

# INTRAFaITH MARRIAGE: MAKING IT WORK

By

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the phenomenon of Jewish married couples who practice different levels of observance. There is a lot of research regarding Jews and intermarriage but very little on Jews marrying other Jews but still facing challenges because of conflicting levels of observance. There are similarities between intermarriage and this type of Jewish intramarriage, but it is important that the Jewish community be aware of this particular issue and be able to accommodate the needs of couples in this situation.

This thesis focuses on the issues these couples face and how and when they negotiate them. The couple as a whole can become less observant, more observant, meet somewhere between the two partners' observance levels or each maintain their own observance levels. Issues they negotiate include what traditions to highlight at the wedding, whether or not to keep *kosher*, and how to observe *Shabbat* and other religious holidays. The couple must decide which synagogue to attend together or agree to find two places that work for each partner separately. If couples have or are planning on having children, they must work out what levels of observance their children will follow. These couples must also deal with reactions from their families. Through careful and thoughtful negotiation, these couples tend to find ways to make their marriages successful.

This thesis offers advice and recommendations for how couples in similar situations can effectively make their marriages work, as well as how therapists and Jewish communal professionals can help them. It also explores how some couples in this situation are embracing non- and post-denominationalism. Ultimately, these marriages promote Jewish unity.

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## Introduction

In this thesis, I would like to bring awareness to the concept of Jewish intramarriage, and the challenges that often exist within Jewish relationships because of denominational and observance differences. There is a lot of research on intermarriage and the challenges that arise for couples who come from different faiths, but there does not seem to be research that discusses issues that arise for couples when both partners are Jewish. Jewish families often push the importance of marrying other Jews, but it is possible to marry another Jewish person whose religious observance level is completely different from your own. Every Jewish couple deals with some differences in religious observance, cultural practices and/or child-rearing values, but for some couples these differences are extremely pronounced.

There are some books that offer helpful hints for Jewish couples who practice different levels of observance, but there is still much more advice given to interfaith couples. The author of *The Creative Jewish Wedding Book*, for example, understands that Jewish couples can come from very different backgrounds and wrote the book in a way for couples “to connect and better understand each other’s backgrounds and perspectives” (Kaplan-Mayer, 2009, p. 2). There is even a section in the book titled “The „Inter-Jewish“ Marriage” (Kaplan-Mayer, 2009, p. 8). The author makes the point that it is okay for couples not to agree on everything, but that one should learn how to “negotiate ways to establish your mode of being Jewish in your home” and hopefully learn to accept and appreciate each others’ practices (Kaplan-Mayer, 2009, p. 2).

I became interested in this topic because it affects me personally. I have been raised as a Reform Jew, and am engaged to a modern Orthodox Jew. Initially, my family and friends had a lot of concerns with us being together and our relationship was even compared to me being with someone outside of my own religion. David and I have spent the past three years finding ways

to compromise when it comes to levels of observance. For example, he keeps *kosher* and I do not. As I compromise for David, we keep a *kosher* home. As a compromise for me, David will eat vegetarian and fish options at non-*kosher* restaurants and at my family's home. We have learned that we must make a lot more compromises than a Jewish couple who practices Judaism the same way. I was interested in meeting couples in similar situations to see how they are able to make their relationships work. I was also curious to find out if most couples who are in this situation tend to find a mid-way point that attempts to meet both partners' needs, or if one partner either becomes more or less practicing to make the situation easier for the couple.

### **Divisions within Judaism**

One reason there are so many Jewish couples who have differences in their observance levels is because Judaism is divided by several denominations. Identifying with a particular denomination is particularly common in the United States. According to the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) taken in 2001, nearly three quarters of American Jewry identifies "through a denominational prism" (Ament, 2005, p. 3). The denominations most represented are Reform, Conservative and Orthodox. According to the NJPS study, there are generally vast differences between peoples' observance levels depending on what denomination they identify with. Almost one hundred percent of people who affiliate as Orthodox attend a synagogue regularly and observe *Shabbat* and other holidays as well as keep *kosher* (Ament, 2005, p. 20). While eighty percent and seventy percent are still high percentages for Conservative and Reform identifiers to belong to a synagogue, the percentages drop to sixty-five and fifty percent with regards to lighting *Shabbat* candles, and thirty and eight percent with keeping *kosher* (Ament, 2005, p. 31).

Some make the argument that denominational affiliations “separate Jews from one another” and break up a chance at Jewish unity (Ehrenkrantz, 2007, p. 17). The different denominations place a label on people which imply certain values they have or ways in which they observe. Because “we are not all Jewish in the same way,” Jews tend to seek out others whose observance levels are similar to theirs (Ehrenkrantz, 2007, p. 19). Denominations have resulted in a divided Jewish community and have made it increasingly difficult for Jews with differing observance levels to come together for religious purposes.

### **Jewish Dating Sites**

Jewish dating sites reflect the divisions that exist within Judaism today. Every website I looked at has a religious background question to fill out, and some questions regarding levels of observance. The idea is that you will want to be matched up with someone who affiliates with the same denomination and/or similar observance levels. I looked at several Jewish dating sites to see which “types” of Jews have access to that particular site and who they are trying to be set up with: JDate, Frumster, JWed and SawYouAtSinai. These sites are divided based on observance level. Some of the sites are specifically for Orthodox Jews. There is even chabadmatch.com which is limited to *Chabad* Jews looking for other *Chabad* Jews.

JDate presents itself as a site for “Jewish singles.” When someone creates a profile on JDate, one of the questions is “Religious Background.” The options under this question are: Reform, Conservative, Orthodox (*Frum*, a devout and observant Jew), Orthodox (*Ba'al Teshuvah*), Modern Orthodox, Traditional, Conservadox, *Hassidic* (Orthodox Jews who promote joy and Jewish mysticism), Reconstructionist, Another Stream of Judaism, Culturally Jewish but not Practicing, Willing to Convert, Not Sure if I’m Willing to Convert, Not Willing to Convert.



There are no non- or post-denominational options, and there are no boxes to create your own option. This suggests that JDate believes all of its members will fit into a specific denominational category and will want to be with someone else who belongs to that category. There is also a tip on the side of the screen that reads: “Level of religious observance is important for many of our members. Please make sure your selections are accurate to receive the best matches.” In addition, JDate is clearly accessible to non-Jews given the last three options under religious background.

Frumster claims to be an “Orthodox Jewish Dating” site. They use the word “*Hashkafah*,” meaning one’s outlook, which includes the options: All Orthodox, All *Machmir* (Jews who are particularly stringent with the laws and reject any leniencies accepted by many Orthodox Jews), All Liberal or choose one: Modern Orthodox Liberal, Modern Orthodox *Machmir*, *Shomer Mitzvot* (someone who keeps the basic laws of *Shabbat*, *kashrut* and *nidah*), *Yeshivish* Black Hat (non-*Chassidic* ultra-Orthodox person), *Yeshivish* Modern, *Hassidish*, *Carlebachian* (followers of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach who focused on prayer through music and stories), Conservadox & Traditional. The only people who are accepted on this site that are not Orthodox are those that identify as Conservadox and/or Traditional.

JWed, Frumster’s sister site, is the “Jewish dating for marriage” site. This site is specifically for the “marriage-minded.” Frumster users have full access to this site. The site claims to be exclusive for the entire Jewish community, literally priding itself on being there for “Jews of all stripes and backgrounds.” In reading the eligibility criteria, however, one must be “authentically Jewish” which the site defines as “from mother’s side or universally recognized conversion” and “legally single” which is defined as “civil and/or Jewish divorce required if applicable.” In addition, the site requires that “you must be honest in representing your Jewish

background, especially those who represent themselves as „orthodox.“ If you represent yourself as „orthodox,“ you must keep *kosher* and *Shabbat*. If you do not keep *kosher* and *Shabbat*, then please choose one of the non-orthodox options when registering.” Though non-Orthodox Jews can sign up on JWed and Frumster, the site does what it can to separate Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews. This would suggest that the creators of the site do not have a positive view of Orthodox and non-Orthodox mixing.

SawYouAtSinai is a Jewish dating site that also utilizes real matchmakers.

SawYouAtSinai has an entire religious information section on its profiles. The first question is “current religious orientation” which includes: *Carlebachian*, Conservative, Conservadox, *Hassidish*, *Lubavitch (Chabad)*, Modern Orthodox (Liberal), Modern Orthodox (*Machmir*), Modern Orthodox (Middle of the Road), Modern *Yeshivish*, *Yeshivish*, Traditional, and then a separate category which includes *Heimish* (ultra Orthodox), *Balabatish* (upper class), Unaffiliated, Spiritual but not Religious, Cultural Identity, Reconstructionist, and Reform. Most of the options in the first category are groups within Orthodoxy. Though someone in any of these categories would consider themselves an observant Jew, the observances still differ within the different sects, and it would still be difficult for a *Lubavitch* Jew and a *Yeshivish* Jew to compromise on several issues. The other questions under religious information include if someone is a *ba'al teshuvah*, their family religious background, and frequency with which they attend synagogue, pray, and study traditional Jewish texts.

The person can then check off the “acceptable religious orientation of potential match,” as well as what observance level they would like a partner to have when it comes to *kashrut*, meaning *kosher* laws, mode of dress, and even their preference regarding someone’s family’s religious background. There is also a section for people to say whether they plan to (possibly,

definitely, or definitely not) own a television, go out to movies, or watch movies at home. The matchmakers on this site will specifically not match people with others based on their Jewish differences. People can decline a match because they are “not religious enough” or “too religious.”

I was able to meet with one of this site’s matchmakers and get an inside look at the process of matching people. According to the matchmaker I spoke with, there does seem to be a trend of people wanting to meet people within their own group, especially when it comes to more insular *yeshivish* groups. But even modern or liberal Orthodox people, she explains, can be reluctant to branch out and date Jews with different levels of observance from themselves. The people that she has noticed that are more willing to date people outside their levels of observance are people who are growing in their Judaism and wanting to learn and practice more. While SawYouAtSinai has an unaffiliated category, none of these sites have non- or post-denominational categories. As opposed to allowing Jews to transcend labels and meet any Jew, they are contributing to continuing the denominational divisions within Judaism.

