

# Will Christopher McNulty feel "at home" in a Jewish Religious School?

By Sheila E. Goldberg

## The Challenge

"What is in a name?" This oft-quoted line of William Shakespeare is a reflection of the changes occurring within the Jewish community as we approach the 21st century. A generation ago it was not unusual to hear a parent or a grandparent identify someone as a Jew based on their last name. Today, this no longer holds true. In many of our religious schools we find children named McNulty, Wong and Fitzpatrick through intermarriage, the Jewish community has greatly expanded.

## Parents Provide a Foundation

The successful integration of children from interfaith families into religious schools begins long before the child is born. It is the parents who must provide the foundation for success. In the decision to enter an interfaith marriage, it is important that the couple address the religious upbringing of their children, as this issue only becomes more difficult after the child is born. Many interfaith couples take the "easy" road by giving a child what they consider "the best of both worlds" and then letting that child make his or her own decision. As I see it, the problem with this approach is that this child ultimately has only a superficial knowledge of both religions and lacks a solid religious identity to hold on to as an adult. In addition, if the child later chooses one parent's religion over the other, she or he could be viewed as favoring that parent. Confusion around religious identity often results.

## Situations We Confront in Religious School

A number of years ago one of my third grade teachers came to me quite concerned about a student in her class. It was December, and whenever she attempted to have a discussion about Hanukkah, the child would chime in with "I'm only half Jewish and I celebrate Christmas too." He was part of an interfaith family which had decided to expose the children to both religious traditions. Knowing that this was a delicate issue, I went into her class to facilitate a discussion on what it feels like to be Jewish at Christmas time. I had barely begun when he let me know that he was "half and half." In a loving way I told him that since his parents had enrolled him in our religious school we understood that to mean that he was being raised as a Jew. He was quiet for most of the remaining discussion, but at the very end he raised his hand and said to me, "There are times I'm just not sure what I am." In a non-judgmental way, I told his parents what had happened that day in class. They agreed that what they had attempted to do didn't appear to be working. Once they made a firm commitment to raise their children as Jews, the child's confusion ceased and he ultimately became one of our most knowledgeable and enthusiastic students.

The following December I had a very different experience with a fifth grader whose father, a non-Jew, agreed to create a Jewish home for their children. It was right before winter break and the mother was delayed at work. I offered to drive her son home. On the way, we talked about the approaching holidays. He told me that they had a Christmas tree in their home. I was taken aback for a moment, and then I commented that it must be hard for him living with two religious traditions. "Oh no," he replied. "My mother and I are Jewish and we celebrate the Jewish holidays. But we also help my dad and my grandparents celebrate their holiday too. It's sort of like helping someone celebrate their birthday." It was evident that he has a strong Jewish identity and does not see this as in any way undermining the love he feels for his father or his non-Jewish grandparents.

The key to success clearly depends upon parents being united in their commitment to raising their child in one religion and jointly reinforcing his/her identity. Children need to know that this is not about choosing one parent over another or loving one parent more. It is about doing what you ultimately believe will be in the best interest of your child.

### Congregation as the "Support System"

If parents have made the decision to raise their child as a Jew and to provide him/her with a Jewish education, the next step might be to join a synagogue. Selecting the right synagogue is crucial. It must be a place where both the Jewish and the non-Jewish spouse feel welcome, comfortable and supported. To make this determination, couples need to take the time to meet with the rabbi and the Jewish educator. If they have school-age children, they should ask to sit in on a class to get a feel for the atmosphere of the school. It's also important to find out how the congregation welcomes interfaith couples.

Congregations that open their doors to interfaith couples and families must be prepared to do more than merely accept them as members. They must find ways to integrate and support these couples. This could entail mentoring programs where interfaith families who have successfully raised Jewish children and created a Jewish home help couples who are just starting out on this path. For couples who are ready to think about conversion, the natural mentor would be someone who has just recently become a Jew by choice.

Several years ago I did a session with preschool families who were either interfaith or where one spouse was a Jew by choice. Mid-way through the workshop, a young woman, a Jew by choice, shared her pain with us. She had gone through a traditional conversion and felt that she had a very strong Judaic background; "My husband says I know far more than he ever did." But somehow that wasn't enough. Not having grown up in a Jewish home surrounded by tradition, she had no experiences to draw on and, as a result, felt she had no choice but to repeat the traditions of her husband's family even though they were not meaningful for her. She and her husband needed to know that it was okay to create their own family traditions and know that we, the professional staff, were available to help them in this process.

Our congregations must be sensitive to the issues and feelings of our interfaith families. We must also be aware of and ready to help couples with additional unresolved issues.

### The religious school Experience

In congregations where interfaith families are welcomed and a support system is in place, it is not unusual to find a Education Director who is sensitive to the needs and feelings of these families. Educators must also work with their staff to uncover any prejudices or ambivalence on the part of the teachers. One way of doing this is to invite interfaith parents who have created a Jewish home to meet with the staff and share their experiences and successes. As educators, we need to dispel the myth that if both parents are not Jewish, then their children will not ultimately become Jews.

It is important that interfaith families meet with the Education Director to discuss their commitment to the education of their child/ren and to provide any information that could be helpful to teachers. In order for religious education to be meaningful, it is important that all families, interfaith or not, make a commitment to be a "partner" in their child's education. This involves participation as a family in services, holiday celebrations and family education programs as well as "at home" rituals such as Shabbat dinners.

With the family involved, the scene is then set for Christopher McNulty to have a meaningful religious school experience.

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