

Talking about Your Religious Beliefs: Advice to Interfaith Couples

By Rabbi Elias Lieberman

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It might happen on your first date; it might follow that first "meet-the-parents" dinner; it might not happen for months into your relationship. But, inevitably, sometime in an interfaith relationship you will speak to your partner about your faith tradition and the role it plays in your life.

Just as in the macrocosm of the world around us, so, too, in the microcosm of a relationship, religion can be a force for tremendous good as well as a source of tension and divisiveness. The need for an open exchange of thoughts and feelings about your respective religious outlooks is essential to the health of an interfaith relationship.

How, then, to talk about something which many would rank behind sex, money, and death as desirable subjects of conversation? What follows is some advice for interfaith couples gleaned from almost two decades of experience as a rabbi counseling them.

Do your homework Before embarking on a discussion of your religious beliefs, play cultural anthropologist. Learn about your partner's faith tradition through books; visit his/her church, mosque, or synagogue; watch movies that explore religious themes; visit museums; attend lectures; explore the Internet. A burgeoning number of books, including *The Guide to Jewish Interfaith Family Life: An InterfaithFamily.com Handbook* (Friedland and Case, editors; Jewish Lights Publishing), *The Intermarriage Handbook* (Petsonk & Remsen; Arbor House), and *Mixed Blessings* (Paul and Rachel Cowan; Doubleday), and websites, including www.interfaithfamily.com, www.beliefnet.com, and <http://uahc.org/outreach/interfaith.shtml>, have been created to provide interfaith couples with the information they need to engage in meaningful dialogue about religious choices. In short, be informed!

Don't confuse family traditions with religious beliefs Just because Uncle Sol always removes his shoes before the Passover seder (ritual meal) or Grandma Jennie garnishes the Easter ham with pineapple rings, don't assume that these customs reflect religious practice. It is all too easy to confuse beloved family traditions with religious tenets. Extended family can be a wonderful source of support in making decisions about your religious life as a couple. It can also be a source of tension and confusion, especially when well-intentioned relatives offer opinions instead of information. Be prepared to take what they say with a grain of (kosher?) salt.

Avoid "charged" times of the year to discuss religion December is not the best time to engage your beloved in a discussion of the relative merits of Christmas versus Hanukkah or whether to have a tree and/or a menorah. Anticipate times of the year which you know may be difficult for either of you and discuss them well in advance of those dates.

Rehearse! Before you engage your beloved in a discussion about religion and the role it plays, or will play, in your life together, be certain that you will be able to answer the following kinds

of questions: "What do you believe about the nature of God and religion?" "Why do you believe it?" "How did you come to believe it?" "What makes you uncomfortable or anxious with respect to religion?" "What religious values and/or practices would you wish to convey to your children, and why?" "What aspects, if any, of your partner's beliefs make you uncomfortable, and why?" "With what parts of your own faith tradition do you struggle?" "What distinctions do you draw between religious observance and identifying culturally with your faith tradition?"

Know and respect your partner's boundaries Once words are spoken they can never be reclaimed. Be respectful of your partner's attachment to his/her beliefs even if you are unable to embrace them. Beware of words and expressions which "push the buttons" of your partner.

Ask "stupid" questions The only "stupid" question is the unasked one, because it never brings you the answer you may need. Don't be ashamed to profess ignorance of any aspect of your partner's religious life. And, conversely, be aware that what is obvious to you may not be to your partner.

Be honest about your intentions Are you discussing religion with your partner because you're motivated by a desire to know and understand, or by a desire (perhaps an unconscious one) to demonstrate the superiority of your own faith tradition?

Don't be scared of the "C" word ("Conversion") Listen carefully to what motivates your partner to raise the subject of conversion with you. It is often an expression of genuine love, a desire to gift you with something your partner deems of inestimable value. Sometimes, it reflects your partner's concern for your spiritual well-being and the fate of your soul. Sometimes, your perceived reticence to discuss conversion is interpreted by your partner as a silent judgment on his/her worthiness to join your faith tradition!

As in the story told of dinner guests who enter the dining room to discover a miniature horse standing on the middle of the table, but who are all too embarrassed to even mention it to the host, the presence of religious attachments in an interfaith relationship cannot remain unexplored if that relationship is to flourish over time. As with any voyage of exploration, time spent preparing for this conversation will reward you handsomely in a greater understanding of your beloved and the potential for a strengthened relationship.

Please contact me with any questions or suggestions you may have. If you would like to be added to our interfaith eNewsletter distribution list – please call or email me.

Thank you,

Linda Kanner, LCSW
609 987-8100
LindaK@jfcsonline.org