

Strangers to the Tribe

By Philip Berroll

Gabrielle Glaser can identify with Madeline Albright. Like the Secretary of State, Glaser, a freelance journalist, grew up believing that she was a Christian – in her case, a German Lutheran, like most of her neighbors in rural Oregon – before learning otherwise. While visiting Poland in 1984, Glaser found out that she was actually descended from Jews who had emigrated from that country a century earlier.

Unlike Albright, Glaser chose to return to Judaism, and formally converted. One factor in her decision was her marriage to *New York Times* correspondent Steven Engelberg, the son of Holocaust survivors. “When we had our first child, we had to make a decision,” she says. “I didn’t want to my kids to be confused.” Yet she found that her in-laws still had trouble accepting her as a member of their faith -- they seemed to feel that “I wasn’t Jewish enough.”

Glaser began to wonder if there were other American couples who had experienced similar problems. Her curiosity has resulted in a new book, *Strangers to the Tribe: Portraits of Interfaith Marriage* (Houghton Mifflin), in which she profiles 11 interfaith couples and the challenges that they face in our multicultural – but still predominantly non-Jewish – society.

On Friday, November 17, Glaser discussed her book in an appearance at the Barnes & Noble bookstore in Bayside’s Bay Terrace shopping mall. Her talk was part of a weeklong program, Interfaith Week, sponsored by the Samuel Field YMHA of Little Neck. The Field YMHA had conceived Interfaith Week as a means of publicizing a new project, Interfaith Network, which it had developed with a grant from the Mazer Foundation (the grant was arranged through UJA-Federation). This program includes monthly meetings for interfaith couples, a support group for their parents and grandparents, and a telephone “warmline” providing confidential responses to interfaith-related questions.

“We decided that what we needed was a way of getting the information out to the public that we were here and we were available,” says program coordinator Lynn Levy. In addition to Glaser, the week’s speakers included Lynne Wolfe, director of the interfaith-outreach program at MetroWest, a Jewish community center in New Jersey. “Lynne has really been a forerunner in

interfaith outreach,” says Levy. “She’s worked very closely with Dr. Egon Mayer of Jewish Outreach Institute (JOY) in Manhattan, who is one of the great spokesmen for outreach in the Jewish community today.”

Glaser told the Barnes & Noble audience that she hopes her book “will give people who feel lonely or isolated in the intermarriage experience something to think about. It will give them models for how other people do it, how other people feel.” And she has tried to do this, she said, while maintaining a tone of objectivity, in contrast to what she calls the “judgmental” tone of previous books on the subject.

Some of Glaser’s subjects – ranging in age from 20s to 70s – are certain to raise eyebrows. Take, for example, the Schandler-Wong family of Hawaii. “The mother is from an Orthodox Jewish home in North Carolina,” said Glaser. “She worked for United Airlines, and wound up meeting a very nice Chinese man from Honolulu. He ultimately decided to convert, and they raised two kids in Honolulu named Ari & Sha’aloni Wong. They have a drawer for kosher chopsticks.”

Such situations may sound amusing, but in truth, according to Glaser, intermarriage can often be a minefield of pain and confusion. Especially tough, she said, are holidays and “life-cycle” events, which “may trigger heartfelt feelings about identity, and who we are, and how is this child going to be raised – what does it mean to me if I’m a Jew and I baptize my child? What does it mean to me if I’m a Catholic and this child *isn’t* baptized? What does it mean for the child in the future?”

Levy, who made a few remarks following Glaser’s talk, agreed that what she calls “the December dilemma” is a major issue for interfaith couples: “The Christmas tree is often the center of a highly charged drama -- particularly for a family which identifies itself as Jewish, except for this two or three weeks of the year when they put the tree in the window. This year it will be particularly rough, because (Christmas and Hanukkah) coincide on the calendar. There’s no way of keeping them separate and distinct.”

Some families, said Glaser, try to split the difference, especially regarding their children. She cited the case of a Catholic-Jewish couple whose first child was baptized at the insistence of the wife's mother. "The father (felt) he was railroaded into this decision. And they decided at that moment that the next child would be Jewish. So now they have a 12-year-old girl who's Catholic, and an 8- or 9- year-old boy who's Jewish. And that's unusual, I would say. But it's not something I would recommend."

Nor does she advise intermarrieds to bring up their children with no religious identification. When a woman in the audience asked about a niece who was raised in an interfaith marriage, without any religious education, "Will she wonder who she is?" Glaser responded, "I'm sure she will. Studies show that children raised in this way wind up as agnostics, with no steady faith, with no strong, clear identity. Is that a nightmare? No – I think in part, that's America. Everybody has a little bit of this, a little bit of that. But for Jewish people, I think it's something of a sad outcome."

But perhaps the saddest people in these situations, the ones with the greatest sense of heartbreak and injury, are the couples' parents. Glaser has met a number of them.

"They feel wronged, and very, very hurt," she said. "It's your sense of identity, of your spiritual legacy being passed on. 'How could my children do this to me?' 'How could they have not known this was important to me?' It's very sad and very painful for everybody involved, especially those who feel that they're the losers in the paradigm. If your grandchildren don't end up as you had envisioned, it's very, very difficult. And not everybody is always on their best behavior.

"The best way I found for people to work through these issues," Glaser continued, "is the ordinary old hard way of talking, and confronting them head on at the very beginning of the relationship. I think the worst thing was when people didn't talk about them, when they just decided that somehow fate would help them decide, or the children would decide later, and they didn't talk to their parents, they didn't address the issues."

Her sentiments were echoed by Levy, who told the audience that this was the purpose of the Field YMHA's outreach program. "It's very possible to create and maintain a good environment and healthy relationships," she said. "And we're going to explore, in these groups, different

avenues and ways of doing that. Because the reality is that we are experiencing a 52% rate of intermarriage in Jewish life, and it's a reality that's not apt to go away. We have to deal with the reality of those numbers.”

Still, the good news, according to Glaser, is that surveys indicate that more than half of those 52% are couples raising their children as Jews. Indeed, both women insisted, the conventional wisdom that intermarriage is a kind of conversion-by-default for the Jewish partner is not true. Quite the contrary, said Levy: “Once [gentile partners] have become interested in learning about Judaism,” she asserted, “they are leaning towards Judaism – I can't say for sure about conversions, but certainly in terms of rearing children and having a single-religion home, which is, I would say, the first step toward conversion.”

Interestingly, according to Levy, a gentile wife is often more likely to push for a Jewish home than her born-Jewish husband. “Very often a husband has taken a middle-of-the-road stance – he'll refuse to have a Christian home, but won't really be the force behind a Jewish home,” she said. “But once the non-Jewish wife becomes interested in Judaism, she is really in a position to make that a reality for the family. I think this might be because even in today's society, the woman structures the home. She's there more with the children; she's the one who introduces religion into the home, and certain rituals.”

This was certainly true for Glaser. “My husband, like many Jews his age, basically had no Jewish experiences between his bar mitzvah and his wedding,” she told her audience, “aside from Passover and Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I wanted our children to be raised as Jews in much stronger terms – ‘We are going to light Shabbat candles every Friday night. We're going to synagogue every weekend.’

“My husband,” she said with a laugh, “sometimes raises up his hands and says, ‘How did this happen? Who is this person?’”

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