### **Non-/Post-denominationalism**

This research comes at a time when the number of Jews who affiliate as non- or post-denominational is growing. Though the majority of American Jews identify with a particular denomination, many Jews are becoming less likely to align themselves with a particular denomination (Valley, 2005, p. 2). In fact, “one in four Jews today disregards denominations altogether” (Valley, 2005, p. 2). This could be due to a decline in organized Jewish life and a refusal to categorize one’s self in general. In surveys, non-denominational Jews generally consider themselves “just Jewish” or “secular” (Cohen, 2005, p. 7). Non-denominational Jews

are generally characterized by a lack of engagement in the Jewish community, and often are “raised by intermarried parents, married to non-Jews, and/or unaffiliated with synagogues” (Cohen, 2005, p. 7).

Post-denominational Jews, on the other hand, are generally highly engaged and committed Jews that do not see themselves as fitting within any denominational categories (Cohen, 2005, p. 7). Post-denominationalism can also be used interchangeably with trans-denominationalism (Cohen, 2005, p. 7). Post-denominational Jews are generally in their twenties and thirties, and join organizations that appeal to a “multidenominational constituency” (Cohen, 2005, p. 7). Part of the philosophy for post-denominational Jews is to “transcend denominational labels” and to not worry themselves with specific denominational descriptions and goals (Gelfand, 2010, pp. 8-9). Post-denominational Jews are viewed as “serious Jews” who meet the following criteria: they are “committed to each of Judaism’s three components: God, *Torah* and Israel,” they attempt to “implement the higher ideals of each of these components,” and they are “constantly growing in each of these areas” (Gelfand, 2010, p. 9).

Many organizations are being formed to unite these “serious Jews” from different backgrounds. One area that has attracted a post-denominational audience is education, including adult learning classes as well as community day schools (Green, 2005, p. 3). Two other areas where post-denominational Jews have organized are in spiritual life and activism (Green, 2005, p. 4). The four principles present within post-denominational communities are “personal choice, egalitarianism, inclusivity, and engaging deeply with Jewish texts and tradition” (Gelfand, 2010, p. 10).

Post-denominationalism has risen in part due to the concerns regarding religious polarization (Wertheimer, 2005, p. 1). Some Jews see the further dividing of Jewish

denominations as the destruction of the Jewish community, and post-denominational organizations seek to find common ground with Jews from multiple backgrounds (Wertheimer, 2005, pp. 1-2). Post-denominational organizations and leaders believe that “Jews face many common challenges and have much to learn from one another; that which divides us is less important than the common concerns and texts we share” (Wertheimer, 2005, p. 5). These groups aim to build connections with Jews from different backgrounds and ease the tensions and misunderstandings between denominations. These organizations, such as independent *minyanim*, have the potential of keeping Jewish couples who practice different levels of observance involved in Jewish life together. These institutions can also serve as an example to couples in this situation, as they can learn from the compromises that the community makes.

### **Why People Marry Outside of their Inherited Group**

In general, marriage was initially contracted by a community but is becoming increasingly more individualistic (Fishman, 2004, p. 1). People are following their hearts as opposed to the wishes of their families or ethnic groups. While Jews marrying other Jews would qualify as marrying within the community, the differences between denominations can be so great that some Jewish couples may feel as though they are marrying outside their own religious group.

Marriage can be “used as a means to resolve long-standing, deep-seated, unconscious conflicts” (Zurofsky, 1966, p. 3). If people had a traumatic childhood, or have certain unfulfilled dreams, they may marry outside of their inherited groups to escape their problems or fulfill their dreams (Zurofsky, 1966, pp. 3-4). When people marry outside of the group they were brought up in, they are often making a statement about their sense of identity and belongingness to their

group (Zurofsky, 1966, p. 5). Often, people “distance themselves from their inherited environment in the course of developing an alternative lifestyle and self-identity” (Schimmel, 1983, p. 28).

People may be looking to become more, or less, observant than what they grew up with. Parents play a significant role in individuals’ levels of Jewish identity and observance, in both positive and negative ways (Cohen & Eisen, 2000, p. 45). A troubled relationship with a parent can lead to “an aversion to Jewishness” or just a different level of involvement from their parents, whether it is more or less (Cohen & Eisen, 2000, p. 45). Ultimately, people may seek out partners who practice the way they would like to, or they might just happen to fall in love with someone from a different Jewish background. Whatever the reasons may be, people from different religious backgrounds marry one another and then must find ways to work through their differences.

### **Issues and Compromises of Married Couples from Different Backgrounds**

It has been found that couples from different backgrounds find their differences “fertile sources of conflict” (Scharf, 1994, p. 87). While this study was specifically based on intermarried couples, the same information applies to Jewish couples who practice different levels of observance. In her book *Double or Nothing?*, Sylvia Barack Fishman describes the challenges that arise for Jews who marry non-Jews. Couples who come from different religious backgrounds are “challenged to create a world that works for them” (Fishman, 2004, p. 2). They must invent their own traditions and negotiate issues throughout their lives. Even though weddings for any couple can be difficult to plan, negotiations for a wedding for this type of couple “becomes a backdrop for later negotiations” (Fishman, 2004, p. 39).

After weddings, couples grapple with life-cycle ceremonies and holidays (Fishman, 2004, p. 60). Intermarried couples must negotiate two traditions when celebrating holidays, especially when children are in the picture. While Jewish couples who practice different levels of observance may celebrate the same holidays, they will celebrate them in different ways, and possibly at different places. Many people in mixed marriages struggle with how to raise their children, especially if both partners are equally committed to their customs and traditions (Gruzen, Derby, & Gordon, 1990, p. xii). Often, the couple will combine their customs and create new traditions for their families.

Both intermarried couples and Jewish couples who practice different levels of observance can face opposition from their family and friends based on their spousal choices. In fact, research shows that it is not unusual for family members to be less upset about a non-Orthodox Jew marrying a non-Jew as opposed to that person marrying someone who is ultra-Orthodox (Fishman, 2004, p. 38). When people make decisions that stray from their family norms, there is generally “friction, dispute and misunderstandings” between parents and their children (Schimel, 1983, p. 62). Parents often learn to accommodate to the changes in their children and generally accept the decisions they make (Schimel, 1983, p. 82). Intermarriage is often a concern for families and for the broader religious community that someone belongs to (Cavan, 1970, p. 311). While marriage between Jews who practice different levels of observance could be challenging to particular denominations, it is not threatening to Judaism as a whole.

Partners who are in a relationship with someone from a different background are forced to be more aware of themselves as well as of their partners. Often, this awareness helps a couple “provide and define identification boundaries for each other” (Fishman, 2004, p. 54). Couples in this situation are also often sensitive to their partners’ feelings, and care about the impact of their

words and actions. Though this type of relationship can give people a greater appreciation for their own heritages, and heighten their sensitivity toward differences in others, they must still find a way to live out dual expectations (Fishman, 2004, p. 54). While there are a lot of similarities between Jewish couples who practice different levels of observance and intermarried couples, it is important for Jewish couples to have literature specific to their situation. The couples' stories and advice given in this thesis deal explicitly with the issues that Jewish couples in this situation face.



## Methodology

In order to investigate the issues that Jewish married couples who practice different levels of observance deal with, I sought out couples in these marriages to interview. I interviewed a total of twenty-nine people who represent sixteen couples. I interviewed thirteen couples, a single woman who is divorced because of the observance differences in her marriage, and two women who are currently in “mixed Jewish” relationships, but their husbands were either unable or unwilling to participate in the interview. In these three cases, the women spoke on behalf of their ex-husbands or husbands. I found it important to interview couples together as opposed to separately in order to observe the give-and-take of their relationship.

Twelve of my interviews were done in person at the couple’s home, and four of the interviews, mostly because of distance, were done over the phone. The interviews generally lasted forty-five minutes to an hour. The interviews were structured in that I asked each couple the same seven questions: How did you identify “Jewishly” growing up? How do you identify “Jewishly” now? What are a few of the biggest differences between the two partners-ideologically and practice-wise? How have you dealt with these issues? Is there an issue that has not come up yet that you expect might come up in the future? How might you handle this? Have there been any concerns from family and/or friends about your relationship? What advice can you give to couples in similar situations? Because these interviews were really an open dialogue between the couple, I was able to ask follow-up questions to their responses, and ask specifically about issues such as their wedding, *kashrut*, and observing *Shabbat*.

I mainly found these couples via word of mouth. I told friends and family members about my thesis, and they were often able to put me in touch with appropriate couples that they knew. I also sent out email blasts to synagogues of various denominations and trans-

denominational organizations. The couples I found reside in either the greater Los Angeles area or Boston. One challenge that I found in more liberal Jewish circles was that though couples were eager to be interviewed by me, many couples did not know what Jewish observance levels meant when it comes to *halakha*. A lot of couples were even in intermarried relationships, when I was specifically looking for two Jewish partners. Couples in the Orthodox community, on the other hand, were reluctant to share any information with me. I sent several emails to Orthodox synagogues and received no responses, whereas I immediately received responses from people, though most cases were not appropriate for my thesis, from more liberal Jewish synagogues and organizations. People in the Orthodox community that I live in knew of couples who fit this description but explained to me that this was “hush hush” in the neighborhood, something these couples were embarrassed about and not likely to discuss with me.

There is a lot of diversity amongst the couples that I interviewed for my thesis. Of the sixteen couples, there is an even number between couples where the husband is more observant and where the wife is more observant. Six of the couples were made up of one Reform partner and one Conservative partner, three couples had one Conservative partner and one Orthodox partner, and two couples had one Conservative partner and one cultural or non-observant partner. There was also one couple with an Orthodox partner and Reform partner, one couple with an Orthodox partner and a Reconstructionist partner, and one couple with an Orthodox partner and cultural or non-observant partner. Fourteen of the sixteen couples were *Ashkenazic*, meaning their ancestors came from Jewish communities in central and Eastern Europe. I also interviewed one *Sephardic* (Jews whose ancestors came from Spain or North Africa) couple from Morocco and one *Mizrahi* (Jews whose ancestors came from the Middle East) Persian couple with

different levels of observance. Generally, *Sephardic* and *Mizrahi* Jews consider themselves religious or not religious and do not have denominations.

