



I AM *M*Y *B*ELOVED'S

Jewish-American Couples Talk About Their Marriages

DAVID COOPER & BETH ROSENBERG





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I *A*_M *M*_Y *B*_E*L*_O*V*_E*D*'S



Gary & Judy Simon

GARY SIMON, 62, ACADEMIC
— & —
JUDY SIMON, 58, SOCIAL WORKER
Stony Brook, NY

JUDY:

We met at the Harvard School of Public Health in June 1976. I had been accepted to a Ph.D. program in Public Health, and Gary taught a summer course in bio-statistics. There was a luncheon for students and faculty at the cafeteria; we were in line, and Gary put mustard on his sandwich, and I said, ‘You must be Jewish.’ We started talking, found we had a lot to talk about, and started going out. Neither of us had a TV. We both like woods, beaches, and bike riding, and Gary is brilliant.

GARY:

We ended up marrying in December 1977. We were 32 and 28. I was going to a conference...

JUDY:

And Gary said, “Think about whether you’d like to be married to me.” And I said, “I don’t have to think about it.”

GARY:

I didn’t have to sift through clues.

JUDY:

We had two rabbis, and yes, a traditional Jewish wedding at Terrace on the Park at the old World's Fair grounds.

GARY:

We said the traditional Jewish vow; standard legal boilerplate.

JUDY:

We're married. That's all. We didn't have an engagement ring.

Marriage is permanent. We don't know what difficulties lie ahead, but we solve them and push through by doing for the other person and not focusing on oneself.

I'm glad we married when we did. I got to do things earlier that I wouldn't have done had I married earlier: skiing, sailing, travel. I had a fun life, but I was lonely. At the time I met Gary I had just about given up hope.

Years earlier Gary dated my cousin Maxine, but I never met him. Maxine's mother Ruthie was at seder and tried to fix me up with Gary via my mother. I said, "No," and my mom said, "My daughter doesn't need to be fixed up." We figured it out three years later when we met.

GARY:

In retrospect I wish we had met earlier so we could have more years together.

JUDY:

My family of origin is atypical. My mother and father met at ages 15 and 17 on the subway coming home from Coney Island. They married at ages 28 and 30. My mother was fun-loving with a great sense of humor, had ADHD, and was a better friend than a parent. She never accepted that my brother is retarded, was very proud and kept secrets. She was previously married at age 19-20 and divorced.

My father was a business-focused CPA who lost money in bad investments. They married while serving in the Army in France. My father believed the man should be in control, make all decisions and all the money; he owns everything including his wife and kids. He was honorable and fulfilled his duty to the family. He terrified me; I once bought two morning newspapers instead of one, and he scolded me sternly and said, "Don't you ever do that again." My mother wasn't scared of him and could not be tamed. They never screamed at each other but never dis-

cussed anything either; they gave each other the silent treatment. She was sneaky and deceptive. She never spoke about the baby that died. Creditors came to the door and Mom told me, “Say no one is home.”

GARY:

My dad was 30 and my mom 18 when they married. My mom was 19 when I was born and died when I was 14. Dad remarried—they’ve been married 46 years now.

My birth mom was tender and loving. She was a wonderful person; everybody loved her; she was beautiful. She died of a cerebral hemorrhage. Dad remarried a widow from around the corner—they needed each other. With hindsight she was difficult and careless with words.

JUDY:

She was the worst problem in our early marriage. Gary didn’t see the things she did to me. When I breast-fed she asked, “How many ounces is he getting?” She criticized the kids sleeping with us. Our house was never clean enough for her.

My mother-in-law said I was ruining the kids. Our oldest, Ian, has Asperger’s. He had screaming fits, mixed up his pronouns, and slept odd hours. He’s now 28 and has had several relationships with women. When he was bar-mitzvahed and read from the Torah, she decided he was OK. Our third son, Andrew, who is 23 and has Tourette’s, graduated from Brown, and works for ITA in Cambridge, MA, as a software engineer. He was kicked out of Hebrew school and did not have a bar mitzvah. We took our daughter Lea out at the same time and enrolled them both in a secular folk shul.

Gary and I have a marriage nothing like my parents’. My mom would buy non-kosher meat and let my father think it was kosher; she cooked and served food quickly and carelessly. I never have lied to Gary and never would.

GARY:

What’s wonderful about openness is that there is no guessing about what the other one wants.

JUDY:

I believe we Jews were more understanding and kinder than neighboring tribes, as we see in the Ten Commandments and honoring one’s spouse. To me Jewish values means charity, education, and honoring and respecting the family—treating one’s children and spouse with kindness, respect, fairness, and understanding, and working to make the marriage last.

