# 5. Paul Cowan with Rachel Cowan, *Mixed Blessings: Overcoming the Stumbling Blocks in an Interfaith Marriage*

Paul Cowan with Rachel Cowan, *Mixed Blessings: Overcoming the Stumbling Blocks in an Interfaith Marriage*, New York: Penguin Books, 1987

**Paul Cowan** (1940–1988) was a staff writer at the *Village Voice*.

**Rabbi Rachel Cowan** (1941–2018) was Executive Director of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality and Co-Founder of the Jewish Healing Movement.

When Jews and Christians first fall in love, they usually regard themselves as individualists who will be able to transcend the specific cultural demands of the pasts that shaped their beliefs and laid claims on their loyalties. But that is a more difficult task than they imagine, for at some profound level of self and psyche, most will always be attached to the religious and ethnic tribes in which they were raised. They'll remain Americanized Eastern European Jews or German Methodists or Italian Catholics or Chinese Buddhists. They love the cultural assumptions that permeated their households when they were young: the background music of ordinary life, which a child takes for granted, which an adolescent or young adult tries to forget. If couples don't acknowledge such assumptions in the same way that people acknowledge music—as an interior melody that can't be articulated in words—they can damage the ecology of an intermarriage.

If a struggle over religion does begin, it often takes couples by surprise, thrusting them into confusing, seemingly endless discussions. For suddenly they discover that they are not interchangeable parts of an American whole, but two people whose different pasts have endowed them with a distinct set of feelings. How should they discuss their differences? How can each understand the ethnic and religious context in which the other's emotions exist? (128)

By the time children are old enough to ask about their identities, most patterns of a marriage are already established. Couples have negotiated their wedding ceremonies, the details of housekeeping, child care, wage earning,

bill paying. They know what they'll do when one wants to make love and the other feels too tired. They have learned whether they can live with an annoying habit, like chronic lateness or bad table manners, or whether those habits may be the first step on the route to the divorce court.

But when the new person in their home asks questions which indicate uncertainty about his or her religious or ethnic identity, the interfaith couple may feel its marital ecology is imperiled. If the child asks a question indirectly, the couple may fail to acknowledge its importance or dismiss it as a cute remark. If the question suggests urgency, as our son Matt's question about Haman did, it may provide such doubt and disagreement that the parents ignore it altogether.

But they shouldn't. All youngsters need to feel secure. Often, when they ask questions about faith, they are seeking emotional reinforcement. But when children of intermarriage combine remarks about faith with questions about identity, they are trying to discover where they belong, as well. They are trying to ascertain *their* religion, *their* ethnicity, *their* place in a world that seems quite puzzling. They need to hear answers that show them their parents are comfortable with whatever spiritual choice they have made. (152)

Gentiles who feel pressure to convert to Judaism usually say that they haven't ruled out the prospect entirely. But, like Tim and Chris in our workshop, they want to feel as if they are making the decision for themselves, not for a spouse or for an in-law. They want to be treated as individuals, with their own histories, their own accomplishments, their own values. They bridle when a rabbi, an in-law, a spouse make them feel that the only important question about them is whether they'll become Jews.

In those situations, it is important that the spouse or in-law who hopes the gentile will choose Judaism find a program of Jewish study that is intellectually stimulating and doesn't demand immediate conversion. It is important that the gentile is exposed to a ritual life with meaning, and a community of Jews which welcomes newcomers. For people are far more willing to choose Judaism if they see it as an attractive way of life than if conversion is only portrayed as an homage to the 6 million. (236)

## COMMENTARY BY SAMIRA K. MEHTA

When Paul and Rachel Cowan published *Mixed Blessings: Overcoming the Stumbling Blocks in an Interfaith Marriage* in 1987, they were drawing from over

twenty years of marriage and from workshops they ran through several Jewish organizations including synagogues, the 92nd Street Y, American Jewish Committee, and Hillel. Their book, published by Penguin, was blurbed by Rabbi Harold S. Kushner (*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*) who wrote, "One of the most important books to come along in years. The right book on the right subject by the right people." The *New York Times Book Review* and the *Los Angeles Times* both agreed.

So, what allowed Kushner to give *Mixed Blessings* this endorsement? When *Mixed Blessings* was published, Jewish leaders and many active in Jewish communal life understood interfaith marriage (or intermarriage, as it was commonly called) to be the defining problem facing American Judaism. The National Jewish Population Survey, released three years after *Mixed Blessings*, offered statistical evidence for what many already knew to be true: 50% of American Jews were "marrying out." Their book was the "right subject" because it was of the moment.

While Jewish communities had rejected interfaith marriage for much of the twentieth century, the wildly increasing rates of interfaith marriage caused a shift in communal perspective. In 1971, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the Reform movement's rabbinic organization, had reluctantly rejected a policy that would have forbidden its clergy from performing interfaith marriages, a rejection rooted not so much in support for interfaith marriage as in autonomy for the rabbinic pulpit.[1] That said, some of the CCAR leadership saw a strategic reason for rabbis to perform interfaith weddings, namely, avoiding the alienation of interfaith couples. This faction advocated for performing the weddings if the couple agreed to certain conditions outlined by Rabbi David Max Eichhorn: they had to raise the children as Jews, with formal Jewish education; maintain a Jewish home according to the standards of the community providing the children's education; and lastly, keep their homes devoid of any non-Jewish religious symbols and celebrations. These conditions were intended to keep interfaith couples within Judaism, without weakening Jewish religion through assimilation.[2]

The Reform movement made other attempts to attract interfaith families. In 1983, they had decided to recognize patrilineal descent (counting people

1 Samira Mehta, "Chrismukkah: Millennial Multiculturalism," *Religion and American Culture* 25, no. 1 (2015): 22–24.

2 Mehta, "Chrismukkah," 25.

with one Jewish parent and a Jewish education as Jewish).[3] This decision was a notable break with Jewish law, which had, for centuries, seen Jewish identity as exclusively matrilineal. In addition, since the late 1970s, the Jewish Outreach Institute had worked, largely under Lydia Kukoff's direction, to make interfaith couples and their resultant families feel welcome in Jewish communities (even if those same communities had rejected them at the time of their weddings). They worked to meet the needs of interfaith families—offering training in practicing Judaism and in navigating interfaith life and working with congregations to help them welcome these families. The Cowans participated in this effort, giving talks and workshops on interfaith family life, and it was into this moment of crisis and shifting understandings of outreach that *Mixed Blessings* appeared.