**Table 1: Self-Reported Religiosity upon Meeting**

<b>Names</b>	<b>Wife's Denomination</b>	<b>Husband's Denomination</b>	<b>Approximate Age Range Currently</b>
Sarah & Oren	Reform	Orthodox	Late 20''s/early 30''s
Batsheva & Shimon	<i>Sephardic</i> - observant	<i>Sephardic</i> - not observant	Late 40''s/mid 50''s
Lily & Joshua	Non-religious	Conservative	50''s
Jessica & Samuel	Reform	Conservative	Early 30''s
Rachel & Nathan	Modern Orthodox	Reconstructionist	20''s
Wendy & Martin	Reform	Not religious	60''s
Sydney & Jonathan	Non-religious	Conservative	Late 30''s
Lauren & Adam	Conservative	Reform	Late 20''s/early 30''s
Ariella & Jonah	Modern Orthodox	Conservative	30''s
Brooke & Gabe	Reform	Conservative	30''s
Susan & Chaim	Cultural/Zionist	Orthodox	70''s
Naomi & Yehuda	Orthodox	Conservative	30''s
Sahar & Payam	<i>Mizrahi</i> - observant	<i>Mizrahi</i> - not observant	Mid 20''s/late 20''s
Ruth & Conner	Orthodox	Not religious	40''s
Deborah & Gary	Reform	Conservative	Late 40''s/early 50''s
Yael & Ben	Conservadox	Reform	30''s

**Note:** All names were changed to protect confidentiality of interviewees.

### Profile of a Couple

Ruth and Conner offer one example of how individuals with different levels of observance can fall in love, marry, and negotiate a successful marriage through a series of compromises. Ruth and Conner were raised similarly. Both of them had Jewish parents but never went to synagogue, did not celebrate Jewish holidays and really had no conception of what Judaism was. While Conner continued this lifestyle through his first marriage to a Catholic woman, Ruth became very interested in Judaism in her twenties. She felt a big void in her life, so she joined a synagogue and started going to various religious events. She ultimately went to Israel to learn with *Aish Hatorah*, a Jewish outreach organization, and became a *ba'alat teshuvah*, someone who grew up in a secular background and “returns” to being a religious Jew, generally Orthodox. Now, Ruth strictly keeps *kosher*, the Jewish dietary laws such as not eating pork or shellfish and not mixing milk and meat products, and she also observes all of the Jewish holidays. Conner and his first wife created “secular holiday celebrations” for their children. They had a Christmas tree and gave out *Chanukkah* cards, but their family did not attend synagogue or church and there was no religion involved in what they were doing.

Some time after Conner’s first marriage ended, he was set up on a date by his sister with Ruth. Ruth did not want to go on a date with Conner and called him up to explain that she was an observant woman. Conner’s response to this was “What are you observing...the stars?” Though Ruth tried to get out of it, they went on a date and became close very quickly. Ruth began teaching Conner what it meant to be Jewish. On their first date, she brought Conner the book *Permission to Believe* which Conner found very logical and which gave him, for the first time in his life, the ability to acknowledge the existence of G-d.

Ruth and Conner got married about six months later. Their wedding preparations were relatively easy because Conner let Ruth plan everything. Because Ruth was a *ba'alat teshuvah*, there were several rabbis that wanted to be involved in her wedding and make sure it was done according to Jewish law. Conner claims that the situation was not stressful for him since he did not have to plan it and that everyone there had a great time “because it was so joyful.” There were some issues for both Ruth and Conner’s family members. Their families did not like that the ceremony had separate seating for men and women. When Ruth and Conner chose to have mixed dancing at their party in order to appease their parents, about half of their guests left.

Ruth and Conner moved somewhere where Ruth could be in walking distance to a synagogue. At first, only Ruth went to *shul*, another term for synagogue, and Conner spent his *Shabbats*, the Jewish day of rest, on business trips or driving his kids around. Conner claims that “at first, everything was a struggle for me.” He was not going to ask Ruth to not be observant and she was not going to ask Conner to be observant. Conner and Ruth did have a *kosher* kitchen, and Conner needed to learn the various technicalities of what this meant. Ruth would not make a big deal out of it if Conner made a mistake, and would generally let it go if he did put a meat container on the dairy side of the sink. Conner still finds a lot of the rules “nonsense” but has mostly gotten used to it now. At first, Conner still ate non-*kosher* food outside of the home but now keeps the same level as Ruth. Both of them will eat fish and dairy in non-*kosher* restaurants. Conner claims that his becoming more observant “just sort of happened” after a while, that it was all a slow-moving process.

*Shabbat* and other holidays were initially a “part-time observance” for Conner. Ruth understood this as he had two children that did not grow up with this lifestyle. Now that his children are older and do not rely on him, he mostly keeps *Shabbat* and enjoys celebrating

Jewish holidays. Conner does still take business calls if they are important and turns off the lights to conserve energy. Although Ruth would not do these things herself, she puts up with Conner doing them. At first, they did look for a Reform or Conservative synagogue to be a part of, because Ruth wanted Conner to feel comfortable. Overall, Conner has become very comfortable with the *Chabad*, a particular group within Orthodoxy, community that they are a part of and now goes to services with Ruth.

Another issue that came up for Ruth and Conner early on was the laws of *nidah*, family purity laws in which a wife and husband cannot be intimate with one another while she has her period and for seven days afterward. It was very difficult for Conner to “have intimacy around a schedule.” Conner claims that this was very emotional for him and that he resented doing it for the first five years of their marriage. He resented G-d and his wife for making them follow these laws. Ruth feels like she has compromised in this area because they do not follow all of the laws during this time. They still kiss, touch and pass things to one another. Like many observances, Conner claims that he got used to keeping the laws of *nidah* and ended up meeting Ruth’s level of observance.

Conner’s children from his first marriage have learned more about Judaism but are still not very involved. They consider themselves half-Jewish and will celebrate Passover and other holidays with Conner and Ruth. Conner and Ruth also have one child together. While they have chosen to raise their son as an observant Jew, one issue that has come up has been what type of school to send him to. It was very important for Ruth that her child attends a private Jewish school, but Conner was more concerned with the level of education he would get. Their son did go to a Jewish school for preschool and Kindergarten, but then it became difficult as the closest Jewish school was an hour from where they lived. Much to Ruth’s dismay, their son now attends

secular school and has a private tutor for his Jewish education. Conner also makes his son go to school on some religious holidays so he does not get too many absences. Ruth makes sure that he rides his bike there, as opposed to getting driven, and will not write or break any other *halakhah*, Jewish law, while he is there.

Ruth's parents were thrilled that she met Conner because they thought Conner would "bring her down a notch" and make her less religious. Conner's parents, on the other hand, thought that he was crazy. They could not understand why he would want to be with an Orthodox woman and were concerned that he would become Orthodox as well. Ruth and Conner have missed a lot of family get-togethers, which their families have trouble understanding. Conner especially felt guilty about this at first, but now knows that his family does not expect him to come over on *Shabbat*, and knows that they will bring their own food if they go to their families' homes on other occasions. Both of their families still have difficulties with their levels of observance.

Though there have been hardships along the way, Ruth and Conner have been married almost twelve years. They have compromised a lot in order to make their marriage work. Overall, Conner has become more observant to accommodate Ruth, but Ruth has also become more lenient than she would be if she were on her own or with someone more observant. While Conner would not be as observant if he was on his own, he is glad that Ruth has brought Judaism into his life. Ruth and Conner offer the advice to choose one's battles wisely and really think if the issue is worth having a fight over. Conner adds that it really has to do with what a person is like on the inside. One can always work through levels of observance, but can you deal with this person? Conner actually believes that religion has greatly contributed to making Ruth such a wonderful person.

## Areas of Conflict and Compromise

“I met Jonathan...and that changed, that changed everything. Jonathan already kept *kosher* on his own, so he said he wanted to keep a *kosher* home and that was very important to him, so I had to learn how to keep *kosher*, which was a battle. I’m used to it now. I don’t keep *kosher* outside of the home. I try but...” (Sydney).

Jewish couples who practice different levels of observance find many issues on which they must learn to compromise. As I began interviewing couples for this thesis, I found certain areas of conflict coming up consistently. For most couples, the conflicts began with the wedding. This seemed to contain many issues that they found in their daily lives, such as keeping *kosher* and how to accommodate their more and less observant family members. Once living together, couples had to decide whether or not they were going to keep *kosher*, both inside and outside the home. Then came compromising on *Shabbat* and other holidays, as well as finding what synagogue works for both partners, or accepting that each partner will attend somewhere different. The most difficult issue for these couples seems to be once they have children, or even when they begin thinking about having children. They also have to find ways to handle their own, and their partners’, families as the couple becomes more or less observant. Though Jewish married couples who practice different levels of observance have a lot of areas to compromise on, they find ways to make it work.

### Wedding

“The wedding for me was a total train wreck. It was so traditional and felt so uncomfortable to circle him 7 times, not me at all, really felt like an out of body experience” (Jessica).

Often times, the wedding is the first major milestone for a Jewish couple, and a lot of issues come up for couples who practice different levels of observance in planning the wedding



and on the wedding day itself. All couples planning their wedding must decide who will perform the ceremony and what food to eat at the reception, but these issues become much bigger when religious differences are involved. A major issue that comes up for these couples revolves around egalitarianism within the wedding. Many couples must find ways to compromise between having traditional Jewish weddings, while maintaining equality between the men and women. A key issue that comes up for these couples, as well as couples who do not practice different levels of observance, is making decisions based on what the family wants, especially when the family is paying for the event.

