



# Dovetail

A Journal by and for Jewish/Christian Families

September/October 2005 Volume 14, Number 1

## Working on the Basics: Making Plans with an Interfaith Perspective

This is the first issue of the **Dovetail** journal's new incarnation as a pdf-only publication. We are sad to have left our venerable print version, and yet remain committed and excited about the Dovetail Institute's prospects for the future. Thirteen years is a very long life for a small magazine with no newsstand sales, major advertising, or institutional underwriting to support it.

As the only independent, non-denominational, national organization for interfaith couples, we feel a responsibility to keep making plans and working to fulfill our mission. The major set of plans we're immersed in at the moment: Dovetail's Fifth National Conference, "How Interfaith Families Can Thrive and Contribute in a Polarized World."

It will take place January 12-15, 2006 (the three day weekend of Rev. Martin Luther King's birthday observances). I am happy to report that the Bradely Hills Presbyterian Church (BHPC) and the Bethesda Jewish Congregation (BJC) have graciously agreed to let us use the facility they share at 6601 Bradley Blvd. in Bethesda, MD.

Dovetail Executive Board Member Maran Gluckstein, a longtime educator and administrator with BJC, is chairing the committee, with the help of local groups such as the Interfaith Families Project (IFFP) and the Jewish-Catholic Family Network of Greater Washington, as well as Sheila Gordon's Interfaith Community in New York. If you would like to offer to participate, please contact Maran at [opera.buff@verizon.net](mailto:opera.buff@verizon.net).

It seems particularly appropriate to usher in the Jewish High Holiday season with a discussion of plans. Rosh Hashanah is about beginnings, but it is rooted in the matrix of the past and its traditions as a base on which to construct the future.

In "The Ram and the Cross," taking her cue from two seminal symbols of dedication and sacrifice from the two faiths in her life, Debra Johanyuk takes a sensitive, nuanced look at some plans and decisions she made earlier in her life and how they've worked out. She concludes with some checkpoints for couples trying to make their own plans.

Susan D. Sheu, in "Going with the Flow," takes a heartfelt look at her own decision-making process and the way it has matured through her own thinking and her interaction with others.

Francine Trevens introduces us to a couple whose lives didn't work out quite as they'd planned—but who were able to adopt a new plan that makes them feel they've "won" in the game of life.

Gwenyfar Rohler has had to resist being forced into the molds that other people plan for her. The result: a rich and nurturing mix of her own devising.

The haunting, bitterly beautiful poem "Marrano" by Carol Tufts brings us back to the other part of the High Holiday season: the repentance and grief of Yom Kippur.

We finish with a bit of Internet humor to lighten that weight a bit.

May you all be inscribed in the Book of Life, and may none of your "best laid plans," in the words of scottish poet Robert Burns, "gang aft agley."

**Mary Rosenbaum**

# Going with the Flow

By Susan D. Sheu

The closest I've ever come to a moment of truth was the mikvah before I converted to Judaism in 1998. As I entered the warm, deep pool, the "mikvah lady" nearby and my conversion rabbi behind a curtain, it dawned on me that maybe I wasn't ready for all of this. The rabbi's muted voice spoke words in Hebrew and English across the expanse of the room, my mind went blank, and my naked body focused on the primal associations with the bath. It was my first inkling that I'd prematurely taken the plunge, so to speak, to convert to Judaism.

## Wading into Judaism

Ever since my husband and I had become a couple, five years before, I'd been respectful and mildly observant of his religion. I agreed to convert because my husband's Jewish identity seemed so important to him. He was not observant, but he made a few attempts to fast on Yom Kippur, to be festive at Pesach and Rosh Hashana. I'd taken a Judaism course in college that I'd enjoyed, and my Jewish friends in high school and college had been people among whom I felt particularly at home, whose values appealed to me.

It seemed logical for me to convert; certainly my new religion would mean more to me than my previous agnostic Christianity, I thought. One of the three rabbis on my *beit din* seemed to hold a

sense of foreboding as the others, delighted to add a Jew-by-choice to the fold, shook my hand. "You will have to seek out a community with whom you can learn to practice if you want to make this your own," she said, her brow furrowed despite her smile.

