

Beginning the Conversation Modern Jewish Families in Their Own Words

Ryan ... and Ryan and Fran

Our congregants need to realize that if a non-Jew is present in the synagogue, it's because they want to be there.

Ryan and I have been married for 18 years and we have two children. Before we started dating we went for interfaith counseling since religion had been such an important part of our upbringings. We were married by a rabbi and a priest, with a ketubah, and our children had Hebrew naming ceremonies.

In choosing a synagogue we thought that we would have to join a Reform synagogue, but we decided to first visit a Conservative synagogue. The rabbi introduced himself and assured us that we would be accepted, but that there were three things Ryan could not do: serve as congregational president, men's club president, and the Torah could not pass through his arms at our children's b'nai mitzvahs. After only one Shabbat we joined and felt at home.



Along the way there have been a few unpleasant occurrences. Once at Shabbat morning service a congregant told Ryan that he shouldn't be wearing a tallis. Ryan - who attended services frequently and wore one as a sign of respect - was quite upset. It wasn't *what* he was told, rather, it was the *way* he was told. The subsequent rabbi told Ryan that it was his choice whether to wear a tallis or not, so now he does wear one on Shabbat. However, Ryan no longer particularly enjoys attending Shabbat morning services, preferring instead Friday nights when the tallis is not an issue. (After this incident, the rabbi delivered a sermon about acceptance. I think a similar sermon every once in a while would be a positive thing.)

When planning our daughter's bat mitzvah we experienced another problem. We knew that Ryan would not be in the line to pass the Torah, a policy we understand. But when we were told that my husband even could not stand by my side when I had an aliyah, our entire family was distressed that he was separated out like this at our daughter's simchah. Since then, although we still attend services, it is much less frequent.

People are surprised at Ryan's continued commitment. He attends services on occasion, has served on synagogue committees, is active in the religious school and men's club. He even offered to be a shomer [one who watches over a body between death and burial] a task many people do not want to take on, but was told he could not. He fasts on Yom Kippur, refrains from eating chametz on Passover, etc. He does these things because he supports me, our children and our family.

Our congregation, along with many others, is changing. Many couples/families are intermarried, families are bi-racial, ethnically diverse and even with same-sex partners. It is important for all members that they feel welcome into the Jewish community. Our congregants need to realize that if a non-Jew is present in the synagogue, it's because they

want to be there. If interfaith couples are not welcome in our houses of worship, the Jewish community will lose the Jewish spouse.

It would be wonderful for rabbis to deliver sermons regularly about changing faces of the congregation. Having a translated siddur also would make people more comfortable.

Although I do not mind helping other couples/congregants understand what it means to be an interfaith family, sometimes it is even more dividing to keep referring to us as such.