### Wedding Planning

Some issues that come up in planning a wedding include what food to eat and where to get married. Generally, if one of the partners keeps *kosher*, the wedding is *kosher*. Some couples made compromises on this issue, though, and had fish and vegetarian options, especially as *kosher* catering is very expensive. For Yael, who grew up Conservadox, if she and Ben had meat at their wedding, it would have to be *kosher*. Ben's family, who is Reform and not observant, did not want to buy *kosher* meat and were concerned that people would want meat. A *kosher* meat option was too expensive for Yael and Ben, however, so they chose a fish and vegetarian "*kosher* style" option, and told Ben's family that they could get themselves meat after the reception. This was also an issue for Sydney and Jonathan. Sydney, whose family grew up non-religious and had no understanding of the laws of *kashrut*, had to accommodate Jonathan's traditional Conservative upbringing. Sydney and Jonathan also opted for the "*kosher* style" menu and had fish and vegetarian options. They could not have chicken which was difficult for Sydney and her family, but Jonathan's mother would not allow it.

It was also difficult for many couples to decide what type of synagogue, or by what type of rabbi, they should get married. Ariella is modern Orthodox and Jonah is Conservative. They got married in what they consider a “neutral place”, which ended up being a Conservative synagogue that also performs Orthodox weddings. For this particular wedding, Jonah’s father, who is a Conservative rabbi, officiated with Ariella’s brother, an Orthodox rabbi. However, she had to tell others that no one officiated from her side of the family because her brother did not want to be associated with the ceremony. Ariella’s family, including her brother, felt uncomfortable with many of the rituals during the ceremony and reception, but still came to support her. Gary and Deborah had a traditional wedding officiated by one of Gary’s family members, a Conservative rabbi. Gary grew up in an Orthodox household and is now traditional Conservative so it was important for him to have a traditional wedding. Though Deborah grew up Reform, her first marriage was Orthodox and she is very comfortable with different Jewish sects, so having a Conservative ceremony was not an issue for her.

### Egalitarianism

Many couples who are traditional egalitarian find that they must mold many of the components of the ceremony to fit in with their values. The typical components that have to be changed to become egalitarian are the *ketubah*, *aufruf*, *tisch* and seven circles. The *ketubah* is a Jewish marriage contract that grants “women economic protection within the marriage and in case of its dissolution” (Ramon, 2001, p. 106). Traditionally, the *ketubah* is “the husband’s one-sided promise to this wife” (Ramon, 2001, p. 107). Today, many Jews have issues with the traditional text of the *ketubah* because many wives also support their husbands financially and otherwise. For Sarah and Oren, the *ketubah* was the biggest issue. Oren, who grew up in a very

observant home, though now considers himself “Agnostodox” which means he practices in an Orthodox style while not believing in G-d, wanted an Orthodox *ketubah* to please his parents, and also for his future children in case they choose to have an Orthodox wedding. Sarah, a Reform rabbinical student, did not feel that the words of the traditional *ketubah* resonated for them. After much debate, the *ketubah* ended up being traditional egalitarian. This means that everything the husband traditionally does, the wife does as well. For example, they both agree to enter into a partnership with one another and take care of one another, as opposed to it being solely the groom’s role. Their *ketubah* is also written to resolve the issue of *agunah*, where a husband can refuse to give his wife a *get* (Jewish legal divorce), therefore keeping her from remarrying. In Oren and Sarah’s *ketubah*, if they are separated or civilly divorced and Oren does not give Sarah a *get*, their *ketubah*, and thus Jewish marriage, becomes annulled.

Sarah and Oren also chose to each have an *aufruf*, where each partner read from the *Torah*. Known as “the pre-wedding *aliyah*,” a traditional *aufruf* is where “a groom is called to the *Torah* to receive an *aliyah* on the *Shabbat* immediately prior to his wedding” (Kaplan-Mayer, 2009, pp. 117-118). Naomi and Yehuda each had their own *tisch* before their wedding. Traditionally, only the groom has a *tisch*, where he gathers his male friends and tries to offer them words of *Torah* while getting interrupted by them with songs and jokes (Kaplan-Mayer, 2009, pp. 125-126). At the same time, the bride traditionally has a *kabbalat panim*, where her female guests come to bless her and she can give them blessings in return (Kaplan-Mayer, 2009, p. 125). Though Naomi grew up Orthodox and is more observant than her Conservative husband Yehuda, it was important for her to have the wedding be as egalitarian as possible.

The *hakafot*, circling that takes place at a traditional wedding also brought up issues for some of the couples. “Traditionally, the wedding ceremony begins with the bride circling the

groom seven times” under the *chuppah*, the traditional wedding canopy that Jews are married under (Kaplan-Mayer, 2009, p. 132). The circling is an “ancient gesture” that “wards off evil spirits” from the bride and groom’s new home (Kaplan-Mayer, 2009, p. 132). Many egalitarian couples do not believe that the bride should circle the groom all seven times, and have altered the ritual accordingly. Jonah and Ariella each walked around the other three and a half times. They wanted the circling to be egalitarian so that they were each bringing the other into their lives and connecting with one another on the same level.

### Dealing with Families

Sarah would have made several different choices for her wedding if her Orthodox mother-in-law had not been involved. Sarah would have liked for her and Oren to circle one another, as opposed to her circling him all seven times, but her mother-in-law would not allow this. There was also tension with her mother-in-law when it came to mixed versus separate dancing. Ultimately, these problems led to Sarah’s mother-in-law withdrawing some financial support from the wedding, which caused Sarah and Oren not to be able to have a *kosher* wedding. The *kosher* food, however, was mostly to appease Sarah’s in-laws. Since his parents did not give the wedding an “Orthodox seal of approval,” they did not see the reason for it to be *kosher*. This rift hurt Sarah and her mother’s feelings. The relations between Sarah and her mother-in-law have improved since the wedding.

Jonah is proud of himself for his creativity in planning things for the wedding as his father-in-law “refused to compromise on many things,” such as a mutual ring exchange under the *chuppah*. Jonah felt like his father-in-law was concerned with “losing his credibility in his community” if his daughter did not have an Orthodox wedding, but Jonah “found ways to get

around these issues.” Ariella and Jonah had an Orthodox service and an egalitarian *minyan*, public prayer that traditionally requires ten male adults, before their wedding. They each circled the other three and a half times. They also created speaking opportunities for women. A female guest gave a *d’var Torah*, a speech relating to the *Torah*, under the *chuppah* and there were two chantings of the blessing after the meal, the second led by a woman. Jonah was disappointed in his family, who are Conservative Jews, for not speaking up more for what they wanted in the ceremony.

Some parents, specifically the more observant ones, insist that the ceremony take place at their synagogue. It seems as though the parents who are more observant are more adamant and outspoken about the way the wedding should be in general. Susan and Chaim were not allowed to plan their wedding because traditionally the parents were supposed to take care of the wedding financially, but also because it needed to be supervised by Chaim’s Orthodox parents. Susan’s parents, who were raised Orthodox but had come to see it as something of the past with archaic rituals, wanted to walk her down the aisle but Chaim’s parents would not allow it because they followed the custom that both fathers walk the groom down the aisle and both mothers walk the bride down. Susan remembers not being “deeply upset by it” because a big wedding was not important to her or Chaim. Susan’s parents and in-laws did not accept one another’s religious backgrounds. Susan explains that “my parents saw theirs as ridiculous and archaic, and they thought my parents may not even be Jewish, and had a rabbi check.” They did treat each other civilly but did not really like one another. Once Susan and Chaim were married, however, their parents learned to accept the practices that their children decided on.

For the most part, couples have *kosher*, or at least *kosher* style, meals at their weddings to accommodate the more observant partner who keeps *kosher*. While this was difficult for some non-observant families to accept, no couple with an observant partner had non-*kosher* meat at their wedding. Many couples were able to compromise, though, and cater to the less observant partner within a traditional service. This was specifically done for egalitarian purposes. Many of the couples seemed eager to find ways to have a traditional egalitarian ceremony. This generally applied to couples that were knowledgeable of these issues and were observant in some ways themselves. Typically, when the less observant partner was unaware of certain changes that could be made, the couple followed the rabbi which tended to accommodate the more observant partner's needs. Therefore, it is important for couples to understand all of the components of a Jewish wedding and discuss what they might like to do for themselves before being influenced by their rabbi and families.

While most couples were able to make compromises with one another, it was often difficult to accommodate the less observant partner if an observant family was involved. In these cases, the couple found that the changes they could make were constrained by the observant family members. In some situations, couples may have to choose between receiving finances from their families and being able to make their own decisions, or they need to be willing to have an honest dialogue with their families about the choices they are making and trust that their families will support them.

## Kashrut

“He brought shrimp into our home. It happened only once, and from that time I wouldn’t let it happen again. He didn’t have a choice” (Batsheva).

Most people I interviewed were not as outspoken on the *kashrut* issue as they were about other compromises that they have to make. The general consensus seems to be that if one of the partners keeps *kosher*, the home is *kosher*. It is difficult to compromise within the home when it comes to laws of *kashrut*. It does not seem to be much of an issue for people to keep a *kosher* home, even if they were not used to doing so previously. One exception to this is Joshua who moved in to Lily’s already existing non-*kosher* home. Joshua is Conservative and has kept *kosher* all of his life whereas Lily grew up non-religious. Joshua uses Lily’s dishes except during Passover. He also has his own *kosher* barbeque at the house, where he can cook *kosher* meat. Lily and Joshua plan to move into a new home together, however, and that home will be *kosher*. Lily finds it important to be accommodating to Joshua in this way because it is something that is important to him. Like Lily, most partners who are less observant feel that this is a way they can be accommodating to their more observant partner. Typical responses to this issue include “it was important to him, so I learned how to do it” or “I wasn’t opposed to it [keeping *kosher*] because I liked the idea of having a Jewish home.”

## Compromising Up

Both Batsheva and Shimon grew up in strictly observant *Sephardic* households in Israel. While Batsheva has always continued to keep *kosher*, Shimon strayed away from being observant as he became older. It was important to Batsheva to continue the traditions that she learned growing up in her household, so their house is strictly *kosher*. Though Shimon would not keep a *kosher* kitchen if he lived on his own, he claims that it is “not difficult for me to not to

have it in the house because I'm used to it, because I grew up that way." Shimon adheres to the laws of *kashrut* inside the house, but outside mixes milk and meat and loves shellfish. Batsheva accepts that Shimon does not keep *kosher* outside of their home, but believes that the house has to be one way or the other, especially when children are involved. Batsheva and Shimon have given their children, who are now twenty and eighteen, a choice when it comes to keeping *kosher* outside the home. Though they have the option, their children have chosen to not eat pork or shellfish, or red meat in non-*kosher* restaurants. Batsheva and Shimon like that their children have found a balance in this area.

