



Telling Her Family She's Dating Outside Her Race and Religion

Judith's Iranian Jewish parents expected her to date, and ultimately marry, someone of her cultural background. But her new relationship is creating tension with her relatives--and within herself. And Samira Mehta, a religion and family politics scholar, debunks myths about interfaith marriage in the U.S. and shares strategies for making religious spaces and family traditions more inclusive.

Juleyka Lantigua:

Hi, everybody. Today we have Judith with us. Judith comes from an Iranian Jewish family. Interracial and interfaith marriages were extremely rare in the community she grew up around. Now as an adult, she's in a relationship with a Black Christian man and as she looks ahead at their future together, she's eager but nervous to speak with her family about their romantic partnership. Let's get into it.

Judith:

My name is Judith Goldstein. I am a store owner. I own a store named Luca in Los Angeles, and I'm also a mother to an amazing 13-year-old girl named Shai. I grew up in Los Angeles, California, but I was born in Iran. My family escaped during the Iranian revolution. I like to call myself a citizen of humanity because I have lived all around the world and a significant part of my life in Tel Aviv, but I moved back to Los Angeles five years ago. Growing up I called my parents Maman and Baba.

Iranian culture is extremely celebratory and joyous and also the Jewish culture. And because I'm an Iranian Jew, we had a lot of love and celebration and warmth in our home, but we also had a family that was responding from a lot of generational trauma and pain, and you're really, it's extremely taboo to marry or even date outside of your religion and your race.

No one ever sat us down and said, "Here, this is who you're allowed to be with." It was one, just comments. I remember when I was very little, my mom told me that one of her cousins married a Muslim man and her family sat Shiva for her. My mom saying that was literally like, "If you marry out of your religion, you are dead to us."

My family is extremely spiritual and growing up, both my mother and my father always said that every religion is rooted in the same value system.

Judith: That being said, when you are Jewish and you grow up Jewish and the narrative is we're going to be dying and we're going to go extinct, there is this pressure. And not only from others, even with yourself, there is this question of, "Do I preserve this religion? Do I have a duty to make Jewish babies and preserve this beautiful culture and religion? Is that important to me? And can I be in a relationship with someone from a different religion and raise my children to teach them about Judaism and to let them choose what is the right path for them?"

So with my mother, the first conversation I had with her was completely transparent and I told her I was dating someone Black and Christian. She really changed her viewpoint over the last 20 years and believes in women empowerment and really was able to be supportive.

With my father, when I spoke to him about it, I didn't tell him I was currently dating someone because I think he would've been shocked, but I told him that I'm interested in dating outside of my race and religion, and it was extremely hard for him. The beginning of that conversation was him expressing his stereotypes about other cultures and communities.

And I had to explain to him, "Hey, in the same way that a lot of people will say Jews are greedy and only care about money, and that hurts you to think that those people believe those things, it goes the other way as well." And after about two months, I told him that I was seeing someone who is Christian and Black.

My dad was very concerned that our relationship would be harder because of our differences. Then a lot of the rest of our conversations had to be about how we would deal with our extended family. This is an ongoing conversation. I have still not discussed this with them. No.

My dad's biggest concern for me? You are socially ranked in Iranian society, and he was worried that my social ranking and our family's social ranking would diminish because of this decision. The irony of the situation is my dad actually, he's very dark skinned. He has a lot of features that look like he's half Black, and so he was always discriminated against.

I think it triggers and opens the wound for the discrimination that was against him and the fear that he has that we would ever be treated like he was treated in his lifetime. And of course, I want my family to support my decisions and to accept the people that I love, the way that I accept him into my life. So that was the hardest part of the conversation.

Lantigua: Interracial and interfaith relationships are more and more common in the US, but like many first gens, Judith is taking on the role of family trailblazer with regards to this trend. Her awareness of the friction this is causing really hit home for me. I

also married outside of my race and her experience made me think about what first gens can do to prepare for sometimes difficult family conversations involving our romantic partners. How can we help our loved ones accept our relationship decisions instead of seeing them as a threat to our family traditions or our family's way of life? To help us figure it out, I called in an expert.

Samira Mehta: My name is Samira Mehta. I'm an associate professor of women and gender studies and Jewish studies at the University of Colorado Boulder. I'm also, and probably most pertinent for our conversation today, the author of a book called *Beyond Chrismukkah: The Christian-Jewish Interfaith Families in the United States*.

