you're a "non-something." You usually walk through life thinking of yourself as a "something," but never the opposite of something. (page 17)*

#### **1) For Interfaith Couples**

Even as you become welcomed into your partner's family, it is a natural feeling to “feel like an outsider” in your partner's family and religion. As you concentrate on your religious/ethnic differences, you suddenly begin to experience being a “non-Jew,” “non-Italian,” or “non-Protestant.” (You may also be feeling like a non-New Yorker, non-Republican, or non-McNulty for that matter!)

It is an uncomfortable, awkward feeling as well, wanting to fit in, yet wondering if you are giving something of yourself up to become accepted as a part of another group. In time it is likely that you will begin to feel more comfortable with each other's family and religious differences. This feeling of greater belonging may be accompanied by questioning if you are losing your ties to your own family and religious heritage.

Again, communication is key! Let your partner know how you are feeling. Try to balance your exposure to both families/religions to avoid overexposure to just one family/religion. Especially since Judaism has so many holidays to celebrate, including Shabbat, it can feel “lopsided” when balanced with a Christian calendar of holiday celebrations, with Christmas and Easter as the primary holidays.

Be ambassadors to each other. Recognize that first experiences are often awkward—whether it is the first time you play tennis, do the rumba, or sit in church services. You are apt to feel that everyone is looking at you, just waiting for you to make a mistake. Prepare your partner for what to expect so that embarrassing situations can be avoided!

Lastly, be aware that your parents, their extended family, and their circle of friends may be focusing on religious differences. This can reinforce those uncomfortable feelings of being a “non-something.” Encourage and remind your parents to recognize the many things that your partner is—a loving person, a great companion, a loyal son/daughter, successful, funny, multitalented, etc., plus someone who holds similar religious values, albeit in another religious tradition. In time, your family will also become more comfortable with differences—at least, let's hope that they do!

## **2) For Parents and Extended Family**

Think about a time when you walked into a situation in which you felt really awkward. Perhaps you were in a setting where everyone was speaking another language or seemed proficient at an activity that you were just beginning, or maybe you walked into a room where everyone was much younger or where you were the only man in a room full of women. Whatever the experience, you may recall how uncomfortable it feels to be viewed as a “non-something.” Since, for example, most men rarely think of themselves as “non-women” and most Americans rarely think of themselves as “non-Canadian,” the feeling of being a minority within a majority can feel rather new and overwhelming. Chances are this feeling of discomfort is what your son or daughter’s partner may be feeling as he or she comes into your home, family, and religious circle.

How can you alleviate these moments of awkwardness? First, get to know this new person for the many things that he/she is, rather than focusing on what he/she is not. Recognize this individual as a Methodist or an Italian Catholic, not merely a “non-Jew.” Be aware of your own fears about differences, but let differences in religious beliefs and customs be a topic of conversation. As you get to know your child’s partner over time, become familiar with his/her religious background, unique family’s traditions, and personal religious beliefs. This respectful communication will set an important tone for your future relationship with your son- or daughter-in-law.

Lastly, serve as an ambassador into the religious traditions that are unique to your family. Be inclusive. Enable this new person, who has brought happiness and contentment into your child’s life, to become a part of, not apart from, your family’s rituals. If you are loving and welcoming, and if your family’s expression of religious tradition is joyous and inviting, it is also more likely that your future son- or daughter-in-law will seek to partake in your family’s religious traditions and to choose to make these family rituals an ongoing part of his or her life.

## **3) For Professionals**

Throughout the Bible, we are encouraged “to know the heart of the stranger.” We are commanded to remember what it felt like to be the stranger in order to recognize the importance of welcoming and inclusiveness.

As professionals, we too must serve as ambassadors into our religious traditions for a variety of newcomers, including those who come (or come back) to us from our own faith traditions. For interfaith couples, it is critical that we open our hearts and our doors. If we do not, we will send a message that these couples are not welcome in our religious settings. It is unlikely that anyone would choose to become a part of a group that feels unwelcoming.

We need to become more sensitive to the signs in our environment that welcome or discourage newcomers. Observe the many things that may seem totally comfortable to those who are on the “inside” but very confusing to those who are coming in from the “outside.” Most worship services have various rubrics that, while understood by frequent worshippers, seem odd to a first-timer. How would one know, for example, that Hebrew prayer books commonly open from left to right rather than right to left? How would someone participating in a Catholic Mass for the first time know appropriate behaviors during Communion?

Lastly, as professionals we need to be sensitive to language. Be aware that our pews hold those who come to us from a variety of religious backgrounds. Our words alone can convey an impression of welcome or rejection. If we fulfill the biblical commandment to “welcome the stranger,” those who once felt like strangers coming into our houses of worship are more likely, in time, to feel that our congregational community has become their religious home.

## **Chapter 4. Before We Go Any Further, What Religion Will Our Children Be?**

*What worked best for us was just the hours and hours of talking to each other and trying to figure out what our religion meant to each of us. (page 28)*

### **1) For Interfaith Couples**

If you, as an interfaith couple, can communicate about the huge decision regarding your children’s religious identity in a loving and supportive way, chances are you have the foundation for good communication that is the essential ingredient to a good marriage.

Indeed, this decision involves using your very best communication skills—not just talking, but listening as well—understanding what your partner values most from his or her religious upbringing. Finding a way to integrate the most valued aspects of each partner’s religious heritage into your family’s life is key, especially for the partner whose religion is not chosen as the foundation of religious identity for your children.

