

# Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and the Non-Jewish Partner

By Andrea King

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Ben and I had been married for a couple of years when I asked him to take me to a High Holy Day service. As a regular churchgoer who enjoyed the ceremonies and rituals of worship, I thought I'd appreciate the service. Besides, I wanted a glimpse into Ben's background.

It turned out to be one of the most disconcerting experiences of my life. Yom Kippur was a blistering September day and the temple was packed. When we arrived, the service was already in progress, but no one looked askance as we (and several other late arrivals) found seats. I noticed that many people seemed to be comfortable talking and walking around during the service. The music, instead of being joyful and uplifting, was downright mournful. To top it off, when the service ended, it just ended. No triumphal procession down the aisle and out of the building to carry the message of faith into the world. People simply left. This was not how we Episcopalians worshiped!

Suddenly I felt distanced from Ben; maybe we didn't share as much as I had thought. This was the one service of the year he was willing to attend, and I wanted to share it with him, but I could not. It was simply too different.

Twenty-some years later, I know that my reaction was predictable. Interfaith couples tend to build their relationships on their similarities rather than on their differences. What the couple shares is much more important to each partner than the ways in which they differ. Couples tend to identify the parallel threads in their ceremonies and holidays, while playing down the differences.

It's easy, for example, to find all the ways that a christening is like a bris (circumcision ceremony) or baby-naming. The Jewish Shabbat and the Christian Sabbath are both designed to be days of rest and worship, set apart from the rest of the week. Christmas and Hanukkah, because they occur at the same time of year, are easy to link. Passover and Easter also have the calendar in common, and because the Last Supper was in all probability a Passover seder, the bond between the two holidays is especially strong.

This comparability can be convenient and comfortable for the Christian partner: for each new Jewish holiday or event, there seems to be a familiar Christian parallel. That, in a nutshell, is why Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are so difficult for non-Jewish interfaith partners. There is no Christian analogy to the High Holy Days.

The two Christian festivals that most American Christians celebrate are Christmas and Easter, which go nicely with Hanukkah and Passover. All four have messages of hope and freedom; all four have home-based customs that focus on children; all four are essentially fun. For many interfaith couples, the "Four-Holiday Calendar" fills their need and/or desire for religious observance.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur do not make it onto this top-four list, despite the central role that the High Holy Days play within Judaism. Why? First, there is no big Christian holiday in September to balance them. Second, the whole tone of High Holy Day services is foreign to most Christians. If you haven't grown up with them, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are not easy to understand and appreciate. Somber self-reflection is seldom the theme at Christmas or Easter services. Third, there are few home-based customs in connection with the High Holy Days, so it's difficult to include young children in the observance. Finally, even though it's the one time of year that many Jews are drawn to services, the Jewish partner may not be able to

articulate why the High Holy Days are meaningful to him/her, and it's hard to share what you can't talk about.

So why bother with the High Holy Days? Because, even for the non-Jew, there can be meaning in the services and value in the exercise of self-reflection.

Through 20-odd years of Rosh Hashanah, Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur services, I have grown to appreciate them. I see them now as an opportunity to take a break from the hectic demands of family and work, a time to look honestly at my goals and progress, my shortcomings and strivings. The cycle of High Holy Day services is a progression that offers me a chance to clear the dust, cobwebs and disorder from my mind, re-focus on my priorities, and start fresh. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur give us a couple of family days without having to entertain, travel, shop, or even cook much. We can spend time together and, if we choose, take stock of where we've been and where we're going.

I didn't grow up with the High Holy Days. Hearing the *shofar* (ram's horn, which is blown on the High Holidays) or the *Kol Nidre* (haunting chant that is offered on the evening of Yom Kippur) will never transport me back to my childhood as it does Ben. For me, the High Holy Days are an adult expression of my continuing growth as a thinking, feeling, caring human being. At High Holy Day services I am part of a community engaged in the process of self-examination. There is meaning in this uniquely Jewish observance, even for this non-Jew.



**Andrea King is the Christian partner in an interfaith marriage of 25 years. She and her husband, Ben Cardozo, live in Santa Monica, Calif. The family belongs to Beth Shir Sholom, a Reform synagogue, where their son Nathan became bar mitzvah, Ben has served on the Board, and Andrea heads the outreach program. Ms. King is the author of *If I'm Jewish and You're Christian, What are the Kids?* (UAHC Press, 1993). She holds a master's degree in education, and supervises the preschools for the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District.**