



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

**“A Personal Synthesis:
The Whole is More than the Sum of Its Parts”**

**by Emily Dyke
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When I went to my first meeting with Rabbi Peter to discuss my final project, I thought I was pretty set on a topic already. As some of you know, acting is one of my greatest passions. I was interested in learning about the history of Jews in movies and theater, and it seemed like a perfect topic, considering Jews have a long and rich history there. I even have a family member, my great, great uncle Ben Weldon, who was a professional actor. Among his many television and movie credits are episodes of Superman with George Reeves and Bedtime For Bonzo with Ronald Reagan. But over the course of my meeting with Rabbi Peter that day, the subject somehow floated over to my being “half Jewish.” As many of you here know, my mother, Debbie, is Jewish and my father, Jeff, is Christian...specifically, half Italian Catholic and half New England Protestant. As Rabbi Peter and I spoke, I became excited about some ideas and connections that I was making about my mixed cultural heritage. This subject soon came to interest me even more than Jewish theater. I realized that I didn’t view myself as “half-Jewish” and “half-Christian”, as in two distinct identities, but Jewish *and* Christian, as in a blending of both. I soon began to make connections to stories and to other people in similar situations.

My mixed religious and cultural identity didn’t seem so uncommon to me when I was younger. In fact, I didn’t really think of religion at all. I thought everyone celebrated both religion’s holidays as I did! As I already mentioned, to say that I am half-Jewish and half-Christian just doesn’t accurately describe the way I celebrate my religions or experience my identity. Factors from each religion and culture blend and contribute to my own unique sense of who I am.

The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, or TCC, has made the blending of my two cultures possible while still emphasizing Jewish study. Before we found TCC, I knew I wanted to learn more about my Jewish heritage, but my family hadn’t found a congregation that fit our belief system. We had been celebrating the Christian holidays with my dad’s family but didn’t have any Jewish relatives nearby to celebrate the Jewish holidays with. Though over the years we spent many Jewish holidays with great friends who welcomed us into their homes, there was little family connection to Judaism for me. Sometimes, we would travel to New Hampshire or Michigan to celebrate one of the Jewish holidays with family there, but those trips were infrequent. My mom was raised with what was then a brand new type of Judaism, called Humanistic Judaism, that had a cultural and humanistic orientation. Her Rabbi was none other than Sherwin Wine, the founder of Humanistic Judaism. My father remembered he had once overheard someone saying that there was a Humanistic congregation somewhere in NYC, and after a few phone calls, we discovered TCC. So in a way, we really “rediscovered” Humanistic Judaism.

Belonging to TCC has not only enabled me to connect with my cultural Jewish roots, but it also provides me with an intimate and personal link to my mom and her cultural heritage. She was not only Bat Mitzvahed by Rabbi Wine, but he married her and my dad as well. He also performed Jewish baby naming ceremonies for my older brother and me. So Humanistic Judaism runs deeply and meaningfully through my heritage.

A couple of years ago, I read a book by Judy Blume called *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. During my discussion with Rabbi Peter, I remembered this book and that the main character, Margaret, also comes from a mixed religious background. Throughout the book she attempts to find her religious identity. She is pressured by her parents, grandparents, and friends at school to choose one religion. She ends up going to church and temple many times searching for God's presence. She did not feel like she belonged in either one because she was only half of each religion. A half-Jewish writer, Daniel Menaker, feels similarly to Margaret. As he puts it "Often, I feel detached from both [sides], not fully committed to either. And then I very much envy those people who are One Thing, a person who knows precisely who he is and where he is from." Margaret finds that she feels most religiously comfortable when she speaks to God before she goes to bed at night, rather than in a formal place of worship. Though it did take me a while to discover my religious and cultural identity, I've never felt the same amount of pressure that Margaret did. My parents did not force me to choose, my grandmother is very accepting, I have many mixed-heritage family members, and my friends at school are of many different religions.

I never understood why it is so important to some people in our culture to be only one religion or another. America is becoming more and more populated with people of mixed religious and ethnic backgrounds. The upward trend of mixed marriages in the Jewish population had really begun in the 1950's. According to The Half-Jewish Book written by Daniel Klein and Freke Vuijst, some of the initial reactions to this new trend were fear and horror. A book came out around that time called The Enemy Camp by Jerome Weidman. This book is a story about a Jewish boy marrying his Christian sweetheart who eventually turns out to be an anti-Semite. This was meant to be a warning for all those Jews who might have been considering the idea of intermarriage. Even more dramatic is the novel written by Phillip Roth called American Pastoral. This book is about the monstrous offspring resulting from marrying outside of the Jewish faith. In this story the daughter of a Jewish father and an Irish-Catholic mother is jinxed from the beginning of her life. She starts out as a screamer and stutterer and eventually becomes a bomb-throwing terrorist and murderer! Just about everyone in the novel links her monstrosity to her being half-Jewish.