Though often times a home is *kosher* to accommodate the more observant partner in the relationship, sometimes a couple keeps *kosher* to appease one of the partners' more observant families. Though Oren grew up keeping *kosher*, he would be happy to buy non-*hekshered* dairy products as a compromise to his less-observant wife Sarah. They have both chosen to buy only *hekshered*, food products with particular *kosher* certifications, dairy products, however, because Oren's family is very religious and would not eat in their home otherwise. It is very important to Sarah to be inclusive of Oren's family so she does not mind making this change.

Lauren was convinced by Adam's reasoning for keeping a *kosher* home. Though Adam grew up less observant than Lauren, he Reform and she Conservative, it was Adam who chose to start keeping *kosher* in college. Adam's "guiding principle for keeping a *kosher* home" was so that any Jew in the community could eat at his home. This principle resonated with Lauren and so she accepted having a *kosher* home. Though keeping *kosher* does not come from a place of observance for Adam, it is still important to him and so Lauren accommodates him in this regard.



## Compromising Down

When it comes to *kashrut*, some compromises occur in which the partner who keeps *kosher* continues to keep a *kosher* home while becoming less strict. For example, some couples no longer require *hekshered* cheese or are more lax about which *hekhshers* are allowed in the household. Though Rachel grew up in a strict Orthodox household, she has become much more lenient since she married Nathan, who still follows the tenets of Reconstructionism. Rachel claims that she and Nathan “keep mostly *kosher*” in their home. This means that she will not allow pig or shellfish in the house but will eat non-*kosher* chicken and turkey. They do not mix milk and meat because they have no milk in their home. This is not for purposes of *kashrut*, however, as Nathan is lactose intolerant.

Most partners who would choose not to keep a *kosher* home if they lived on their own continue to eat non-*kosher* food outside of the home. Many of the partners who find it important to keep a *kosher* home accept the fact that their partners do not keep *kosher* outside of the home. The partner who keeps *kosher* also tends to be more lenient when it comes to keeping *kosher* outside the home. Ariella “won’t eat in non-*kosher* restaurants but will go with Jonah to drink a soda or eat ice cream” which she never would have done “before being with him.” Jonah never saw himself keeping a *kosher* home, which he does to accommodate Ariella, so he appreciates the compromise she makes by going to non-*kosher* places with him. Other more observant partners will eat vegetarian out at non-*kosher* restaurants, when they would not have done so before they were married. When Brooke and Gabe first started dating, Gabe would not eat out at non-*kosher* restaurants. Brooke grew up in a non-observant Reform household and Gabe was ordained as a rabbi at Hebrew College, a trans-denominational program, yet most closely associates with the Conservative movement. Brooke claims that the idea made Gabe furious

because he did not believe in going out to eat at non-*kosher* places or with non-Jewish or non-*kosher* keeping friends. Since they were married, however, Gabe has agreed to eat vegetarian options at non-*kosher* restaurants as a compromise to Brooke since she keeps *kosher* for Gabe inside the home.

The general trends around keeping *kosher* are that couples are stricter and follow the more observant partner's level of *kashrut* inside the home, but are more lenient and often follow the less observant partner's level of *kashrut* outside of the home. Inside the home, it is important to the more observant partner, and often times to the couple as a whole, to have a Jewish home and be able to provide *kosher* food for more observant family members as well as others in the community. It is also important for couples with children, or who are thinking of having children, to have a *kosher* home so that their children grow up with one. For other couples, it is important to carry on the tradition that they had growing up.

Outside of the home, couples who never ate in non-*kosher* restaurants before are often willing to compromise with their less observant partners and eat vegetarian options or try non-*kosher* poultry. It seems like it would be very difficult for the less observant partners to fully keep *kosher* inside and outside the home, especially if the couple does not live in an area with many or any *kosher* restaurants. Therefore, it seems to be a good compromise for couples in these situations to keep a *kosher* home and be more lenient outside of it.

## Shabbat and Holidays

“He didn’t like that I didn’t keep *Shabbat*. He had this whole idea of how things were going to be, and I was the person ruining it” (Jessica).

When it comes to celebrating *Shabbat* and other holidays, there are many ways that couples who practice different levels of observance compromise with one another. Sometimes, the less observant partner will try not to do things that the more observant partner chooses not to do out of respect for them, or ends up becoming more observant out of habit. Some observances become relaxed to cater to the less observant partner in the relationship, whereas in some relationships, both partners do what they want and leave the other alone. There are, however, often mixed feelings with these compromises for both the more and less observant partners. Often times, the more observant partners do not like seeing their partners doing something that they are uncomfortable with. These choices take a lot of discussing and maneuvering in order to please both parties.

### Compromising on Shabbat

Lily never used to keep *Shabbat* before she met Joshua. Now, she buys *challah*, a type of bread made specifically for this holiday, every Friday for the *Shabbat* dinner that they have. For her, “it’s become routine.” For Joshua, “that was a gift.” The fact that Lily does this has “tremendous meaning” for him. Conner has also made changes to accommodate Ruth’s higher levels of observance. Though neither Conner nor Ruth grew up religious, Ruth became Orthodox before she met Conner. Ruth did not expect Conner to practice the way that she did, but Conner claims that becoming observant has been a slow-moving process which “just sort of happened after being together.” Initially, Conner did not keep *Shabbat* at all, but after eleven and a half years of marriage, and many *Shabbats*, he now mostly keeps *Shabbat* with the

exception of taking a business call here or there or turning off the lights in order to conserve energy.

Brooke and Gabe decided that they would find ways together to make *Shabbat* “separate” from the rest of the week. In doing so, they still found ways to accommodate Brooke’s liberal Jewish upbringing and Gabe’s traditional Conservative upbringing. They will only drive on *Shabbat* if it is to go to *shul* or drive to someone’s home for a *Shabbat* meal. They also do not watch television in their home during *Shabbat*. Gabe describes that “in an ideal world, Brooke would be more excited about keeping *Shabbat*.” Because he understands that this is not necessarily her choice, it is about “finding a balance” and being more flexible. For example, Gabe is okay with lighting the candles before it is time to do so or even ending *Shabbat* a little early. He is also more flexible with keeping *Shabbat* on vacations which Gabe explains may not have to happen if Brooke was more “fired up” about keeping *Shabbat*. Even if the less observant partner in the relationship does not become more halakhically observant, generally they will practice *Shabbat* in some way, when they may not have done anything for it prior to their relationship.

Neither Wendy nor Martin grew up religious, but Martin has become more observant over the last decade. While Wendy continues to affiliate the way she grew up with the Reform movement, Martin now attends a few traditional *minyanim* and affiliates most with the Conservative movement. Martin keeps some aspects of *Shabbat* such as not spending money, and will only drive to get to *shul*, while this is unimportant to Wendy. Despite their differences, Wendy and Martin made the decision that they will be together on Friday nights. It is important to both of them on Fridays to pray with the same *minyan* and to host *Shabbat* dinners for family and friends. On Saturdays, however, Martin attends a *minyan* that Wendy does not go to and

Wendy will go to “non-*Shabbat* events.” They both respect each other’s decisions when it comes to *Shabbat* observances.

Jonah and Ariella hold the attitude that each person does what feels right to them. As Jonah puts it, “the things I don’t do she doesn’t care and she can do what she wants.” Their home, however, is *Shabbat* observant, meaning Jonah must keep *Shabbat* when he is in their home. This does not apply if he is somewhere else, like his parents’ home. Ariella has needed to be more lenient at her in-laws’ home and accepts that they will cook and watch television. Ariella makes this compromise for Jonah but expresses that it is very difficult for her. She knows Jonah’s family does not want to offend her or make her uncomfortable, but when they watch television, she must go to another room and be by herself.

Naomi allows Yehuda to use electronics in their home on *Shabbat*, even though it was very difficult for her to accept him using the computer. Naomi claims that she “won’t judge his practices,” even though she has mixed feelings about it. She had to ask herself, “Am I going to be the kind of person that can handle this?” and decided that she would have to be in order to be in a relationship with him. Naomi explains that a lot of these compromises started while they were dating. A formal Saturday *Shabbat* lunch has always been very important to Naomi, but she has compromised and now the lunch that they have is not as formal as she originally had hoped. Yehuda feels an impulse not to have a formal lunch because *Shabbat* is a day of rest and he wants to be comfortable. Therefore, they can eat in their pajamas and she just does not use her good china, but they still always have a *Shabbat* lunch.

## Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Passover

Some compromises that happen during other holidays such as *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year, *Yom Kippur*, the day of atonement, and Passover, revolve around how many days of the holiday will be kept and which laws will be observed. While Sahar keeps the holidays for two days, Payam only observes them for one. For Sahar, it would be ideal if Payam and his family also kept the holidays as strictly as she does, but she “puts up with it” and will not “be disrespectful” to them. Sahar explains that often times *shalom bayit*, having peace in the home, is more important than arguing with Payam about being more observant. As she puts it, “G-d would rather me not fight with my husband all the time.”

Yael grew up never going to school or working during the high holidays, whereas Ben may not take off for one day of *Rosh Hashanah*, let alone two. Now that Yael and Ben are together, Ben will take off work for the holidays as well. Because of Ben, Yael has become less strict during Passover. She won't eat bread, and prefers it not to be in the house, but accepts that Ben eats it. Though Deborah is not thrilled about having to use a completely different set of dishes and scour the house for bread in preparation for Passover, she still does so to accommodate Gary. Deborah believes that “it's a consumer fraud to change the food and you can't use anything that was open from the Passover before” and that the process in general is a “little excessive,” but she still follows everything.

Many couples who practice different levels of observance accept that they will not keep *Shabbat* and other holidays the same way as their spouse. Though couples often agree that their home will be *shomer Shabbat*, keeping within the laws of *Shabbat* (with the less observant partners doing as they please when outside or provided it does not affect the more observant

partners), they still view the holidays as family celebrations and want to celebrate with their partners. It seems to be difficult for partners who observe these holidays on their own and create a separation between one another.