GARY:

After lots of reading—mainly gentile authors, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes—I believe there is a God, but God doesn't want or care about us. Judaism is a club with complicated bylaws that few read or know. Jews still have a pretty good club, with really nice people who really care about one another. I can go for days without thinking or feeling Jewish; it takes conscious effort. But I can tell you who all the Jewish major league ball players are.

JUDY:

I'm Jewish every moment, every second. My passion is Jewish genealogy. I feel part of a continuity. Everything I am is part of my heritage. This is what a child learns from his or her family and the family learns from the tribe. I feel happy and proud about being Jewish. From my genealogy study I learned that half of my paternal grandmother's family perished in the Holocaust. I found numerous relatives at Yad Vashem. We are the representatives of those who were lost.

I would not have married someone who was not Jewish.

GARY:

I was never in a position to find out.

JUDY:

I want to be buried in a Jewish cemetery. Becoming a social worker had to do with Jewish values. I was a medical statistician and epidemiologist. It came out of work I did with the Tourette's Syndrome Association, and many of my fellow activists were Jewish, as were many of my social work classmates and faculty.

I didn't know I would have wild brilliant kids whom their Hebrew school teachers wouldn't know how to handle. I regret failing to convey Jewish values and Yiddishkeit to my kids—they didn't have immigrant grandparents. My kids know I'll accept whomever they marry, but I would be happy if at least one married a Jew. But I would rather they marry a gentile with good character than marry a Jew who is a snake. Ian and Elizabeth (who is from Taiwan) are so good to each other; maybe they'll marry.

GARY:

We have 100% commitment to 100% fidelity.

JUDY:

It's understood. It's one's commitment in a marriage. I work with people who have affairs. Every time I hear about it I have a sinking feeling. It's a horrible thing to do to your kids and spouse.

GARY:

Our bodies are wearing out at the same rate.

JUDY:

Which displeases Gary more than it does me.

GARY:

I don't want to wear out.

JUDY:

This marriage is great without Viagra. When they were younger the kids made demands on my body; now I just give my body to Gary. There's nothing competing with that. I would hate to see the institution of marriage end. I think kids need to see parents persevering. But I recommended that my niece leave her alcoholic husband.

GARY:

Judy's advice gave her the push; she knew from social work what alcoholism can do.

JUDY:

Gary is a loner. I spend many hours a day talking with people. When I get home I want to either be alone or with Gary. I have one close friend, Esther, whom I meet once a week for breakfast.

We don't have a social life. I'm not so good at socializing either.

I have a much better relationship with Gary than with God.

GARY:

Spirituality and religion are different.

JUDY:

In religion there must be acceptance of a God. Spirituality is between people.

GARY:

Spirituality is the sense that there is a non-organic communication between everything. I'd make a good Taoist. Likewise there is a movement and flow in our marriage. I have to make that work for me and for Judy, and make it happy.

I'm a "Yidophile." Judy may enhance that. If I were single or intermarried I'd have a smaller attachment to Jews. Marriage reinforces the attachment to other Jews. I care about Israel, because I have friends and relatives there, and so does Judy. There is a commitment; if you sign onto a cause you stick with it.

JUDY:

I belong to our tribe, and I belong to our marriage. My commitment to both grew over the years.

GARY:

As I've learned more I realize that the Jewish community in Wilkes-Barre, PA, where I grew up, was modeled on shtetl life, but we did it without a hint of anti-Semitism. It was American magic, because the gentiles came from European anti-Semitic nationalities: Poles, Slovaks, Germans, ... This is America's gift to the world.

I kept kosher and laid *tefillin* until I went to college. After my mom died I went to shul and said Kaddish twice a day. I'm glad I know that liturgy but am sorry I had to learn it that way. I'm the one who wants to remain a shul member so I'll have that community when my dad goes.

JUDY:

My kids have already fulfilled my hopes: they're ethical.

GARY:

Fine wonderful people, and we're proud of them.

JUDY:

I hope Lea finds a man she can have kids with; likewise for Ian. I hope Jay figures out that there's more to women than looks. I hope Andy can continue to make a life for himself that he wants.

GARY:

I hope he meets enough girls.

JUDY:

I hope Ian grows to be less self-critical. I hope Jay finds a girlfriend on the right parameters. I hope they have no material wants. I hope they never experience anti-Semitism.

GARY:

I haven't had any deep losses since my mother died. Ritualistic mourning helped. I've had too few disappointments to mention. My dad is 92 and has had a wonderful life.

JUDY:

I like the Jewish funeral structure. I like that there is a defined period of mourning. I have always wished I could believe in God. I need God for all the reasons Rabbi Kushner mentions, but I don't believe. I say the *Shema* nonetheless. If I did believe it would help me cope.

