Navigating Israel's War When One Spouse Is Jewish, and One Is Not

For some couples, figuring out how to talk about the war in Gaza is a hurdle in the relationship, but ultimately one that has brought them closer.

By Marc Tracy and Emma Goldberg

Marc Tracy and Emma Goldberg talked to couples from Jewish and Christian faith backgrounds, religious leaders and marriage counselors.

When Ava Friedmann and Michael Henein were married, they used a tablecloth from Ms. Friedmann's grandmother as a huppah, or ritual canopy held above the couple in a Jewish wedding. Mr. Henein's father, who is a Coptic Christian from Egypt, anointed them with holy oil.

That same braiding of their cultural traditions has steered them over the last three months, as they have talked about the Israel-Hamas war. Both were horrified by the Hamas attack on Oct. 7, but Mr. Henein worried instinctively about the Palestinian lives in Gaza that would be lost because of Israel's military response. They decided to read identical news sources about the war to help make sure they stayed on the same page.

"We needed to really hear each other and share our perspectives, and make sure we were creating an environment that didn't lead to conflict between the two of us," Ms. Friedmann said.

Many American Jews have reconsidered how they feel about Israel and even their own Jewish identity since the Oct. 7 attack, in which Israeli officials say Hamas militants killed roughly 1,200 people. Israel's reprisal, a bombing campaign and invasion, has killed more than 26,000 people, Palestinian officials say.

For Jews in interfaith couples, no matter what they believe about Israel, there is the added dimension of communicating with a partner who may not viscerally feel a connection to Israel or other Jews. Their non-Jewish partners sometimes have entirely different feelings about the war and Israel, and even the most supportive spouses might struggle to understand their Jewish partners' emotions.

Jewish intermarriage rates have risen in the United States. For decades, the trend has induced anxiety among Jewish leaders in America who fret that it threatens the perpetuation of the Jewish people. A Pew Research study published in 2021 showed that in the United States, roughly 40 percent of Jews who wed between 1980 and 1999 married non-Jewish partners. That number jumped to 61 percent between 2010 and 2020.

Those couples are in a unique position. Some partners among more than a dozen interfaith couples interviewed described navigating new challenges around raising children and emotional distance in their relationships. Others said the topic of the war had presented a hurdle, but ultimately brought them closer.

Jamie Smith, 48, who lives in Washington, D.C., has noticed how differently she and her husband, raised by Lutheran parents, think about antisemitic threats since the war began.

Worried about her four children's safety, Ms. Smith, who is Jewish, encouraged her teenage son to cut his curly hair short so he would look less Jewish. (He declined.) And she wore a cross when she traveled with her children to Morocco and Turkey in December and early January.

"I definitely feel an acute and heightened sense of danger of what it means to be Jewish right now," she said. "I have talked to my husband about that and I don't think he gets it." Her husband declined to comment.

"Marriage can be hard enough," she added. "When you also add a difference in religion, that adds another level of difficulty. I hadn't experienced that until now."

Some couples described a renewed sense of confidence and closeness in their relationships, as Jewish people leaned on non-Jewish partners for support, and both took leaps to try to view the conflict through the other's eyes.

"There's an opportunity here to connect and deepen the relationship by having meaningful conversations," said Denise Handlarski, a rabbi who counsels many intermarried couples and also wrote the book "The A-Z of Intermarriage." "You can see your partner's pain or desire to be understood and try to be a support."
In Chicago, Ms. Friedmann, 36, and Mr. Henein, 33, began discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the complications of intermarriage long before Oct. 7. Ms. Friedmann had many moments since they started dating when she turned to Mr. Henein and asked: "How do you feel about marrying someone Jewish?" Their relatives had mixed feelings about the relationship at the start.

When the war began, they found themselves grateful that they were so accustomed to having these frank conversations.

"Everything is out in the open with us," Mr. Henein said, "which has definitely helped us navigate not only the wedding and the marriage ceremony, but also these attacks and our cultural differences."

One obstacle, some Jewish partners in interfaith couples said, is trying to communicate the importance of Israel and solidarity among Jews.

Before she met her future husband, Lindsay Schwartz, 34, had little contact with Judaism, growing up in a Methodist household in eastern Georgia. But she understood early in their relationship how important connection to faith was to Jake Schwartz, 35, whose grandparents were Holocaust survivors.

“It was something you read in a book,” Ms. Schwartz said. “You hear about it, but I never in my life thought I would be — I’m going to have children that are a direct lineage of people who survived the atrocities.”

The Schwartzes, who live in Atlanta, visited Israel in March on a trip sponsored by Honeymoon Israel, a group that specializes in tours of the country for interfaith couples.

Since Oct. 7, the Schwartzes have been in lock step, they said, in mourning Israeli victims and supporting the country’s right to defend itself. Ms. Schwartz said she was considering Jewish day school for their future children because, she said, she and Jake had been shocked by what they saw as a lack of interest in the attack on Israel, and in antisemitism.

Kevan Link, 36, understood early in his relationship with Mindy Isser that pro-Palestinian activism would be part of their life together. Ms. Isser, 33, is a labor organizer who is Jewish and involved with the anti-Zionist group Jewish Voice for Peace.

Mr. Link, who was raised Catholic, also understood that not raising their children Jewish would be “a deal breaker” for his wife.

They have hosted Passover Seders, celebrate Shabbat most Friday nights and are raising their toddler, whose first birthday fell on Oct. 7, in the faith. Mr. Link sees his role as supportive sidekick, whether it is solo-parenting when Ms. Isser was arrested at a protest in favor of a cease-fire or stepping back when members of Ms. Isser’s family speak favorably of Israel.

Mr. Link said he had not fully understood what it meant to be both a member of the Jewish community and sharply critical of Israel until recently. In December, he attended a memorial service for Ms. Isser’s father at her childhood Conservative congregation, where enthusiastic support for Israel, manifested in prayers for the country and its army, was at odds with their beliefs.

Mr. Link said he was surprised to see a young girl at the synagogue wearing a hoodie in support of Israel’s military.

“I’ve told him so much how the Israel stuff is so intense and so much a part of Judaism, at least Conservative Judaism,” Ms. Isser said of her husband, adding, “he didn’t really get it until he saw it.”

For other couples, the war has raised new questions about the prospect of raising children in multifaith households.

Max Freedman, 35, and Morgan McGuire, 38, were married in October in Brooklyn.

Mr. Freedman had felt alienated from the traditionally pro-Israel Jewish community since before the war began, but during the war that feeling was amplified. He realized that he sympathized more with the priest at Ms. McGuire's church, who expressed concern for the death toll in Gaza, than he did with some of the rabbis he knows.

He now wonders what it will look like to steer future children through the complexities of Jewish identity.

"Because we're in this multifaith relationship, it's up to me to bring the Judaism," Mr. Freedman said. "It's hard for me to be enthusiastic about that right now."

Libby Shani, 42, and her partner, Lindsay Shani, 40, who was raised Catholic, were scheduled to go on a Honeymoon Israel trip in November, but it was postponed because of the war. Instead, Libby, who was born in Tel Aviv and moved to the United States when she was a toddler, visited Israel in January on a trip sponsored by the Jewish National Fund, a pro-Israel nonprofit.

What was supposed to be a shared experience ended up being a solo journey; Lindsay worried about safety, and didn't share Libby's feeling that this was an urgent moment to volunteer for Israeli society.

But Libby said she had also felt closer to Lindsay in recent months, because of the efforts Lindsay had made to support her, like reading books about Israel.

"There's a level of rawness and openness that we hadn't experienced yet," Lindsay said. "Now we have because of this."

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