

Shabbat Shalom. I would like to start with a story by Rochelle Sullivan, a fellow Keruv consultant of mine. She presented this piece during Yom Kippur 2009 at a Conservative Synagogue in Baltimore. These are her words:

“Several years ago my daughter told me that she didn’t care who she married - she didn’t care if they were white or black or Chinese – as long as she loved them, it didn’t matter. I gasped, and I heard myself begin to tell my child, as my parents told me, and as their parents told them: “Jews and Gentiles do NOT marry”. But “Mommy” she said, “Daddy isn’t Jewish and you married him.”

Yup...I did.

And I will tell you how I responded to her – and how it changed my Jewish identity forever – but first let me tell you a little about my life.

Rochelle continues:

Both my parents are Jewish and were raised in a Jewish neighborhood in Baltimore, MD. My great grandparents came here from Russia, my grandparents were members of this synagogue (Beth Israel Congregation) as are my Aunts and Uncles and cousins. But, my parents left the “hood” and travelled to the “not so Jewish” suburbs of Maryland to raise a family. My mother had kosher meat delivered. We attended Friday night services and Hebrew School, I had a Bat Mitzvah and a confirmation, and even spent a summer at Camp Ramah. The whole shebang – despite the move, my parents still gave me all the tools necessary to be the wife of a Jewish man – *DID I MENTION MY NAME IS SULLIVAN????*

For the many years that my husband and I dated, we behaved like a “dual faiths” couple – Christmas with his family and Seders and holiday dinners with mine. Then one year hanging from the Christmas tree was an engagement ring! I was so excited and couldn’t wait to phone my family – but of course they were out eating Chinese food.

Anyway, once I tracked them down, their first question was not WHEN the wedding would be or WHAT color the bridesmaids would wear – it was *HOW WILL YOU RAISE THE CHILDREN?* WOW – at that moment I felt like a Jewish Superhero – “Rochelle – the future of Judaism lies in your womb.”

I guess, had I known that only 2/3 of all intermarried couples have children who consider themselves Jewish, maybe I would have understood their urgency. But what it did was open a

dialog between my husband and me about our religious differences. We knew our children would inherit my religion but, what did that mean? Maybe we could raise them “both.” This was tougher than we thought. So, my mother suggested that we attend a lecture given by Rabbi Rachel Cowan the author of the book “Mixed Blessings”. At the lecture, we learned that we needed to give our children the sights, smells, and sounds of ONE religion, supported by the family and community.

Our daughter was born in 1996 and my world changed. Not immediately – but my turning point was when she came home from school and asked if we could decorate the tree in our front yard with Easter Eggs - WHAT? Hadn't we named her in Shul? Hadn't I fed her matzah ball soup at Passover? We gave her the sights, smells and sounds of Judaism and now this?

Obviously I was missing something, so I turned to my husband and told him of the atrocity his daughter had asked me to commit and he said “That sounds like fun!” - HUH? Didn't he stand with me under the chuppah? Didn't he know I was Jewish? What was next – a tasteful Nativity Scene? OH BOY – NO WAY – OY VAY! Maybe this, I thought, is why Jews and Gentiles are not supposed to marry.

It soon became clear to me that we needed to find a community to support our raising a Jewish child and one that would help my husband and I grow as an intermarried couple. I needed help teaching and answering questions, and guidance in making a Jewish home. So, I enrolled my daughter in Hebrew School and during Shabbat workshop I found myself sobbing as I gave her the daughter blessing. ***She asked why I was crying and I told her I was excited to be Jewish with her. It seemed silly at the time, but this was what I was looking for – the beauty of Judaism that I felt as a child – but as an adult. These sights and smells and sounds that were part of me - there because my parents gave them to me – lovingly – and with the support of our synagogue, youth groups, clergy, family and friends. I wanted to give this to our child and I desperately wanted to share it with my husband – even if he wasn't Jewish - But where and how?***

I needed to “Shul Shop”. Let's be honest, the Conservative movement has not been historically known for its open mindedness toward intermarriage. So, before I crossed Beth Israel off my list and opted for the Reformed Temple down the road, I spoke with the Rabbi about many things – specifically, what we could expect as an interfaith family.

Fast forward 5 years... We have participated as a family in many life cycle events – most recently, the Bat Mitzvah of our oldest daughter. We have all made lifelong friends and are part of

the Jewish community. Our daughters are learning to be Jewish women in a congregation that is not only egalitarian, but accepting of all types.

So – the answer I gave my daughter about her father not being Jewish was this.... “Sweetheart, I cannot tell you who to fall in love with and marry. I can only tell you that if you marry someone who is not Jewish, you may have struggles that other couples don’t have. You will need to join a synagogue that will embrace your family and encourage you to embrace your Judaism and share the sights and smells and sounds with your family.”