GARY:

We had medical crises with the kids.

JUDY:

Ian had a cellulitis infection in his face. IV antibiotics fixed that. You can be a Jew without believing in God.



Joseph & Esther Sherr

JOSEPH SHERR, 49, COMPUTER SCIENTIST
— & —
ESTHER SHERR, 42, NURSE

Highland Park, NJ

JOSEPH:

When Esther and I met, I was a Ph.D. candidate in mathematics at Emory University and worked in the math lab, which was really just a computer room; I answered students' questions. Esther was an undergraduate who decided during summer semester to take a computer class. When I first saw her I immediately wanted to ask her out, but I was pretty awkward with women and self-conscious because I was in a wheelchair. So I took the opportunity to make conversation with her.

ESTHER:

The first time he saw me was at the math lab, but that wasn't the first time I saw him. The first time I saw him I didn't know who he was, and I saw him crossing the quad in his wheelchair. So, I immediately thought to myself, there's someone I'd like to get to know better. The first time we really met was that summer in the math lab. I was always going to him to help me with my programming. He's a very patient and good tutor, and I did well in the class and got a high grade. And then I wasn't taking any more computer classes and had no excuse to hang out in the math lab. We didn't have that many other venues in common. So I applied for a job at the math lab. And he would help out, and we had fun times. We would go to the Friday night Hillel dinners.

JOSEPH:

I never went to Hillel before that

ESTHER:

Hillel was the Jewish organization on campus, and I became very involved in the group there, with the rabbi, the rebbitzin, and their family, and from there I started going to shul regularly and becoming more and more attracted to orthodoxy.

My family didn't really see the *baalas tshuva* thing as a criticism or rebellion. My family's not so much into the *frumkeit*, but they understand that I am, and that's all right. And I'm also tolerant of the way they do things—I would never tell my mother and father that the way they do is wrong and that they need to do things my way. Honoring your father and mother doesn't include telling them what they do is wrong and that they should go along with my choices.

JOSEPH:

I had her over to my house a few times, and she met my family. My parents were very accepting of her. We talked a lot—we went to lunch together every day, we went to Hillel together.

Just after New Year's my brother died in tragic circumstances. He was a patient in a mental hospital and had a severe reaction to the medication he was given. He was admitted on a Friday for the weekend, and it was very early on a Monday morning that my parents came and woke me up and told me that my brother had died. I couldn't go back to sleep. All I could think about was wanting to call Esther and get her support, but I wasn't going to call her in the middle of the night. The first thing in the morning the rabbi came to make arrangements for the funeral. Esther was friends with the rebbitzin. So while the rabbi was at my house talking to my family, the rebbitzin called Esther. As soon as we finished with the rabbi, Esther showed up on our front door with food.

I don't know how I would have gotten through shiva without her. The day that shiva ended, I thought I would take Esther out to lunch to thank her for all her help. She said, when we go back to your office there's something I want to ask you. So we walked back to my office—it was really just a small cubicle—and she asked me, "Would you marry me?" We had begun dating the previous fall, and this was January 1986. I always thought I would ask her, and here she was asking me. I immediately said yes.

ESTHER:

I was 21 and Joe was 28. We had a traditional Jewish wedding.

My parents were concerned about Joe's disability. They didn't know if he could work or how much care he would require; they didn't know him well. But Joe showed them his finances and employment prospects and how much he loved me, and he won them over. Now they love him dearly like one of their own children.

During our engagement I had my own apartment, but I spent much time at Joseph's parents' house. Joseph's parents wanted me to have a tutorial on caring for him: they showed me how to bathe him. Joseph's father and I wore bathing suits and we took him in the shower and they showed me how to wash him.

Unlike other women I never saw Joe's disability as a barrier. If anything it made him more interesting, it set him apart from the crowd. I'm awfully glad he waited for me to grow up and come around. No one else we knew got married right out of college. It was a very old-fashioned, pre-liberation thing to do.

JOSEPH:

Our level of observance doesn't fall into the classic categories. Someone else would say we're Orthodox, but we just say we're Jewish. We try to follow as many mitzvot as we can.

I'm very tolerant of those who are less observant than we are, just as I'm comfortable with those who are more so. We attend an Agudat Yisrael shul because they're very welcoming. When we first moved to the area we visited many synagogues. When we went to one of the Orthodox shuls in town, as we went in, kids started whispering to each other that it was not sabbath observant to use an electric wheelchair on Shabbat. That's why we don't go there. Some time later we were invited to a friend's son's bar mitzvah at the Agudat Yisrael shul, and when we arrived there they lead me to a spot near the bimah—they actually asked other people to move and find other seats. They bent over backwards to accommodate me and made me feel very comfortable there. Added to that our son's desire to become a bar mitzvah at an Orthodox shul, and Esther felt comfortable there too.

