



Have chuppah, will travel

Description

Freelance reform rabbi performs inter-faith ceremonies

By Marlene Eisner

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Tanya Lehrman and Marco De Stefani are not friends of Peter Dalfen and Julie Timmins, but the Montreal couples do have something in common; their wedding ceremonies — uniquely different from each other — were officiated by the same reform rabbi.

Elina Bykova, who has been a freelance reform rabbi for three years, performs weddings, circumcisions, bar and bat mitzvahs and funerals for inter-faith hetro and gay couples and families who wish to inject an element of Judaism into their ceremonies. She has even co-officiated with a priest in a church wedding.

“There was a segment of the population not served by the Montreal rabbis, and if (a couple) wanted a rabbi, they were bringing one in from the U.S. I thought, ‘I could do something here,’” says Bykova, who immigrated to Quebec from the Ukraine in 1999 and was the assistant rabbi at the Temple Emanu-El-Beth Shalom on Sherbrooke Street in Westmount for 10 years.

A growing trend

A recent survey on religious belief, faith and multi-faith issues conducted by the Angus Reid Institute in March 2015 (<http://angusreid.org/faith-in-canada/>) revealed an increased ambivalence toward religious practice on a national level. The poll showed 44 per cent of Canadians sit somewhere between embracing and rejecting their religion, stating: “They still hold many conventional beliefs and sometimes engage in religious practices, including occasional religious service attendance. They do not see themselves as particularly devout; but they also have not abandoned religion.”

Closer to home, an upswing in inter-marriage in the Montreal Jewish community may mirror some of the findings in the Angus survey. According to the Berman Jewish data bank, in 2011 the number of Jews living in Metropolitan Montreal was 90,780; of these, 16.7 per cent of Jewish spouses/partners were married or partnered with non-Jews (<http://www.jewishdatabank.org/studies/details.cfm?StudyID=746>). As well, it showed a 38.2 per cent increase in the last two decades in the number of Jews living in inter-married households, from 7,310 to 10,100 in 2011.

Respecting individual identities



Lehrman De Stefani wedding

When Lehrman first met De Stefani, marriage was the furthest thing from her mind. In fact, she made him wait three weeks before their first date.

“I was done with dating,” says Lehrman, who celebrated her fourth wedding anniversary with De Stefani on May 21, 2015.

“I kind of took it very casually because I wasn’t into investing into a relationship, but we really hit it off.”

The relationship remained casual for about a year until all of a sudden, it wasn’t so casual anymore. By October 2010 they were engaged, and seven months later, Lehrman, who is Jewish and De Stefani, who is not, were married. Lehrman wasn’t interested in a religious ceremony, nor did she want her husband to convert to Judaism.

“I wouldn’t convert and I wouldn’t ask someone to,” she says. “He was the one who wanted the rabbi; I don’t consider myself part of a religion.”

Lehrman grew up in NDG. Her parents are members of the reconstructionist movement of Judaism. De Stefani grew up in Town of Mount Royal, is Roman Catholic and still goes to church on Sunday. Religion was never a factor in either of their dating lives. But when it came to their wedding, something shifted.

“We knew we wanted more than a justice of the peace. We wanted some spiritual element,” says Lehrman.

The couple says it took awhile to find a rabbi who didn’t feel obliged to include the full palate of Jewish customs and rituals into the service.

“Someone referred us to Rabbi Bykova. I liked that she was a woman rabbi and that she encouraged an

egalitarian approach,” says Lehrman. “We discussed the options and we were able to choose what we wanted.”

The event was held downtown, on a Saturday evening. The couple decided to include the chuppah (a tapestry attached to the tops of four poles under which the bride and groom stand) in the ceremony, and De Stefani wore a kippah (skullcap). They broke the traditional wine glass and signed a ketubah, (a Jewish marriage contract), and then added rituals from other cultures such as the blending of the sand ceremony.

“We come from families that have the same values and that trumps religions,” says Lehrman. “We put family first. All that trumps someone who is going to pray but doesn’t share values. Life is about being a good person and treating people well, it’s not about how much you pray. This is what we believe in.”