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A poignant story from my friend, Rochelle, hmmm?

Now for a little of my story. My name is Liz Cox, and I am Jewish. Both of my birth parents were Jewish, although my sisters and I were raised by my Jewish mother, and a non-Jewish step-father.

Before I came to Beth Torah, I tried for several years to find a synagogue and community where I felt at home. Just as important, I tried for many, many years to meet nice Jewish boys. Way back to the 8th grade when I had my first date with Tony Raskin from BBYO, to the age of 32 when I retired my account on JDate, I have been focused on finding a Jewish husband. The totality of this effort was approximately 14 dates with 8 Jewish guys. None lasted more than a couple of months and most lasted only one miserable date. Yes, that’s total, in my whole life....

Also at the age of 32 I met my then future husband Corby Cox, and as you have probably guessed, he is not Jewish. I’ll spare you the sappy details about how strongly I feel about this man and the joy I feel each day just for sharing our lives together and what an amazing husband and father he is, but suffice it to say he is everything I had ever hoped for in a husband.... except Jewish.

It was my decision to marry a non-Jewish man, and I went into it knowingly. We agreed to raise any children of ours Jewish, and I felt I could see my way clear to it all working out nicely. Minutes after Corby proposed, like Rochelle, I was on the phone sharing the news with my family and friends. Unlike her situation, though, no one was asking about how we were going to raise our children.....at least on my side of the family.....

By the time I came to Beth Torah in 1999, I was hopelessly in love with the man I would soon marry. I received an adult Bat Mitzvah with my husband, mother, Step-father, and sisters all looking on.

Over the years, I have struggled with some of the issues Rochelle covers in her piece. It's hard not to feel "not Jewish enough" from time to time, and you do run in to reminders that you are non-traditional every now and then. As a parent and wife, I've sometimes wondered if my son will feel fully accepted at any synagogue, and whether he will be taught to respect and embrace differences in others.

I was at a crossroads when I heard Rochelle tell her story. But I couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was that had me so, as my son says, "discombobulated". Then, Rochelle said "*I wanted to give the beauty of Judaism that I felt as a child to our child and I wanted to share it with my husband – even if he wasn't Jewish - but where and how?*"

That was it! I have these things I want to give to my son and I want my husband to be a part of that experience in some way. And, I believe there are more that have these thoughts, and have stories similar to Rochelle's and mine... so the question becomes, then, "**What can we do to ensure these stories have happy endings?**"

We have seen a surge of marriages between Jews and non-Jews over the last 30 years. You can debate the reasons for this, but the fact remains that the non-traditional family will account for more and more of the body of practicing Jews in the future. You need but look around you today, as ¼ of the couples that make up our congregation are either intermarried or couple where one is Jewish by birth.

Rabbi Laynor used to refer to our non-Jewish and not-by-birth Jewish family members as, "those who have cast their lot with us." I love this expression, as does my husband. To us it says "there are a lot of **them** among us". It also recognizes the weight of the decisions made by these couples to wrap up their future with ours and that of the Jewish tradition.

I believe Rochelle was right. Conservative Judaism has not done a great job at making non-traditional families welcome, including the intermarried. When I think about the commitments made by our spouses, and in some cases the sacrifices they have made by isolating themselves from their family, or raising children to believe something they may not believe themselves...

...**it is time**, and I hope you would agree.

It is time for us to renew our commitment to every member of our Beth Torah community

It is time we re-assert that our fulfillment and happiness is tightly linked with that of every other member here

It is time for “them” to stop being “them”

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It is the goal of the Keruv program to reach out to interfaith families, to share community and traditions and knowledge with those that have cast their lots with us. I am quite proud to be associated with Beth Torah and the very positive posture this shul is taking in this important effort. I believe that this community can do much to help all our families with the difficulties they encounter, AND provide our children with the sights, smells, and sounds of this religion.

Our newly formed Keruv committee will offer social, educational and ritual programming throughout the coming year. We will be partnering with other CBT organizations and other area shuls in the effort.

Most importantly, and on behalf of the 19 members that have stepped forward to form our working committee, we would appreciate your support and participation. Please watch for opportunities - it doesn't have to be hosting a Shabbat dinner. As others here have shown me, outreach can be as simple as a smile, an introduction, or a play date for the kids.

I know many of you and call you friends. You have welcomed my family and I, and with your help, we can welcome many more with open arms. Let us welcome all into our amazing, warm tent as we are commanded to do.

Shabbat Shalom!