Lantigua: As you listened to Judith's story, what did you hear?

Mehta: Judith is so clearly somebody who really understands all of the dynamics of what's going on. The first thing that Judith said was, "Look, I come from an Iranian Jewish community and it's a community that has generations of generational trauma, and there's a lot of fear about whether or not we will continue to exist as a community," and that's something that's really very, very present in Jewish community life.

Now, I would say that we sort of have this idea in Jewish life that it's always been like that, and a lot of that fear really starts sort of historically coming about in the 1970s. So you would think in an American Jewish context where so many people are coming from a European context that for instance, it would happen in the 1950s right after the Holocaust.

Lantigua: Yeah, that's what the rest of us assume I think.

Mehta: That's what the Jewish community assumes as well. But scholars really see that discourse ticking up in the 1970s in response to increasing numbers of Jews marrying people who are not Jewish, mostly in the United States, and also in response to the feminist movement. So in Judaism, the work of transmitting Jewish identity is often something that's really seen as happening in the home. And so women entering the workforce in higher numbers, having fewer children, these were things that caused Jewish leaders to get worried about what we refer to as the crisis of continuity, which is, will there continue to be Jews?

People really worried that people fell away from active Jewish life because they married people who were not Jewish. And I think that really what it is, is that Jewish communities, like many other kinds of religious communities in the United States, are sort of having a hard time making a case to their children as to why you should do this when you grow up. But it's a symptom and I'm not sure that it's a problem. Right? It's a symptom of the reality that religious life is playing a smaller role in many American lives.

Lantigua: It seems that because it is a matrilineal society, there's a lot of pressure on the women like Judith.

Mehta: There's a lot of pressure on the women. Interestingly, when Jewish men marry Christian women, that pressure still falls on the woman to convert or to learn a lot about Judaism, to step up and learn how to raise Jewish children. So there's all of this pressure, and she's right about the pressure. And I think that people really do have this fear, right? And she's saying the fear comes from generational trauma, and it absolutely does. But it's important to note that there's a lot of kind of relatively new, sort of in the past 50 years, sort of structural amplification of that pressure.

Lantigua: Okay. What do you mean by that?

Mehta: A lot of conversation in Jewish community, an entire sort of industry of what are the impacts and effects of people dating and marrying non-Jews? How do we deal with this and what do we do about it? What's interesting is that often interfaith families, they're often more engaged in Jewish life than their entirely Jewish compatriots.

Lantigua: What?

Mehta: Other families.

Lantigua: I love that.

Mehta: Well, think about it this way. If I'm Jewish—and I'm not married—but if I am Jewish, and if my husband were also Jewish, we might think we don't need to do anything to make sure our kids are Jewish. We're Jews. That's what we do. That's not questioned. We'll celebrate.

Lantigua: You woke up like this.

Mehta: Right? I woke up like this. But if you're an interfaith family and you've sort of decided we're going to be a Jewish family, you feel extra need a lot of the time—and also you're being told by the community that there's extra need—to show up. And so those people actually often do more of that work. They're not thinking, "Oh, this will happen by default." Now, plenty of interfaith families also like nobody was particularly religious, and they sort of happily do nothing but celebrate a lot of holidays, which is a perfectly good way to live your life if it works for you. Right? But the people who have decided that, "We're going to be Jewish," they go all in.

Lantigua: That's amazing. But I also want to throw something here, which is that as a hyphenated American, a first gen American, Judith is actually doing what is more

normal now because the rate of interfaith marriages in the US has more than doubled since the sixties. So she's actually doing what her contemporaries and her peers are doing. So are we really talking about familial pressure at this point, since it is entirely normal across American society to intermarry?

Mehta: If you look at rates of interfaith marriage or interracial marriage, both of those things are increasing really dramatically. So in 1960, about 10% of Jews married non-Jews, and by the 1990s people were estimating that number at about 50%.

Lantigua: Whoa.

Mehta: Right. Now, there are studies looking at everybody, so not just Jewish numbers. So you see similar trends across all religions. More Catholics are marrying Methodists, more Presbyterians are marrying Muslims, more Hindus are marrying Jews. And so one of the things that people used to be afraid of was like, "Where will these families fit in?" These families will be able to find lots of other peers doing the things that they're doing.

