



and their families has occurred within progressive congregations, a strong heterosexual and binary gender identity bias remains. Particularly ironic has been the unease of people in the Jewish gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities to welcome me as a transsexual, even though much of the discrimination we face has more to do with gender presentation than sexual behavior.

In our family, we deal with the vicissitudes of family life common to all — school, balancing outside and home lives, engaging the larger world, friends, activities, driver's education. And we share with other Jews the personal and historical perspective of living as an often misunderstood and discriminated against minority. Sometimes my status as a single parent is as relevant as being transsexual.

At my child's ba' mitzvah while I felt welcomed within the synagogue community I also felt slightly

invisible — the journey as a single-parent, transsexual family toward this milestone was less understood, acknowledged, and celebrated. I am very proud of my child's Jewish identity and connection to the community. As an astute and critical thinker with a curiosity of intellect, a kindness of spirit, a sense of responsibility toward the world, a desire for justice, and a good heart, my child reflects values that have been nurtured within our family. They are important human attributes and a profound part of our Jewish identity.

So, I suppose, when you get down to basics, we are really not so different after all.

*In addition to being a parent, Dr. Alex Coleman is a clinical psychologist and attorney. An activist since the 1960s, he continues to grow, stretch, and seek new meanings and possibilities.*

## Mitzvot During Christmas: My Interfaith Experience

*Heather Ellen Miller*

When I was in the tenth grade, I attended a Jewish community high school in Los Angeles with Persian, German, Israeli, Russian, Ethiopian, and other Jewish students. I felt a welcome and legitimate part of the heterogeneous setting, as a product of an interfaith family. During the course of one class discussion, though, a friend insisted that intermarriage should be avoided at all costs; according to her, intermarriage dilutes the Jewish people and could result in our people's destruction.

As a child born into an interfaith family — my father is not Jewish — I initially internalized her assertion, feeling as though my family life embodied her vision. Gradually, however, I began to see her argument unravel. Here I was in a Jewish high school, assuming leadership in the traditional egalitarian minyan, organizing and gathering our community together every week for prayer. How could I be accused of representing our destruction?

I was raised to be a proud link in the chain of my family's Jewish legacy, without fear that I would adopt my father's family's Christianity. Therefore, during my childhood, we placed Easter eggs on the Passover seder plate. We opened Hanukkah presents in front of the fake Christmas tree that we would take

out of the closet and trim every December. Additionally, we visited my Christian grandparents on the East Coast and attended church services with them. But, as I pinned new pairs of mittens on the church Christmas tree, I recognized their distribution to needy children as the mitzvah of *tzedakah*.

A close friend of mine experienced an incident that similarly challenged her full legitimacy as a member of the Jewish community. At her bat mitzvah rehearsal, her non-Jewish father had been welcomed onto the *bimah*. But at the ceremony, her father was asked not to join the family on the *bimah*. Exacerbated by a lack of clarity, my friend read this incident as an injustice and recalls her entrance into Jewish womanhood as a period of tears and tissues, of mixed messages and equivocal welcome.

Clearly, the issue of interfaith family status and participation in Jewish ritual observance is complicated. The Jewish community is faced with the challenge of ensuring that Jewish identity remains accessible and relevant to anyone who seeks to bring her or his whole self to the Jewish people. We have a responsibility to understand how synagogue and movement policy affect all Jewish families — regardless of which family members are Jewish. In this way,

we will best ensure a vibrant and committed community in the future.

*Heather Ellen Miller is a first-year rabbinic student at Hebrew Union College. She has worked at the Northeast Regional Branch of the Jewish Theological Seminary*

*and currently serves in leadership positions of several national nonprofit organizations. In 2000, she was presented with the Multicultural Achievement Award by her alma mater, Wellesley College, where she graduated with a dual degree in Peace and Justice Studies with a focus in Jewish History, and African Studies.*

## Shifting Beneath Our Feet: Jewish Families Today

*Rela Mintz Geffen*

In our ever-changing world, the very bedrock of human society is shifting beneath our feet. At least it feels that way as we survey the contemporary Jewish family in America. We no longer take for granted the existence of a typical Jewish family/household, one of whose main tasks is to create and nurture future citizens of the Jewish community. First there are the structural changes. The most common Jewish American household a decade ago (according to the National Jewish Population Survey of 1990) was one adult Jew living alone. Two adult Jews living together followed, and only then did we find the assumed normative household — two adult Jews, married to each other and with at least one child under the age of 18. This last configuration accounted for about 15 percent of Jewish households; nearly one-third if mixed married nuclear families were included in the tally. Single parent households through divorce or by choice, interracial as well as gay couples with children have become more common and more visible in the Jewish and general American communities.

Second, within the households that appear structurally intact we find profound internal changes. One or both spouses might be in their second marriage, and one or both might be converts to Judaism. As a consequence, among the children one could find those who were “yours,” “mine,” and “ours”; those who were Jewish, half-Jewish, or Christian; those who had the same grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins; and those who had some but not all in common. What sociologists call “families of orientation” — that is, the nuclear family into which a person is born — have become increasingly heterogeneous and fragmented. The revolution in gender roles has also significantly influenced the internal functioning of families popularly known as “married with chil-

dren.”

Third, “families of procreation” have been delayed, with the age at first marriage becoming progressively older for Jewish women and men. Though by mid-century Jews were hailed in the general demographic literature as the most effective users of birth control in American society, it wasn’t until the late 1960s that analysts of contemporary Jewish life noted the aggregate results of this skill combined with other economic and social factors. By the mid-1960s, the Jewish birthrate was below 2.1, the zero population growth (ZPG) level. By the time of the 1970 NJPS, the Jewish birthrate for the previous decade was projected at well below ZPG, a trend maintained through 1990.

What most commentators on the “fertility” question failed to note was that the U.S. birthrate was converging with that of the Jewish community. But if Jews were a smaller proportion of the total U.S. population, it was primarily due not to low or well planned fertility but rather to the loss of young Jews to what sociologist Marshall Sklare had felicitously termed “sociological death.” In the 1970s Sklare postulated that assimilation, intermarriage, apostasy, and conversion out of Judaism constituted a “sociological death” as powerful as the classic demographic variables of birth and mortality. And the findings two decades later — that more than 80 percent of the children of mixed marriage do not choose Judaism when they become adults — confirms his analysis.

In the rhetoric of everyday Jewish communal life, the consequences of delayed marriage and fertility for the life journeys of adult Jews have largely been ignored in favor of communal breast-beating over the absence of their unconceived children. Among the consequences of deferred and lowered fertility are that most Jewish adults are