When Jessica was married to Samuel, he expected her to keep *Shabbat* and come to services where he practiced as a Conservative rabbi. Initially, Jessica did as she was asked, but did not like his traditional synagogue, as she was used to Reform services, and ultimately used *Shabbat* as days to visit her family and friends or even run errands. While Jessica's hope was that Samuel would accept her choices, his was that she would "turn into this *frum Rebbetzin* lady." Their differences led to a divorce two years after they were married. Some couples have no issue being at different places during the holidays or having differing observance levels, but it seems to be ideal for couples to find ways together to make *Shabbat* and other holidays more meaningful for both partners. Often times this means finding a middle ground between both partners' observance levels, or creating family customs that appease both partners.

## Synagogues

On not praying with Adam: "I don't take it personally. We don't need to connect to Judaism in every same way. It's very important that we don't compromise on everything, but that we find what's comfortable for both of us, and separately" (Lauren).

Finding a synagogue seems to be the most individualistic issue for couples who practice different levels of observance. Many of these couples view prayer as personal and are more concerned with their partner doing what is comfortable for them, as opposed to both partners agreeing on the same thing. Some couples accept that prayer is important to one of them and not the other and so only one partner attends services, whereas both partners go to separate synagogues in other relationships. Sometimes the less observant partner or partner less

interested in going to services will go to the synagogue their partner chooses in order to appease their partner. A few of the couples I interviewed did find it important to pray together and have found a traditional egalitarian *minyan* as a middle ground between the two observance levels, although often times neither partner is comfortable there.

### Being Separate

Wendy and Martin attend a non-denominational congregation together on Friday nights, and then attend separate *minyanim* on Saturday mornings, or Martin goes to services while Wendy goes shopping or runs errands. They do not attend the same services for the high holidays. Martin prefers the complete, traditional service, whereas Wendy does not feel comfortable with it. They do feel comfortable going to different services. Wendy explains that it doesn't make her feel lonely, that it's important for them to be where they each want to be. Susan describes that not only her husband Chaim, but all of her children go to separate *shuls*. Linda's children are all adults now, though one son and his wife live with her, and her other children live close by. Her children were raised Orthodox and are much stricter than she is. While they all attend Orthodox synagogues or *minyanim*, they range from modern Orthodox to *Chabad*.

### Meeting the More Observant Partner's Needs

When they attend services, both Lily and Joshua go to a Conservative synagogue, which is where Joshua is comfortable. They both agree that this issue is a compromise for Lily because going to services is not very important to her. If she had her choice, she would attend Reform services, but she understands that belonging to and attending a Conservative synagogue is



important to Joshua, which she respects. Also, often times Joshua goes to services by himself so it makes sense for them to belong somewhere that resonates with Joshua as opposed to Lily. Sydney, who grew up with no religion in her family, joined a Conservative synagogue for Jonathan. It was not an issue for her because she “didn’t know anything different.” As she puts it, “I’ve really embraced belonging to a temple, being a part of something, our kids going to religious school and making friends and feeling part of a Jewish community, because I never had that.”

### Being Together

For Deborah and Gary, it’s important that they find the right place together. They did belong to an Orthodox synagogue to cater to Gary’s traditional observance level, but the services did not resonate for either Deborah or Gary. Now, they are trying to find somewhere that suits both of their needs. Gary explains, “We want to be sitting together at services. I’ll get more out of the services if she’s sitting next to me.” While Gary wants to be sitting with Deborah, he probably would not feel comfortable at a Reform synagogue, which is what Deborah grew up with. Deborah is fine, though, attending a synagogue that is more comfortable for Gary.

Many couples make compromises in which they forfeit their individual locations for prayer in order to attend a traditional egalitarian *minyan* together. Brooke and Gabe attend a non-affiliated egalitarian *shul*. Though Gabe mostly affiliates with the Conservative movement, Brooke is disenchanted with Jewish denominations and is uninterested in attending a Conservative synagogue. She will also not attend a service that is not egalitarian. Gabe will attend a Conservative or non-egalitarian service, but chooses to pray with Brooke. Jonah and Ariella attend three different *minyanim*: he attends one at a Conservative synagogue, she attends

Young Israel, and the two of them go to a *minyan* together that combines aspects of both Conservative and Orthodox customs. Ariella and Jonah found a *minyan* that has aspects of what each of the partners prefers in a service. As Ariella puts it, “The *minyan* wouldn’t be either one of our first choices, but it’s nice to be able to share the *minyan* experience. We both attend it and are both equally uncomfortable.” The components that are more Conservative-leaning are uncomfortable for Ariella and the more Orthodox components are uncomfortable for Jonah.

### Washington Square Minyan

Through my interviews, I found out about a post-denominational *minyan* that caters to the needs of couples who practice different levels of observance. The Washington Square Minyan in Brookline, Massachusetts, describes itself as being “an independent congregation, guided by halakha and following the traditional liturgy” ([wsminyan.org](http://wsminyan.org)). This *minyan* was founded by and attracted many Jews who were not comfortable at local synagogues. Conservative *shuls* were not observant enough but Orthodox synagogues did not offer enough participation to the women. Issues did come up in creating the *minyan* as far as egalitarianism and what liturgy to use. It was ultimately decided that services at the *minyan* are egalitarian and participants use Orthodox liturgy. There is no *mechitzah*, a barrier between men and women found in Orthodox synagogues, but men and women do sit separately, and there is equal participation among men and women. No denominational label is used to describe the *minyan*.

Orthodox *halakhic* decision-making does not traditionally consider the needs of couples with different levels of observance. However, in this *minyan*, the emphasis is on creating an environment where couples with differences in observance will feel comfortable, and therefore strict *halakha* is not always enforced. The *minyan* aims to be a comfortable place for people

with multiple levels of observance. Many women do cover their hair and do not wear *tallitot*, prayer shawls. Many men wear more traditional *tallitot*, and unmarried men often do not wear them, according to *Ashkenazic* Orthodox custom. While most people at this *minyan* follow Orthodox standards when it comes to hair coverings and wearing *tallitot*, people are allowed to do whatever they would like at the *minyan* and no one judges them for it.

Praying and attending services seems to be the main area where couples who practice different levels of observance accept choosing different paths from one another. If prayer is important to both partners, it seems to work for each partner to attend the service that is most meaningful for them, even if it means being separated from their other halves. For the couples that do want to pray together, non- or trans-denominational *minyanim* seem to be the best option. Because these *minyanim* do not cater to a particular denomination, they are less likely to alienate people or make them feel like they must fit into a specific category. There are many traditional egalitarian *minyanim* that serve as a good compromise for observant couples that want to attend services together.

## **Children**

“As much as I don’t want an Orthodox daughter, I don’t want my kids becoming Christian either, so I want to instill in them my Jewish values” (Sarah).

While it is difficult enough for a couple to come to certain decisions about how to live a Jewish life, these decisions become much more difficult once children enter the picture. Even for couples who do not yet have children, this is often a huge issue. Couples must negotiate between what they choose to do now and what they want for their future children. Many couples who are more lenient regarding Jewish observances become stricter when they have children. It

was important to all of the couples interviewed that there was a sense of Judaism instilled in their children. Most of these families insist that their children practice at the more observant partner's level. Often times, the less observant partner will still follow the same level of observance but will hide it from their children. There were also a few couples I interviewed who are in their second marriages and are no longer planning on having children or have already had families of their own. For these couples, they are generally able to continue their own practices without having to conform to their more observant partners.

### Planning for Children

Oren and Sarah do not have children yet, but they plan on it, and so it is something that they discuss a lot. Some issues that come up for them revolve around egalitarianism and belief in G-d. Because Oren and his family are Orthodox, Sarah is concerned about the time alone her children may spend with them. She does not like the idea of her daughters being behind a *mechitzah*, a separation between men and women during services, or things being explained to her children a different way than she would like. For Oren, it is important for his children to experience all different types of Judaism. Also, Oren considers himself agnostic, whereas Sarah has a strong belief in G-d. Sarah explains that she and Oren have conversations about how to discuss G-d with their future children, and that she would like to be in charge of that area because she wants her children to believe in G-d.

Other issues that come up for couples considering having children regard how to keep *Shabbat* or what schools or synagogues their children will attend. When Nathan and Rachel talk about having kids, they discuss finding the right Jewish community for their family. Nathan feels most comfortable at a Reconstructionist synagogue, but Rachel will not allow her children

to be brought up in that kind of environment. Rachel understands that Reconstructionist synagogues perform many interfaith marriages, and it is important for her family to be at a synagogue where they will only perform Jewish marriages, as she does not want her children thinking it is acceptable to marry a non-Jew. There is also a “giant discussion” for Nathan and Rachel with regards to children when it comes to what sort of school they will attend. Rachel is insistent that her children attend a private Jewish school, whereas Nathan is in favor of public school. Even discussing this in an interview became a tense subject, and they decided that it was not something to dwell on at the moment.

Though often times both parents would be okay sending their children to Jewish private school, there is sometimes an argument as to which type of private school. Jonah does not want his children attending an Orthodox day school, whereas that would be Ariella’s first choice. They both want their children living in a community with a “pluralistic viewpoint,” but it is important to Ariella for them to discuss why Jonah does not want their children attending an Orthodox school and the implications of that. Jonah claims that he and Ariella discuss these issues a lot and that often times Ariella will agree to “practice toward the left,” and then she starts to feel bad about it and moves back toward the right.

Sahar and Payam agreed prior to their marriage that their future children would attend *yeshivot*, Orthodox Jewish schools, but now he does not seem to be okay with it. Sahar is also concerned about her children keeping *Shabbat*. It is important to her that her children are *shomer Shabbat*, that they keep all the laws of observing *Shabbat*, but worries that her children will think they do not have to do certain things because they will see their father not doing certain things. Sahar and Payam have decided that they will “tackle the *shomer Shabbat*” decision when they have children.