The family question and the family pressure though is, will this be weird in our community and what will this mean for our community? There are of course communities that are resistant to that trend, and it is true that the Iranian Jewish community, it's a newer immigrant community, often it can take a generation or two for people to sort of step into that interfaith marriage kind of trend. So Judith is probably sort of on the crest of a trend in her specific community. And you can hear in what her father is saying, he has whatever his fears and his prejudices are, but he's also saying, "Will you still be accepted in the community?"

Lantigua: Yeah. That question of status really hit home.

Mehta: Right. What will it be like in this community that she's identifying as having racism to have a black partner? I don't know if biological children are possibly in the cards, but how will those children be treated in the community? And her family expressed concern that it will be harder for them. And what my research really shows is that it's not harder to be in an interfaith relationship if you have a lot of support.

It's not harder because you're different religions or different races necessarily, but if you're really being constantly undermined by your family or by your community, that *is* harder. If the community is going to be really resistant to welcoming them, they're not going to feel welcomed, and that could be immensely painful.

Lantigua: How does someone like Judith prepare to have a conversation with their loved ones, their parents, about this really important choice that they're making in their life? What do you think is both the emotional and the intellectual approach to it?

Because you and I have been having a very high intellectual conversation, but she's going to have a heart-to-heart with her family.

Mehta: I'm a historian and an ethnographer, I'm not like a family therapist.

Lantigua: Yes.

Mehta: So I once did, however, I interviewed a therapist because I was writing an article for the Forward, which is the sort of Jewish newspaper of record, and the family therapist was really saying, this is a matter of boundaries. What you say to your parents is, "Look, this is my life. This is my relationship. This is the partner that I'm choosing. You don't have control over those things. You do have control over how welcome we feel in your home, and therefore, whether we come into your home.

I'm not threatening you, but I am saying that I'm not going to ask my partner to be in a place where he's being treated poorly. And so if you treat him poorly, I'm not going to be able to ask him to come over for Shabbat dinner once a week or once a month or whatever it's going to be. But if you make him feel welcome, we will be here more.

And if you're worried about how integrated we will be into the community or into our culture, the more you can help me show him our culture as something beautiful that he can take part in rather than something that's going to lock doors in his face, the more curious. This is a wonderful person who loves me and our culture, is part of me. He's predisposed to be warm and welcoming to it. If the concern is how will this go in the broader community, be our advocates in the broader community, tell people what a wonderful man he is, demonstrate your pride in my healthy, happy relationship out in the community and help the community come to accept us."

Lantigua: Yeah, I think that that's really powerful. Right. My last question is if you have any resources to share besides your wonderful book, for folks who want to read it a little more, maybe they want to have some conversation starters between their partners and their families.

Mehta: Sure. So if you're really interested in academic scholarly work, there's a book by a woman named Jennifer Thompson called Jewish on Their Own Terms, mostly about Jewish men and Christian women and the ways that they are changing Jewish community. If you're interested in something that's more activist, right? Somebody who's really advocating for interfaith families, you might look at the work of Susan Katz Miller, the Interfaith Families Project. And if one is interested, if you think what you want to do is be a Jewish family, in particular, the reform and reconstructionist movements of Judaism have a lot of resources for interfaith families.

Lantigua: Samira, thank you so much for joining us today and thank you for imparting so much wisdom on us.

Mehta: Thank you so much for having me.

Lantigua: All right, here's what Samira taught us today.

Provide useful context. When addressing family tensions around your relationship decisions, keep in mind the historical and cultural background. For example, recognizing that interfaith marriages are a symptom, not a cause of the changing role of religion in American life might help you and your family understand each other's point of view a little bit better.

Present the choice. Point out to your loved ones that while they cannot control your romantic life, they can play an important role in your relationship. They can influence how welcome they make your partner feel, and by extension, the role of religion in your family life—and your role in theirs.

And remember, find your own way. Honoring your faith, religion and spirituality looks like a lot of different things for different people. From scholars to activists to inclusive spiritual communities, there are plenty of resources out there for a wide range of interfaith couples and multi-faith families. You do not have to go at it alone.

Thank you for listening and thank you for sharing us. *How to Talk to [Mamá & Papá] about Anything* is an original production of LWC Studios. Virginia Lora is the show's producer, Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. I'm the creator and host, Juleyka Lantigua. On Twitter and Instagram we're @talktomamipapi. Bye everybody. Talk to you soon.

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