Shul members come to the house to study with me so I have a chance to learn. They used to study at another location but they've changed the venue so I could participate.

The rabbi never fails to come up to me to greet me. Usually people come up to the rabbi, but he comes to me. I don't feel I draw a crowd but feel accepted.

ESTHER:

Being Jewish is a special responsibility to observe mitzvot, to be part of *klal Yisrael*, to keep our home life according to Jewish law. It's kind of cool to feel part of something bigger than you are, something that goes way back—back to Abraham.

JOSEPH:

It's a sense of belonging—whether doing mitzvot or not—a part of what and who I am. When we first met and started dating I didn't see myself as Orthodox, but was willing to go along with whatever Esther wanted. It's important to be together, to be on the same page and have an identity as a couple. Whatever we do, even if we're apart, we're still together. Politically we both come from liberal families. Since we married our political views have meshed—we don't always agree, but usually, maybe 99% of the time we do. That's just one example.

It was important that Esther came to the marriage with open eyes, that she knew about my condition, my life prospects, life expectancy, and that she's OK with that. Before we married we went to a genetic counselor, because my type of muscular dystrophy is genetically propagated—there's a 50/50 chance of passing it on to a child—and to a muscular dystrophy clinic so she would know and understand.

ESTHER:

I wanted lots of kids, but that turned out to be harder than we thought. After medical difficulties we were grateful to have our one son.

JOSEPH:

I was concerned whether to even have a child.

ESTHER:

To keep a pregnancy required injections every eight hours during and after the pregnancy and bed rest. I have lupus. My body was rejecting the pregnancy as part of an immune response. There were blood clots that choked off the blood supply to the baby and could have killed me.

I'm a nurse. When our son Ephraim was 18 months old I thought I'd like to be a nurse. I volunteered at a hospital, and went to nursing school. After Joe went on disability I changed jobs to one with better pay and benefits.

JOSEPH:

When our son was born we were very much in love and focused on the baby. At the time Esther wasn't working. After giving birth Esther wanted to go to work and find something to do.

ESTHER:

Now there were two people who were physically dependent on me—it took getting used to. I wasn't sleeping enough—the role conflict was stressful. Counseling helped.

JOSEPH:

I don't want it to seem as if it's always rosy. We went to marriage counseling which helped with how we react to and communicate with each other.

ESTHER:

I strapped a baby carrier to Joe. Joe took the baby for walks. Joe would take the baby on his lap so I could study.

JOSEPH:

I couldn't change diapers. I once had to call security at Esther's school for her to come home and change the baby's diaper. She does more than her fair share of the housework and child care.

ESTHER:

I feel I'm not doing all that I should. I rely on him for a lot.

JOSEPH:

I have no doubt that Esther was the right person for me. Perhaps there was Divine intervention. I would not have the same level of Jewish observance without Esther. I've always had an affinity with the Jewish people and a connection with Israel, for example, but that's independent of Esther. Esther is like a lense that focuses and directs, but it doesn't put anything I don't want to see. She provides a focus for what is there.

ESTHER:

Joe has taught me patience and has given me a great moral compass. He's a mensch. Coming from parents with a bad marriage I learned caring, respect, and patience from him. I'd like Ephraim to grow up to be a mensch. He's caring and compassionate. When he sees someone

with difficulties or a disability he always tries to include him. He's a good-hearted child—I'd want him to continue to be a mensch. He likes going to yeshivah, and I would be happy for him to continue. I hope he has a job and can support himself.

JOSEPH:

I don't have a specific career in mind for Ephraim. We both have a strong work ethic, and that is one aspiration that I have for him—to be a great worker.

ESTHER:

I'd like him to marry someone Jewish.

JOSEPH:

I'd like to have Jewish grandchildren. But if he brought home someone non-Jewish we'd accept her.

I've had a lifetime of disappointment—and that's not said in a negative sense. I've had to face not being able to do something, like when I first had to use a wheelchair and had to accept that I could no longer walk. I may feel sorry for myself for a day or so and then will focus on how to go on from there and figure out how to go about my life as I want to. People tell me how I face this is very Jewish.

People tell me I'm amazing. I don't consider myself amazing. I just do what comes naturally to me. I've seen people who just give in and give up. Could I have done what I've done without being Jewish? Probably not. But I don't consider myself as having innate strengths and a character that pushes me forward. I'm just doing what is part of me, and I can't separate that from Judaism.