This huge decision, and I emphasize huge, has to feel like a win-win. Each of you needs to feel that you are “giving,” rather than “giving up.” The most critical part of this discussion is to focus on your own religious needs first. Think about what you need for yourself separate from the question of future children. Make sure that your own needs are met and that your partner helps you to meet your needs. For example, if you need the presence of God and prayer in your life, express this. If you need to continue to be with your family for holiday celebrations, tell your partner. Make a commitment to meet each other’s religious needs, now and into the future, even as your needs may change.

Only after you feel your own needs can be met in your relationship should you focus on your future children’s needs. Only when you feel reassured that you are not “giving up” what you need for yourself can you think about “giving” your partner the enormous gift of raising children in his or her faith. Only when you are certain that this heartfelt and huge “gift” is given for the right reasons can either partner give willingly. This enormous gift must never be taken for granted. Expressions of appreciation and gratitude must be present in your relationship in an ongoing and meaningful way.

Once the decision is made, you will probably feel a tremendous sense of relief, realizing that you have accomplished one of the most difficult tasks inherent in any interfaith decision. Make a commitment to each other, however, to revisit the feelings engendered by this decision as you move forward in your shared family life. Make a commitment to each other to “tweak” aspects of this decision as you meet unexpected life circumstances together, continuing to assure each other of your desire to meet your partner’s needs.

Although the decision of religious identity can seem incredibly overwhelming, keep communicating—listening, listening, and listening to each other. Generally, what each of you will appreciate most is the feeling that your partner truly has heard and

understood what you need. In fact, when this loving communication happens, the right decision for your children will probably evolve from your discussions and feel right for you both. Furthermore, this habit of communicating—of listening and really hearing your partner's feelings before expressing your own feelings and needs, will stand you in very good stead for a lifetime of big decisions you will make together.

## **2) For Parents and Extended Family**

Do you feel that choosing one religion for a child is better than choosing to raise a child with both religions?

Would you rather have your grandchildren raised with one clear religious identity than with no religious connection at all?

Yes, you might say—just as long as our religion is chosen, or just as long as my grandchildren are not raised in a religion different from my own.

Perhaps you can see the dilemma your adult children may experience. Your children do not wish to hurt you. In fact, both partners in an interfaith relationship worry about how their parents will feel about their decisions on religion and feel angst that their own parents might not share a common religion with their future grandchildren.

Interestingly, this fear of hurting either set of parents is the number one reason why interfaith couples often do not make any clear decision about religious identity for their children. These couples fear that the choice of one religion for their children will devastate the family whose religion was not chosen; thus, they make no decision rather than hurt one side of their family.

How can you be supportive as your adult children and their partners struggle with this decision? First, as parents, realize that this important decision is not yours to make. You must support your adult children and encourage them to make the decision of a religious identity for your grandchildren. As future grandparents, recognize that you will have the opportunity to love, nurture, and be close with your grandchildren even if they do not share your religious identity. This will be true as long as you do not stress or break the ties with your adult children.

Ultimately, sharing your love with your grandchildren is more important than sharing your religion. Your grandchildren will always cherish and remember you for being loving, fun, and supportive, not for being Jewish or Presbyterian. You will also share many things in common with your grandchildren, even if they are of a different faith. They will probably look like you or your adult child. They may have your musical or athletic talent. They may share your passion for good friends, good books, and good deeds. You will influence them greatly in moral and ethical teachings, and if you demonstrate your commitment to your own faith in a caring way, they will learn much from you that will shape their beliefs and identity as they grow into adulthood.

Remember, although you do not have the choice of how your grandchildren will be raised, you do have the choice of how you will respond to this decision. You will decide how you want your children and grandchildren to relate to you. Your legacy of love is your choice.

## **3) For Professionals**

Clergy and professionals can be supportive allies for a couple struggling with the decision of how to raise their future children. Helping each partner in an interfaith relationship

understand what they value and need from their own religious upbringing will enable both partners to move forward with the huge decision ahead of them.

Modeling active listening without judgment is essential. Creating a safe setting where each partner can express their genuine feelings and truly hear each other's needs will provide more benefit than any advice one could provide.

Indeed, the resolution to the huge decision of children's religious upbringing will be different for each couple, because this decision is bigger than just choosing a faith identity. A decision that feels like a win-win will involve each partner getting his or her needs met. The partner who gives the tremendous gift of raising children in the other's religion must feel that he or she is "giving" this enormous gift, rather than "giving up." The decision must evolve out of love, not out of pressure.

Clergy and counselors also play a pivotal role helping each partner in an interfaith relationship balance the pressures they are most likely feeling from their family. Each partner recognizes the loss the grandparents will likely feel if the decision is made to raise the grandchildren in a faith different from theirs. Each partner may be struggling to "honor thy mother and thy father." No one wants to hurt their parents. Helping an interfaith couple work through these complex issues and sort through this minefield of explosive feelings is incredibly important.

Professionals must also support the parents of adult children in interfaith relationships as they too struggle with their feelings of confusion and loss. Parents wonder how much they should influence their adult children's decision—or worse, just try to influence the decision. Enabling parents to understand what their role is (and is not) as their children make this decision is vital. Working through their feelings of worry and doubt in a counseling setting is less apt to impair a future relationship with their child and son- or daughter-in-law. Helping these parents to look beyond their current upset and angry feelings to see the bigger picture, to recognize the many ways they will love and relate to their future grandchildren, is key.

"Checking in" informally with interfaith couples and their parents every so often is also important. Inevitably, times will emerge over the years, especially around life-cycle markers and holiday celebrations, when feelings of loss may become more prevalent. Revisiting what each person needs and the best way to communicate these needs is an essential element for ongoing communication in every family relationship.