

What Does it Mean to Have an Interfaithless Marriage?

People have sometimes referred to my marriage as an “interfaith marriage.” After all, my husband comes from a family of devout Christians. I come from a family of secular Jews. So, on the surface, we appear to be part of the 45 percent of Americans who describe their marriages as interfaith.

Except that this phrase doesn’t really describe us. We do come from different religious backgrounds, and as a result, we see the world a little bit differently. In his case, he gave up the religion of his childhood. In my case, I retained the agnosticism that I was taught as a child, but embraced my Jewish cultural identity as an adult.

But the two of us have one thing in common: we are not religious people. So we’re not an interfaith couple. We’re an *interfaithless* couple.

We’re “inter” because of our different background, and because of that, we share some points of negotiation that interfaith couples share. Like whether to have a Christmas tree (yes) or Santa (no). Or what to do about the wedding (we had a secular one, with Jewish traditions included). And what to do when we’re asked to go to various family religious functions (usually we go). And of course there’s the issue of what to do about our daughter, who is being raised proudly as both an agnostic and a Jew.

My husband didn’t know much at all about Jewish culture when he met me. Now he makes amazing matzo balls. Yes, amazing. And he makes pretty good latkes too.

I discovered humanistic Judaism a few years ago, and joined Or Emet. My husband joined with me, since we were both hungry for a community of like-minded people. And that’s what we found. Among other things, we found an abundance of other interfaithless couples, many of whom were raising children in an interfaithless environment.

So what does it mean to be an interfaithless couple? And an interfaithless family? We had a group discussion about this at Or Emet last fall. Since there are many

books out there written for interfaith couples, we imagined one written for interfaithless couples. Here's what we such a book might include:

Chapter 1: What is an Interfaithless Couple?

If someone were to write a book about interfaithless couples, they would not find a one-size-fits-all story. Some interfaithless couples have no interest in affiliating with traditions and cultures related to religion at all, while others maintain connections. Some interfaithless couples perceive religion negatively, while others do not. Of course, in some relationships, one partner is a godbeliever and the other is not.

Chapter 2: The Joys and Strengths of Interfaithless Couples and Families

Many interfaithless couples have more leeway than religious couples when it comes to choosing their own traditions and "rules." The merging of two religious traditions can mean a "menu" of possibilities to both accept and reject. And for children growing up in interfaithless (and interfaith) families, there's the opportunity to get exposed to multiple traditions—a recipe, hopefully, for open-mindedness.

Chapter 3: Challenges of Interfaithless Couples and Families

Challenges come from being "inter," and other challenges come from being "faithless." When two people come from different traditions, sometimes it's hard to relate. Just like interfaith couples, the interfaithless have to deal with in-laws who may not be thrilled with the coupling. And when two people are faithless, there's the cultural stigma that comes with not believing in a higher power.

Chapter 4: Rituals, Holidays, and Traditions

We've gotten our share of (tacky but well-intended) Christmas tree menorahs and other ChristoJew hodgepodge gifts. But gifts aside, interfaithless couples get to combine, recreate, reject, and otherwise do their own thing when it comes from weddings, winter holidays, baby naming ceremonies, and other events. To me, this is both glorious and a little alienating. I found it very meaningful to write my own wedding ceremony. But on the other hand, sometimes I feel like I simply don't fit in.

Chapter 5: What about the Children?

How to “raise” our daughter wasn’t a big issue for us. I had a strong preference to raise my daughter Jewish and agnostic, and my husband was perfectly fine with that. He didn’t have a similar tradition that he wanted to pass along. But just like interfaith couples, some couple can really struggle with balancing two traditions. And other struggles arise for interfaithless families—like how to equip your children for others who may be appalled by their lack of religious beliefs.

So there’s our “book” on interfaithless couples. I’d love to hear more about the experiences of other interfaithless couples and how they negotiate their experiences!