### Compromises for Children

Sydney still does not keep *kosher* outside of the home, but her children have been raised to do so. As Sydney learned the laws of *kashrut* from Jonathan, it became increasingly important to her that her children learn these laws as well. Interestingly enough, it is Jonathan who does not mind if his children continue keeping *kosher* once they have homes of their own, whereas Sydney hopes they will. Jonathan wants his children to understand their heritage, and hopes that when they turn eighteen they decide to keep everything, but it is not “a deal breaker” for him if they choose not to. Brooke has a two year-old son who sees her eating non-*kosher* food outside of the house which he is not allowed to do. She realizes that soon she will have to stop doing it herself or hide it from him. Brooke and Gabe have made the decision that their son will keep *kosher* strictly until he is ten or eleven. They believe at this age he will be able to form a mature opinion on the matter, and then can choose for himself what laws to follow.

Susan’s children were all raised strictly Orthodox, and are all much stricter than she is. She explains that “if I do something it is hidden, it is absolutely for me and nobody else.” She added, “They don’t like it when they see me or sense me not doing things strictly, but sort of let me alone.” For example, often times if it gets dark on Saturday before *Shabbat* is out and Susan wants to read, she will turn a light on. Susan explains that she “just want[s] to be common „sensical“ about it, like the way [she] was brought up.” According to Susan, “I can beat my chest on *Yom Kippur*; I don’t need to bother anyone with it.”

### Second Marriages

This is both Joshua and Lily’s second marriage, and Joshua states that it “made a big difference that the relationship happened in this stage of our lives.” He explains that “we’re not

a young couple, we're not having kids together, and if we would've raised kids together I would've pushed harder for changes in the household." Because it is just Joshua and Lily in the home and both of their children are grown-up, Joshua is not worried about influencing children in a certain way and is willing to be more lenient with many observances.

For Gary and Deborah, they don't think that things would have changed much if they were a younger couple who was going to have children because Deborah practices Gary's level of observance in the household. It does not matter now, however, since this is their second marriage and their kids are older and out of the home. Deborah explains that for some relationships where the children are in the home, "some kids don't want a different life or two households going on."

Both of the above examples pertain to cases where children have already left the home. When there are young children split between two families, one of which has a different level of observance, the issues become even more complicated. Blending two families with different levels of observance would probably be a difficult adjustment for all involved, especially for children already used to a particular level of observance. One couple with different levels of observance has enough issues to consider when raising children; when two families of different levels of observance are involved this becomes even more challenging.

Raising children seems to cause the most difficult discussions for couples who practice different levels of observance. This is a subject that needs to be discussed well in advance of having children and conflict could be minimized if couples have already found ways to compromise amongst themselves. For some couples, it becomes overwhelming to think about. Jessica decided not to talk about kids with her ex-husband Samuel, because they both realized

what a problem it would be. As she puts it, “If we had kids, it would’ve been a huge disaster. There was no way on earth I was comfortable raising them that way, because the way he practiced didn’t imply any choice involved.”

Couples must work out how they will compromise on various issues before figuring out how their children will be raised. While many couples can make it work between the two of them if they each practice varying levels of observance, this becomes much more difficult with children. Children will be aware of both ways, and it can be confusing for them, especially if one of their parents is hiding these practices from them. It is understandable that couples who practice different levels of observance will not practice the same way just because they have children. What is important, however, is that they find ways of being honest with their children so as not to have them confused.

### **Dealing with Families**

On his mother’s reaction to him marrying his wife: “„You’re crazy...you’re marrying an Orthodox!” My whole family still thinks we’re crazy. I’ve missed a lot of family get-togethers because a lot of them happen on Fridays and Saturdays, and I don’t go. I kind of feel bad and initially it was a lot of pressure, but now they just don’t expect it, or they know we’ll bring our own food. If they want us to be there, they have to schedule it around *Shabbat*, but they still think we’re crazy” (Conner).

It is not only with one’s partner that couples who practice different levels of observance must learn to compromise, but also with each other’s families. Often, couples find it easier to compromise within their relationships than with each other’s families. Some couples are judged by their more observant families for becoming less observant, whereas other couples who become more observant than their families find it difficult to practice certain religious customs with them. There is also generally a misunderstanding from couples’ families regarding the “other’s” practices, which can be hurtful and challenging for both of the partners.



### Accommodating Their Partner's Family

Although Oren is the more observant partner in his relationship, Sarah does not need to keep strictly *kosher* in her home for him, but as a compromise to his family. Even though Oren is becoming less observant, Sarah wants to be inclusive of his family who are all Orthodox. Oren's parents recently found out, however, that Oren and Sarah cook in their kitchen on *Shabbat* and now his parents will no longer eat there. One difficulty that Jonah and Ariella have experienced because of Ariella's greater level of observance is that Jonah's family and friends do not keep *kosher* the way Ariella does. Ariella explains:

I've allowed myself to be a little more lenient when it comes to kashrut when in Jonah's parents' house. In my own home, I wouldn't utilize the dishwasher for both meat and milk dishes, and in his parents' house that hasn't stopped me from eating the food or using the dishes. I wouldn't turn off and on an oven on *Shabbat* whereas they would, so I just stay out of their kitchen.

Ariella adds that she thinks of "*shalom bayit*, this is not just my relationship with Jonah, but also a relationship with my in-laws, so I don't make a big deal out of it." Ariella knows friends who will not eat in their in-laws homes or bring their own plates, but she has chosen not to create that type of environment.

### Family Tensions

As Brooke has come closer to Gabe's level of observance, it has become increasingly more difficult for the two of them to celebrate Jewish holidays and other customs with Brooke's parents. Gabe describes his in-laws' observance levels as "almost non-existent." As he explains it, this is "not a pleasant way for us to celebrate because it doesn't cover what we'd want to do." As a compromise, they generally celebrate Jewish holidays with Gabe's parents and secular holidays with Brooke's family. Brooke believes that her family "finds it difficult" and "feels

intimidated” by the way that they choose to live Jewishly. There are some specific tensions with her mother, a Reform rabbi, now that Brooke no longer affiliates with the Reform movement. Gabe understands that Brooke’s family does try and accommodate him by making vegetarian meals or buying *kosher* meat. He will go to dinner with their family before *Shabbat* is over, as long as he can walk there. As Brooke has become more observant, it has become easier for her to fit in with Gabe’s family.

For Yael and Ben, there were tensions with both of their families. Yael’s family did not understand how Ben’s family breaks the fast early or only celebrates one day of the *chagim*. Ben’s mom “has a level of contempt with more observant people” and even found it difficult that Ben has become involved with a synagogue. They both claim, though, that things have been getting better with each other’s in-laws.

Lily and Joshua remember their first family *seder* together as being a “very difficult night” as “both families felt very uncomfortable.” It was done in a Conservative way, according to Joshua’s family’s traditions. According to Lily, “his family thought we were being disrespectful because we talked and joked, and we thought his family was being very rigid and controlling.” It took a lot of talking and dialoguing with their own families and cross-families in order to alleviate the tension. Joshua says that “the *seder* was the biggest thing, and it hasn’t been an issue since,” because Joshua and Lily have spent a lot of time discussing these issues with their respective families. Joshua also had some initial questioning from his son about his marriage to Lily because she was less observant than Joshua. Joshua says he “had a long talk with him about my own compromises, why I’m making them, why the situation was different for me now [because of stage of life], and that was the end of it.”

Nathan remembers feeling very defensive initially about his Reconstructionist beliefs and customs because Rachel and her family asked a lot of questions about them. He explains that now he “know[s] they had the best intentions, but early on I felt some resistance.” Rachel adds that “his parents had a lot of questions for me too. I didn’t feel defensive, just that they were curious. His mom had a lot of *kashrut* questions, just to be helpful.” Ariella’s parents were “very, very unhappy with me dating Jonah and asked me to break up with him.” She explains that they wanted her to marry someone who affiliated Orthodox and that they “had many misconceptions about Conservative Jewry.” Ariella felt like her parents were putting her in the middle, but she made a decision that made her happy and feels that her parents have since come around. Ariella is now pregnant with her first child and wonders what issues may arise between her and her parents regarding this child’s religious experiences.

It is generally difficult for parents to come to terms with their children marrying someone who comes from a different denomination or has a different level of observance. Though it is also difficult for the partners themselves, they are in love with one another and are choosing to be in this relationship. While the parents can grow to love their children’s spouses, it takes time and they are more likely to have troubles accepting their differences. This is difficult for both more and less observant families, but more observant families seem to demand more changes whereas less observant families tend to be more cooperative. Many of the less observant families are very accommodating to the more observant partner when it comes to *kashrut* and other rituals. Generally, most families are ultimately willing to meet the needs of their children’s partner and accept their choices.

## **Advice**

“Be clear about who you are and don’t expect them to become somebody else; if you’re not happy with what you have going in, you can’t expect to ever be happy with it” (Jessica).

At the end of each of the interviews, I asked each couple to share with me advice that they have for other couples in similar situations to them. According to most of the couples I interviewed, communication regarding these differences is key. Jessica said to “talk about it 100 million times” so that each partner is really clear on what the issue is and what decisions are being made. It is also essential to discuss all of these issues early on, well before the couple is married. Another key component is for each partner to prioritize what is most important to them and to pick their battles accordingly. The couples I interviewed stressed the importance of respecting one’s partner and loving each other for who they are, not for who you hope they will become.

## **Communicating Honestly**

Most couples stressed the importance of communicating these issues to one another and being really clear as to what you want. For couples with these types of differences, it is important to discuss these issues “before you enter into it.” Yael is adamant that a couple must “talk it out while you’re dating. If you don’t address it early, it’s going to come and bite you later in the relationship.” Jonathan says to “hash out all those problems before you get married, and make sure the majority of the problems aren’t deal breakers.” Brooke and Gabe agree that this must be done, mostly, before you are married, and that the couple must “create a foundation to figure out how to work through things.” Brooke adds that this involves a lot of talking and

listening and caring about what the other person wants, as well as being willing to make compromises for that person.

Naomi and Yehuda agree that a couple needs a “solid basis for how to converse with one another first, before delving into serious religious issues.” Couples must learn how to argue with one another, and approach issues “with an awareness that it’s not right and wrong, but it’s what we know,” in other words what they grew up with and what they are used to. Brooke and Gabe point out that this involves a lot of talking, but also a lot of listening, and “caring about what the other person wants.” It also involves being honest with one another about where you stand and how you feel.