The Cowans were the right people because they, through personal inclinations and explorations, had come to the conclusions that the Reform movement hoped interfaith couples would reach. When they married in 1965, Paul was from a secular and assimilated Jewish family that spent more time on Christmas and Easter than on Jewish holidays. He had gone to Choate, a prestigious Episcopal prep school that had provided a painful crash course in assimilation. Rachel was from a rational and skeptical family that had joined a Unitarian church for social acceptability (9–11). They had begun their marriage, and their early parenting, in the model of "doing both." Paul writes that they both saw the holidays fitting together in a secular calendar and were drawn to religious ceremony (though ironically, Paul was drawn to the pageantry of high church Episcopalianism and Rachel to the home-based celebrations of Judaism) (17). When their children were five and three years old, their son came running to his mother during a Purim celebration, seeking assurance that Haman would not get him as he was only "half-Jewish." Shortly thereafter, their daughter asked whether Rachel would be hurt if she chose to be Jewish. For the Cowan parents, these questions were "timebombs" that could hurt their children over the long run (24). They felt that the household needed one religion and, for reasons that *Mixed Blessings* traces, the religion they chose was Judaism.

They had independently come to the conclusion that the Reform movement hoped all interfaith couples would reach: a household must have one religion, and Judaism makes the most sense for a Christian-Jewish interfaith couple. They presented their decision as best for their family, not growing out

3 "Report of the Committee on Patrilineal Descent on the Status of Children of Mixed Marriages Adopted by the Central Conference of American Rabbis at Its 94th Annual Convention," March 15, 1983, 739 Box 8 Folder 13, American Jewish Archives.

of a sense of obligation to Jewish community. Rather than feeling deprived of her heritage, Rachel Cowan found such meaning in Judaism that she eventually converted to Judaism and entered rabbinical school. (*Mixed Blessings* is presented as "by Paul, with Rachel" because the demands of rabbinical school were such that Rachel took a less involved role in the book's creation than initially planned.) While the Cowans made it clear that Rachel's conversion did not remove all of the "stumbling blocks" in their interfaith marriage—they still had been socialized to different emotional needs, communication styles, and habits of grocery shopping—they also made it clear that choosing Judaism had been the best choice for all.

If the Cowans had created "the right book on the right subject by the right people," they were writing in accordance with the understood best practices at that moment; but those best practices were the product of a particular set of historically and culturally located understandings. *Mixed Blessings* was read for more than two decades by couples seeking insight into how to run their interfaith families. (It is now out of print, still read, though less frequently.) But in those decades, couples came up with many critiques.

The Cowans did not intend to outline a system in which the wife subsumed her culture to that of the husband, but rather one in which Jewish culture was preserved at the expense of Christian culture. Their story, however, modeled a trend in both prescriptive literature and popular culture. The model interfaith couple, in the American imagination, was a Jewish husband and a Christian wife. The solution, then, was for the Christian wife to give up her traditions and to do much of the work of raising Jewish children and maintaining a Jewish home. At the same time, they presented Judaism as a religion and a culture, seemingly undermining some of their own arguments about how Christian Protestant culture had shaped Rachel's world.

The next generation of interfaith couples would critique this model, not only for its failures in understanding Christianity, but also for feminist failings. These couples were looking for something more egalitarian, in which Jewish husbands participated more in raising Jewish children and the wives' traditions were not consistently the ones sacrificed. Many couple who chose to do both cited feminist values. Rachel Cowan certainly identified as a feminist, but that did not prevent critiques of the implicit gender dynamics of *Mixed Blessings* when seen in the broader context of literature for interfaith couples. Simultaneously, Jewish women married Christians at the same rate as their male coreligionists, and these homes presented different models for combining traditions. Some women married to non-Jewish men did maintain exclusively Jewish

homes. Many, however, secure in their children's halakhic status and, perhaps, socialized to defer to their husbands, included more Christian traditions in their homes than their Christian counterparts were allowed.

The Cowans' sense that one could not be "half-Jewish," while in accordance with Jewish law, centered on understandings of identity that would be challenged by rising language of multiculturalism. Many people now present understandings of Jewish identity in combination with other identities using the language and logic of multiculturalism. Sometimes those responses have used the language of "halfness," such as we see in *The Half-Jewish Book* (2000) or *The Mozart Season* (2007).[4] Other times, they use the language of being entirely two things at once, for instance *Being Both: Embracing Two Religions in One Interfaith Family* (2006).[5] Other ways to discuss multiple identities have also been presented.[6] With *Mixed Blessings,* the Cowans ushered in a new era of Best Practices for Christian-Jewish interfaith family life, but it was not to be the last.

4 Daniel Klein and Freke Vuijst, *The Half-Jewish Book: A Celebration* (New York: Villard, 2000); Virginia Euwer Wolff, *The Mozart Season* (New York: Square Fish, 2007).

5 Susan Katz Miller, *Being Both: Embracing Two Religions in One Interfaith Family* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013).

6 Laurel Snyder, *Half/Life: Jew-ish Tales from Interfaith Homes* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2006).