From 1965 to 1985 the rate of Jews marrying outside the religion rose by 42 percent, according to The Council of Jewish Federations' 1990 National Jewish Population Survey. According to Daniel Klein and Freke Vuijst, "the number of American half-Jews under the age of eleven now exceeds the number of American full Jews under eleven". Although interfaith marriages are becoming more common, as are their offspring, many people still have difficulty accepting them. We may not be as fearful as people were back in the 1950's, however, I believe that many people continue to worry that intermarriage will lead to a loss of Jewish identification and traditions, and perhaps could ultimately lead to a severe weakening of the entire Jewish people and religion. It seems to me that this fear may come out of the perspective that people can only embrace one religion. If we are open to the idea of celebrating multiple cultural heritages, we are actually more likely to maintain the traditions, rather than losing them by having to choose one.

There are many different approaches that interfaith couples take in establishing their children's religious and cultural affiliations. Some families don't affiliate with any religion. Some parents choose one religion only for their children, or leave the choice up to the child to pick a religion or not affiliate at all. Others may force their children to choose one religion over the other, and still others choose to

affiliate with aspects of both. The last approach best describes how my parents have chosen to raise my brothers and me. Because neither of my parents is formally religious, the aspects that we focus on are more culturally based.

My brothers and I are not the only ones of multiple religious cultures in our extended family. I have a total of five cousins who have mixed cultural and religious backgrounds. Most of them have not chosen one religion over the other, but one of my cousins did have a Bat Mitzvah. I also have a couple of friends who come from interfaith families. One of my friend's parents chose for her to attend a religious Hebrew school at a young age, and she was Bat Mitzvahed, although she does celebrate Christmas and other Christian holidays. My other friend has not formally studied either religion, but she does celebrate holidays from both. All three of us have similar religious backgrounds, though all of us have chosen, or had chosen for us, very different ways to practice our religions.

Being both Jewish and Christian is important to me. I want people to view me as a mixture of both because I see it as being very different than just being half-Jewish and half-Christian. It's like mixing colors. When you mix the colors blue and red you come up with a whole new color. Not half red and half blue, but purple. I am thankful that I don't have to make a choice between two religions. That, to me, would feel limiting and artificial, because I am not red, I am not blue, I'm not even red and blue, but I am purple.

But what does being "purple" mean in terms of my mixed cultural identity? Frequently, there are stereotypes that become associated with a group of people or a culture. In general, stereotyping is problematic because it is often used in a critical way against a particular group. It risks labeling and a loss of individuality. Yet, shared cultural qualities can help to connect members of a group and give them a unique character and sense of pride and belonging. So, while stereotyping per se should be discouraged, we should also celebrate the existence of qualities that may help to characterize and distinguish a group or culture. I am the product of a number of different cultures and, as such, it isn't easy to trace the exact origins of all my personality traits.

I believe that many of the qualities I possess reflect a blending of both of my heritages. For example, I tend to be very emotionally expressive, and sometimes even a little dramatic. Some might associate this with the Jewish culture; however, those people have obviously not met my Italian grandma, Rose. She has no short supply of these qualities herself! So where did it come from? My Jewish side? My Italian Catholic side? Both? Or is it my own form of expression, growing out of my mixed heritage?

Being extremely family oriented is another characteristic commonly associated with Jewish people. I do possess this quality but I'm not so sure it only comes from my Jewish side. While my Jewish family members are very loving and affectionate and dedicated to family, my Christian relatives are equally family oriented, loving and connected.

Another quality that I possess is industriousness and a value of intellect and education. Though these are often viewed as common Jewish characteristics, once again, they are not limited to that side of my family. My Jewish mom has a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. Her father built a successful men's clothing business, and her mother went back to college in her middle age (with a dedication that my mother found embarrassing at the time!). Her uncle and many cousins were dedicated teachers in the Detroit public school system, as well as physicians. And yet, my Christian dad also has a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. His father was a Harvard educated radiologist and his grandparents were esteemed educators in the New Hampshire public schools. My paternal grandmother was a registered nurse, and her parents were dedicated farm and railroad workers in Massachusetts.

While this is, of course, not an exhaustive list of my qualities, they contribute importantly to my overall sense of who I am. By giving examples of how these qualities connect to both sides of my family, I am illustrating how the mixture of all of my colors combine to become me...not Jewish and Christian, glued together, but a unique mix of the two heritages that blend into one. Interestingly, in *The Half-Jewish Book*, the authors have created a list of “Half-Jewish Traits” that have been self-reported by more than one hundred respondents to their survey. These are traits that don’t necessarily come out of being Jewish or Gentile, but appear to have evolved from the mixing of these cultures. Some examples of these traits involve being socially adaptable, empathetic, tolerant and having a profound sense of dualities. I think, for the most part, I do possess these qualities and believe them to be some of the gifts that have come out of having to negotiate two different cultures. It makes me think about how society has feared the raising of children in gay families. Many have worried that children of gay marriage will be damaged somehow by not having both a mother and a father. But as these families have become more prevalent, research has shown that this is not true. A study by two University of Southern California sociologists suggests that children of lesbian or gay parents show more empathy for social diversity. In general, I believe that being raised in a home which is diverse itself allows us children to be open to many different ways of living and many different belief systems.

I am proud to be of mixed cultures and to practice Judaism in a non-traditional way. I believe that it enhances the way I can be open to other people’s beliefs and overall differences, because I can relate to them. I hope that I will continue to grow in my ability to accept and understand others. I think accepting my own mixed religious and cultural identity has helped me to do so and will continue to be an enriching feature of my life.