Perhaps she said this to me because I started off as another non-Jewish woman who'd promised to raise Jewish children. Perhaps she'd seen how the best intentions can go awry in one spouse's attempt to make another one happy. Maybe she was savvy enough to detect the graduate student tone of my essay and responses to the verbal questions, to know that my mind and not my heart had made this decision.

In the years that followed, I mostly counted my blessings. My Methodist mother not only supported my choice, but went so far as to request that we go to temple on the Friday nights when she visits, to sing the transliterated songs, and to put Stars of David on her Christmas tree. My other relatives seem to respect that my husband and I are Jews, even though they are Evangelical Chinese. They inquire whether our family banquets in Taiwan must be kosher, and are relieved when we say no.

But I could not hide from the fact that I'd taken Judaism for a form of secular humanism. The Jews' history of social justice despite our

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tragedies, our love of learning, and our involvement in politics were all part of my new identity. Any desire to practice Judaism as a religion, however, eluded me. I tried to accept that, as a woman married to a secular Jew. I would originate any rituals we adopted. But I felt little to motivate me. Belatedly, I found that I was not in love with the decision I'd made for the love of my husband.

Our religious practice, or lack thereof, became an area of discomfort in our marriage. Eventually we ceased even going through the motions because of the strife it caused between my husband and me.

### Getting in the swim


Several years later, when it came time for us to choose a preschool for our first child, we chose our temple's. Both its reputation and my instinct that the tiny school beneath the eucalyptus trees was the right place for her made our decision easy. We enrolled in the toddler class in order for her to acclimate to the school environment. Little did I know that the class would educate me as much as it would stimulate her.

Getting used to the class was easy enough. Living in a large city, my daughter and I have tried a variety of mommy-and-me and music classes, most with pleasant teachers, parents, and kids. But this class was different. It was a twice-weekly slice of community. After a few sessions, the children mostly adhered to the rules of their toddler community: we don't hit, we take turns, and singing the

clean-up song means it's time to pitch in. The orderliness of a group dynamic takes over; as a critical mass sits quietly at the table, the other toddlers follow suit. On Friday mornings, we light candles and sing songs over the challah, snacks, and imaginary Kiddush cups.

The mothers seemed to blend together just as well. Some working and some not, some Jewish and others only raising their children Jewish, they were easy to talk to and had concerns like mine, an outlook on raising children that I shared. None of us hovered, yet we all enforced reasonable boundaries. Within a few weeks, I grew to view the class as an oasis for my tired soul. While my daughter sang songs about tzedakah and Shabbat at home, and talked about her friends from "temple class," I looked forward to watching my daughter play and learn the building blocks of faith.

Perhaps it's fitting that through learning at the preschool level I am finally letting my high-minded intellectual choice into my being. My pleasure at seeing my child in the infancy of faith is tempered with knowing that she, like me, could reject it all when she is older. But when I see her touch the Torah at religious services and belt out the songs she's learned, I know that she will grow up with precepts I believe in, even if they've been hard-earned for me. She is free to make them her own, or not. Like my own tolerant mother, I will try to be satisfied if she simply believes in something. I don't pretend to feel completely

at home with the choice I made years ago, but I know that the Jewish life I've chosen means practice and repetition, with others of like mind, more than looking for the answers in a book or by myself. While the latter has given me knowledge, only a genuine community has brought me joy, and the possibility of faith. 



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**Dovetail's** mission is to provide a channel of communication for interfaith couples, their parents, and their children. No matter what their specific choices regarding faith for their home and children, the more interfaith families can share their ideas, experiences, resources, and support, the more they can make peace in their homes and communities. Jewish and Christian perspectives can dovetail.

Believing that there are no definitive answers to the questions facing interfaith families, **Dovetail** strives to be open to all ideas and opinions. Editorial content attempts to balance and respect the perspectives of both Jewish and Christian partners in interfaith marriages, as well as the diverse perspectives of parents and children of interfaith couples. Inclusion in **Dovetail** does not imply endorsement. **Dovetail** accepts a thoughtful and constructive discussion of all related issues in the Letters to the Editor section, and reserves the right to reply.

For information on subscriptions, please visit [www.dovetailinstitute.org](http://www.dovetailinstitute.org).

**Dovetail** welcomes article submissions, letters to the editor, and comments or suggestions: [di-ifr@bardstown.com](mailto:di-ifr@bardstown.com)

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