

Love and faith: Beth Yam congregation helps couples, families make interfaith marriages work

By LAURA OBERLE

Melanie Segal was sure she would marry a Jewish man.

She was Jewish. Both her parents were Jewish. Their parents were Jewish.

Melanie was 25, and living in her hometown of Dallas, working as a special education teacher. She was ready to seriously date, to get married, and was even signed up for JDate, a Jewish dating website.

Judaism was all she knew, and all she wanted.

Until she met Jeff.

Jeff Wynne was in her group of friends, and Melanie knew she couldn't date him. He was a Presbyterian, a denomination of Christianity. He was a non-Jew.

"But what if you found someone to date who wasn't Jewish?" Jeff would ask Melanie.

"I wouldn't," she'd reply.

As a friend, Jeff had gotten to know Melanie's parents. When Jeff asked Melanie on a date, Melanie's mother told her not to go. She knew Jeff was a great person and knew her daughter could fall in love with him.

She knew that because they were from different religious backgrounds, one of them would get hurt.

Melanie and Jeff ended up dating, knowing that it might not last.

"She was so set on marrying a Jewish guy," Jeff said. "I told her she was going to marry the wrong guy."

When Jeff sat down and asked Melanie's father for his daughter's hand in marriage, he said "absolutely," but under the condition that his grandchildren would be raised Jewish.

With that one set guideline, everything else became a matter of compromise and meeting in the middle.

Instead of the traditional Jewish wedding Melanie always thought she'd have -- with a rabbi, under the chuppah, with the groom breaking the glass and the guests shouting "Mazel tov!" -- she and Jeff were married on Hilton Head Island by a justice of the peace in a family-only, non-denominational wedding.

That was one sacrifice Melanie made; the other was peace of mind.

"I was giving up a certainty for an uncertainty," she said. "It wasn't about a holiday here and a holiday there. It's about the plan you had for your life. And then you meet a fantastic person that's not in your religion, but you know this is the person you want to spend your life with. You're giving up what you've always set on your course."



From left, Jeff, Cameron, Alexandra and Melanie Wynne.

Jeff knew he could uphold his promise to raise their children Jewish because while Melanie had a fervent passion for her religion, Jeff wasn't actively practicing his.

"He wasn't religious when we met, and it's one of the reasons that enabled us to raise our kids Jewish," Melanie said.

"My kids have an identity, which they would not get from me and my religion," Jeff added.

INTERFAITH MARRIAGES

In ancient times, interfaith marriage in Judaism was viewed with such disdain that it was punishable by death. Even in more modern times it was still looked upon unfavorably.

But in the 19th century, traditional Jewish doctrines and practices were challenged with the birth of Reform Judaism. It asserted that "Judaism frozen in time is an heirloom, not a living fountain."

As Judaism's place in society evolves, so must the practice of Judaism.

"Judaism is now accepted, as compared to history where it had to survive isolated or as a victim or tolerated minority," said Brad Bloom, the rabbi at Congregation Beth Yam on Hilton Head. "So Christians are not afraid to marry Jews. You won't be alienated or condemned, nor will you be treated that way anymore by your Jewish culture."

With this newfound acceptance Judaism saw a rise in interfaith marriage, and in 1978, Alexander Schindler, a rabbi and former president of the Union for Reform Judaism, established outreach as a part of Judaism.

"We need to remove the 'not wanted' signs from our hearts," Schindler said in a speech to the URJ board of trustees.

And while he made clear he discourages interfaith marriage, he called for damage control when it happens.

"If all of our efforts do not suffice ... our task is to draw them even closer to our hearts, to do everything we can to make certain that our grandchildren will nonetheless be Jews," Schindler said.

Children are to be raised Jewish.

It was the promise Jeff made to Melanie and her family. It's the condition under which Bloom will perform interfaith marriages.

The Jewish religion and culture is passed down from generation-to-generation, and that passing becomes more important as the Jewish population becomes smaller and smaller worldwide.

"Because this notion of survival of my culture, my religion, that merges into this spiritual DNA," Bloom said. "I don't want to know that Judaism died on my watch."

OUTREACH AWARD

In May, Congregation Beth Yam was one of eight recipients of the 2013 Belin Outreach and Membership Award, a national award given by the Union of Reform Judaism. The award was largely based on Beth Yam's efforts to accept and engage interfaith families.

"It is about creating a positive, welcoming tone for interfaith families looking for an identity without making a negative judgment on them because they don't fit the ideal of where both are Jewish," Bloom said.

Marcia Frezza, the outreach committee chairwoman at Beth Yam, presented five programs for consideration: a grandparent workshop, multigenerational interfaith program, a Bring Your Friend to Hanukkah Party, family-to-family holiday celebrations, and Outreach on the Move, which involves trips to historical synagogues and churches.

Frezza, who has worked as a psychotherapist for more than 30 years, is in an interfaith marriage. Her husband is Catholic but is a welcomed member of Beth Yam. Frezza raised her children Jewish and says that leaving religious decisions entirely up to children is a high-risk situation.

"I can tell you that professionally through my work as a psychotherapist, and as a parent and grandparent, children need an identity," Frezza said. "Parents need to help them with that."

Whether they choose to raise their children Jewish or as the religion of the non-Jewish spouse, Frezza said the important thing is that a choice is made.

"We encourage parents -- whatever decision you make, we'll support that," Frezza said. "But make a choice. Choose a religion and let your child know that's where they belong, that's their identity."

MAKING IT WORK

The Wynnes have two children, Alexandra, 14, and Cameron, 12, and since moving to Hilton Head last August, they have been active members of Beth Yam.

"The fact the outreach committee is so accepting and they are constantly trying to get interfaith couples in and to feel welcome and secure ..." said Melanie.

"It's awesome," Jeff said, finishing her sentence. "They don't look at us as interfaith. They just look at us as a family that wants to participate."

Frezza upholds the Wynnes as the model couple for interfaith marriage.

"It's not that it just worked for them," she said. "They set out to make it work. They knew what they wanted for their children and for their life, and they stuck to that."

Alexandra and Cameron attended Jewish day school in Dallas, and are now enrolled at Hilton Head Preparatory School. Jeff fully participates in every aspect of his children's lives, especially the religious ones. He is a member of the men's club at Beth Yam, prays the Jewish prayers, and leads the Passover at seder. Melanie said that at times he's more active at temple than she is.

"He really jumped in with both feet, with both hands," Melanie said. "He's such an active participant that he has a sense of comfort, even though it isn't his faith. He does not look at religion anymore as ours and his."

In their 17 years of marriage, Jeff said he was never once pressured into converting to Judaism and has never felt the need to.

"I am who I am," he said. "I was born and raised this way. I don't think that converting is going to mean much to me. I don't need to convert, my family doesn't need me to convert to show them I love and respect our religion."

They also celebrate Jeff's Christianity. Melanie buys the kids' Christmas presents, the family cuts down a Christmas tree, and they celebrate with Jeff's parents.

"I don't ever want our kids to not celebrate their father and their grandparents' holiday," Melanie said. "And we support them. We go to church, and it's just an acceptance."

Melanie said she has seen interfaith marriages that didn't work, that don't share their success story. But she knows

their success is a result of the commitments she and her husband made to each other, and staying true to those commitments.

"You have to work at it, though. We'd set our goals before we got married and we've stayed on our course," Melanie said. "I know how hard it can be. For Jeff and I, we're one of the lucky ones."

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