### Choosing Battles

Sarah and Oren agree that couples in these situations must sit and think about their values, and choose their battles accordingly. Brooke and Gabe agree that couples need to “figure out for each person what is really important and what they feel like they really need to hold on to and what they can give up, both making compromises.” Many couples agree that they must make compromises in the relationship in order to accommodate both partners. Though these particular relationships require more compromises based on Jewish practice, “whoever you marry, you’ll have to compromise something.” It is often more difficult, however, for the more observant partner to compromise. As Nathan puts it, “not everything is of equal weight in Judaism.” He explains that each partner should know what is most vital to them, yet also be willing to be open to new ideas and customs. Nathan adds that while it is important to hold on to some things, partners in these relationships should also step outside of their comfort zones.

## Respecting Each Other

Another important aspect for making these marriages work is to not pressure one another. As Sarah puts it, “tell them you love them and whatever they want to do to share [their religious experiences] will be great.” This understanding comes with respecting your partner for who they are. Included in this is “respecting each other’s backgrounds,” says Yehuda. Yael points out that a couple should understand they are not going to agree on everything or want to do everything together, and that “it’s okay if you end up doing things separately.” Joshua explains that “I do what I want to do for myself, there is no pressure on me to do that, and there’s no pressure on Lily to do whatever I’m doing. We respect each other’s modes of living.” Ariella reminds couples that “if you have the expectation that now that you’re married your partner will change, that should be an expectation that you should ditch immediately.”

Ultimately, some of these couples feel like they are marrying one another for love and not religion, and that they can compromise certain aspects of their religion because of their relationship. Or, as is the case for Rachel, it’s about “being with the person you love”, but also that both partners are Jewish and so “not to get too hung up on the details.” As Gabe puts it, “for me, my relationship is more important than my religious commitment.” Conner describes that it “really has to do with the person inside, their soul and their demeanor.” A couple can work through their differences when it comes to levels of observance, if they can deal with one another. For Susan, it’s all about commitment. “If you know you love each other, and you want to go in a certain direction, then you go in that direction,” she says.

The couples that I interviewed do not always follow their own advice when discussing these issues, but they still wanted couples in similar situations to know the best ways of dealing

with their differences. Shying away from issues is not going to make them disappear. It is important to discuss these issues though when both partners have put a lot of thought into what they want and are both really ready to talk about it. While each partner should respect the observances of the other, couples often cater to the partner who is more observant. As Gary puts it, “the one that’s more observant, if they believe strongly, to make them change would minimize their beliefs and degrade or force them away from what they believe in,” whereas the “person who isn’t traditional can go any way, and can be flexible.” However, it is not always as simple as this and discussions regarding every issue, no matter what both partners’ observance levels are, are vital.

In her book *I Only Want to Get Married Once*, Chana Levitan discusses the importance of communication within relationships. She explains that “healthy dialogue is one of the most important elements in any relationship” (Levitan, 2010, p. 99). Levitan adds that healthy dialogue includes arguing and disagreeing with one another, but there is a positivity to negativity “magic ratio” that couples should aim for (Levitan, 2010, pp. 95-96). This ratio is five to one, meaning for every negative conversation a couple has, there should be five positive ones (Levitan, 2010, p. 96). Levitan reminds us that positive relationships are not void of conflict. Rather, it is about using these disagreements in a constructive way and not letting them overpower the relationship.

## Conclusion

Though there is a range in partners' observance levels, among most of the couples interviewed, the less observant partners become more observant to accommodate their more observant partners. The main exception to this is the more observant partner becoming less observant when they were already leaning that way, without the help of their less observant partner. There are also a few couples who have found more of a middle ground that suits both partners. This generally occurs for traditional egalitarian couples or couples where both partners are Jewishly knowledgeable. The following table indicates how each partner identifies "Jewishly" now, as opposed to when they were growing up. The bolded words represent a change in the person's reported religiosity after being in their relationship.

**Table 2: Comparison of Self-Reported Religiosity Before and After Being in Relationship**

Names	Wife's Previous Denomination	Wife's Current Denomination	Husband's Previous Denomination	Husband's Current Denomination
Sarah & Oren	Reform	Reform	Orthodox	<b>Agnostodox</b>
Batsheva & Shimon	<i>Sephardic</i> -observant	<i>Sephardic</i> -observant	<i>Sephardic</i> - not observant	<i>Sephardic</i> - <b>more observant</b>
Lily & Joshua	Non-religious	<b>Reform</b>	Conservative	Conservative
Jessica & Samuel	Reform	Reform	Conservative	Conservative
Rachel & Nathan	Modern Orthodox	<b>Conservative</b>	Reconstructionist	Reconstructionist
Wendy & Martin	Reform	<b>Non-denominational</b>	Non-religious	<b>Non-denominational</b>
Sydney & Jonathan	Non-religious	<b>Conservative</b>	Conservative	Conservative
Lauren & Adam	Conservative	<b>Reform</b>	Reform	Reform



Ariella & Jonah	Modern Orthodox	Modern Orthodox	Conservative	Conservative
Brooke & Gabe	Reform	<b>Non-denominational</b>	Conservative	Conservative
Susan & Chaim	Cultural/Zionist	<b>Modern Orthodox</b>	Orthodox	Orthodox
Naomi & Yehuda	Orthodox	<b>Heimishly observant</b>	Conservative	<b>Orthoprax</b>
Sahar & Payam	<i>Mizrahi</i> -observant	<i>Mizrahi</i> -observant	<i>Mizrahi</i> -not observant	<i>Mizrahi</i> - <b>more observant</b>
Ruth & Conner	Orthodox	Orthodox	Non-religious	<b>Orthodox</b>
Deborah & Gary	Reform	<b>Trans-denominational</b>	Conservative	Conservative
Yael & Ben	Conservadox	<b>Reform</b>	Reform	Reform

Ten of the sixteen couples I interviewed follow the more observant partner's levels of observance, and most of the less observant partners have become more observant inside and outside of the home. Though most couples meet the needs of the more observant partner, there are generally compromises made in some areas that accommodate the less observant partner as well. Though often times the less observant partners can do what they want outside of the home, they usually keep a more strict observance level inside. The couples that have found more of a middle ground in their relationships are the couples who are traditional egalitarian. These couples generally come from Orthodox and Conservative backgrounds and are able to blend the two practices. These couples seem to end up praying with non- or post-denominational *minyanim* and no longer affiliate with a particular denomination.

## Recommendations

### For Couples

I hope that couples in this situation who are married or considering marriage can use this research to work on the issues that have arisen or may arise in their relationships. Every couple is unique and will deal with their differences in ways that work for them, but it is good for them to be aware of the issues that may come up and discuss how they might deal with these issues early on. I hope that this thesis offers them insight as to how other couples in similar situations make compromises in order to make their marriages work. The following is a questionnaire that couples who practice different levels of observance should consider answering and discussing with one another. This questionnaire was adapted from the “Questionnaire for Premarital Counseling” focusing on intermarriage and was altered with regards to my interview questions (Scharf, 1994, p. 89).

1. How did you identify “Jewishly” growing up? Be sure to discuss level of *kashrut* inside and outside the home and observance of *Shabbat* and other holidays.
2. How are you and your partner different religiously?
3. Have you found ways to work out these differences? What are some ways you might work out these differences?
4. Have there been holidays or observances that have particularly difficult for you to work through with your partner?
5. How do you envision your wedding?
6. How do you envision raising your children?

7. Might your family have issues with either of your observance levels? How might you handle this situation? Has your relationship with your family changed since you've been in this relationship?
8. What advice would you give to a couple in a similar situation?

It is crucial that couples who practice different levels of observance discuss these issues at length before they get married in order to find ways of negotiating and compromising with one another. This questionnaire could also be adapted for couples who are already married.

### Premarital Counseling

Some of the couples I interviewed discussed the importance of discussing their differences with their rabbis or therapists as part of premarital counseling. Premarital counseling is highly encouraged in several countries as a preventive approach to reduce divorce rates and strengthen families (Stahmann, 2000, p. 104). Premarital counseling helps to provide couples with a "better base for a stable and satisfactory marriage" (Stahmann, 2000, p. 104). Typical goals for premarital counseling include "easing the transition from single to married life, increasing couple stability and satisfaction for the short and long term, enhancing the communications skills of the couple, increasing friendship and commitment to the relationship, increasing couple intimacy, enhancing problem-solving and decision-making skills in such areas as marital roles and finances" (Stahmann and Salts, 1993).

Primary providers of premarital counseling are clergy members and mental health workers (Stahmann, 2000, p. 105). Whether it is a rabbi or clinician providing premarital counseling, they will help the couple to recognize the consequences of their differences (Scharf, 1994, p. 87). The counselor's role is to ask questions and gather information about the couple,

and enable them to explore their feelings as well as their ties to their families and traditions (Scharf, 1994, pp. 91-92). While there have not been many studies done on the effectiveness of premarital counseling, most studies have shown more positive outcomes for the couples (Markman, et al., 1993). The issues that couples who practice different levels of observance face can be vast, challenging and often taxing to deal with on their own. Couples that are having a difficult time working through their differences should consider utilizing premarital or marital counseling.

### **For Jewish Professionals, Organizations, and the Jewish Community**

Some Jews are marrying Jews with differing levels of observance, and it is important that Jewish professionals, organizations, and the Jewish community as a whole are aware of this and can cater to their needs accordingly. Though this thesis is primarily focused on couples, it has macro implications as well. Jewish professionals working with these types of couples should be knowledgeable of interdenominational differences and take these into account when creating programs and working with families. The issues explored in this paper are particularly important in light of the rise of post-denominationalism. It is crucial for Jewish organizations to be able to cater to the needs of Jews from various backgrounds and denominations if they want to remain relevant.

Aside from the struggles these couples face and the challenges they pose for their families and communities, they also offer an important model for Jewish harmony. When Jews of different denominations and observance levels create families together, they effectively foster bonds between different segments of the Jewish community, promote tolerance, and contribute to *klal yisrael*, the unity of all Jews.

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