

Beginning the Conversation Modern Jewish Families in Their Own Words

STEPHANIE AND MIKE

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our community's image of who is Jewish expands*

Mike and I have been married for almost six years and recently I gave birth to our second child. We both grew up in a Jewish neighborhood and met while working at Jewish summer camp. What makes us unique is that my husband is a convert to Judaism and is black. He was adopted from foster care shortly before his third birthday, was raised as a Catholic and even served as an altar boy. His grandparents owned one of the area's historic black funeral homes. But Mike, never strongly connected to Catholicism, became attracted to Judaism already in high school, perhaps, he thinks, because of its sense of community. He began the conversion process (in fact, before we met) when he was 22 years old. When his conversion was completed Mike celebrated by going to Israel with Birthright.



Over the years we have compiled our share stories, some humorous, some slightly irritating and some offensive. On the humorous side, a mother of a camper once noticing Mike's Jewish star probably meant to ask "Are you Jewish?" But what came out was "Are you black?" He looked at his arms as if to confirm, and answered, "yes." She asked, "Are your parents black?" Again, Mike looked at his arms and answered, "yes."

For the most part our experiences have been overwhelmingly positive. The Jewish community where we live is relatively small and Mike's outgoing personality is such that we know many people. We recently joined a new synagogue that is surprisingly diverse. But we have had a number of less positive experiences. Mike still faces visible shock when people find out he is Jewish which (after ten years) has become increasingly annoying. Just recently he went to drop off our deposit at a daycare center – the door of which was locked. It took some convincing for the director to accept that the 6'2" black man standing outside her door was safe to let in, much less a parent.

There is an automatic assumption when people meet Mike that he converted for me. While we are supposed to place no judgment on people that convert for marriage, I see why this offends him. Unfortunately, too many people judge converts more critically, and there are numerous occasions where people have judged him either for not knowing something or conversely, are surprised at his level of knowledge.

My family now embraces Mike, but that was a long road. I was raised in a traditional Jewish home, and my parents had a different image of who I would marry. Like the aforementioned preschool director, there is still a prevailing image of what a Jew "looks" like. Mike is articulate and personable, and while his experiences have been challenging, they did not scar him. However, we do worry about our own children and their experiences. Our oldest

daughter, Maya, is dark (as is our baby) and if you wanted to label her, it would be Black. She attends a Jewish preschool, will attend a Jewish day school, and loves all things Jewish. We continue to hope that as our daughters grow our community's image of who is Jewish expands, and that we, their family, have instilled in them the self-confidence to confront the challenges with humor and eloquence.