There’s a rabbi in the church



Timmins Dalfen wedding

Having a reform rabbi perform a wedding ceremony at a restaurant is one thing; to do so in a church beside a priest is a whole other cup of tea. But that’s what Dalfen and Timmins envisioned — to be married in a church in a ceremony infused with elements of Catholicism and Judaism. The couple was able to find willing co-officiants in Bykova and Father Patrick Donnelley, who performed the ceremony on Nov. 9, 2013 at the Ascension of Our Lord Church on Kitchener Avenue and Sherbrooke Street in Westmount.

“Religion wasn’t an issue,” says Dalfen, who grew up in Westmount in a traditional Jewish family. His mother had converted to Judaism from Catholicism when she married his father. “We had discussed it early on and we both respected the other’s traditions to not ask the other to convert.”

It was Timmins who wanted a church wedding, but she wanted it to be inclusive and reflective of the range of traditions and religions represented in both of their families.

“I guess for me it was important to get married in a church,” she says. “It was always what I wanted to do and I pictured I would get married where my parents got married, where there was some history. But it was also important to both of us, especially to me that our wedding be represented as both of us. I started researching

online if we could have a rabbi co-officiate [with a priest].”

In the end, Dalfen spoke with someone at the Temple, who referred them to Bykova.

“Julie and I decided to meet with her and we were comfortable with the way she was willing to go inside a church,” he says. “She wasn’t trying to convince Julie to turn to the other side. The same thing with the priest from the Ascension who was respectful of my traditions and culture.”

They ended up blending some elements of a Catholic ceremony, including parts of the mass and some elements of Judaism such as the seven blessings and breaking the wine glass.

“It was like the greatest hits of both,” says Dalfen.

Keeping some faith



Rabbi Elina Bykova

It’s true that love doesn’t recognize race or religion; Bykova has married Jews with partners from Muslim, Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Ukrainian Orthodox backgrounds. She says when a Jewish person falls in love with someone from another religion, she is able to help them with all of life’s milestones. Because she is not affiliated with a religious institution, she has the freedom to give people options.

“While I was at the Temple, I realized there was a big group of people who want some Jewishness in their life for their life-cycle events, but ... rabbis have to follow a set of rules,” she explains.

Bykova has seen her fair share of permutations and combinations when it comes to how much Judaism a couple injects into their ceremony — from very little to strictly Jewish with no other religion present. And when Chelsea Clinton wed Marc Mezvinsky in 2010 in an inter-faith marriage, it added a whole new dimension to Bykova’s playing field.

“After (former U.S President Bill) Clinton married his daughter with a priest and a rabbi, many people wanted this and started looking for someone to co-officiate and I said, ‘okay’ and that became something else altogether,” says Bykova.

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wanted this and started looking for someone to co-officiate.

Even as her business expands through word-of-mouth, Bykova says she doesn't think other rabbis in the city who would not perform these ceremonies frown upon her actions.

"They understand I do not introduce Jews to non-Jews. It is a situation that already exists," she explains. "I help them to bring some Jewishness into their life. No one knows whose child will be with a non-Jew. I have lots of people from traditional backgrounds. No one can guarantee your child is not gay. Gay people also marry non-Jews. Who are they going to go to?"

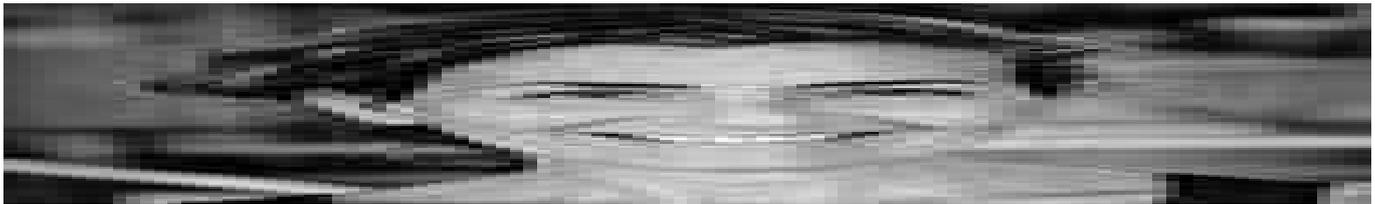
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Images: courtesy of Elina Bykova

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