

My husband's Orthodox Jewish family pressured us to call off our wedding

I thought parental disapproval of marriage was a problem of the past. I was wrong.

[Helaina Hovitz](#) Dec 27, 2017, 9:00am EST

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I wasn't entirely surprised to hear that my fiancé's father had announced he would "wear black to mourn our wedding day."

I've never met the guy, but I knew enough about him not to expect anything different. We had hoped to have the support of my fiancé's mother, who, just weeks before, had come into our home, embraced me, and said, "We're family now. You have us." She'd even sounded excited when we called to tell her how the proposal went down on the phone. But not 24 hours after our little engagement banner flickered across Facebook, the celebratory comments were edged out by a hysterical phone call.

"How could you do this to me? To the family?" his mother cried. "Why did you have to announce it publicly? You're so selfish!"

She had, apparently, already been flooded with calls herself — even accosted at the grocery store — in their modern Orthodox Jewish community in New Jersey.

"What a shame," people said to Lee's mother when they heard of our engagement. "This is so terrible."

So in turn, she told him, "You're going to realize you're wrong. You're

making a mistake.” The groupthink had won out.

When she added the less-than-comforting caveat, “This has nothing to do with Helaina. It’s not personal,” she was telling the truth. It’s not personal. It’s just because I’m only half-Jewish.

During one of my regular late-night scrolls through Pinterest, weighing the differences between high-top and low-top floral arrangements, my aunt’s name popped up on my caller ID.

“You’ll never guess who just called me,” she said.

It was the long-lost love of her life from 40 years ago, who had left her instead of marrying her because his Jewish mother threatened to disown him.

“He was carrying on about how he was so stupid, that he’s divorced now and miserable,” she relayed. “He kept saying he made a huge mistake.”

The year was 1973, and my aunt Fran, from my mother’s Italian (and non-Jewish) side of the family, was 23. A young man named Sam selling cosmetics approached her at the gym, saying, “I know you. I saw you at a club last weekend. I noticed you. I remember exactly what you were wearing.”

My aunt shrugged it off with a smile. She was used to every guy on the block approaching her to dance, even when she was taken. She was *that* girl. She was on the scene back in the disco days of New York, the life of every party. To this day, she has not met a party she doesn’t love.

Sam tried several times to get her number, and when she finally gave in, they went to a place called Adam’s Apple, a club on the Upper East Side, for their first date. He ordered fish and explained that he was “kosher.”

“I looked at him like he had 14 heads,” she told me. “I didn’t know what kosher was, but he explained it. I didn’t understand it, but I didn’t care. I ordered a burger.”

What began as a game of hard to get quickly spiraled into an intense love affair: They went to Las Vegas to see Frank Sinatra, they went to see Little Anthony and the Imperials perform at the Waldorf Astoria, an occasion to which Sam wore his best green corduroy suit — which was in, back in the day, my aunt assured me — and to see boxing matches at Madison Square Garden.

Within a few weeks, he told her: “I could never marry you because you’re not Jewish.”

“What did I care?” my aunt said. “I was 23. I wasn’t looking to get married.”

As months turned into years, my aunt’s feelings about marriage changed, but Sam’s did not, and neither did his family’s.

“I thought I was going to be able to convince them to accept her. I was young and thought I could do anything I put my mind to,” Sam told me. “I believed in the end it would be okay, and that if my family didn’t come around, I’d be strong enough to marry her anyway.”

But the ultimatum did finally come, and Sam spent months in a depression, feeling stuck, unable to choose between the love of his life and the family he loved — and the religion he truly believed in. No matter what he chose in this situation, it could be a “huge mistake.”

There was only one way to find out: make the decision, the same one my fiancé found himself faced with years later.

I met Lee in the fall of 2013 after he pitched me one of his clients for a

story. He worked in public relations, and I was a freelance journalist.

Our relationship was healthy and exciting and honest from the beginning, and we bonded over many of our shared values. As we walked around the outskirts of his Brooklyn neighborhood and passed Hasidic couples or families — this was before I knew exactly how strict of a background he came from — Lee would often comment on the faults many religions have, that they push people apart and keep them separate.

“I went to Sunday school, I celebrate Hanukkah with our little electric menorah, but I’m not really religious,” I told him. “I enjoy a lot of Buddhist teachings and principles, but I don’t even know if I’d define myself as a Buddhist. I just believe in being good to other people and to yourself, being generous, open ... stuff that just seems kind and human.”

“Thank you! Exactly!” he practically shouted, kissing me gently on the mouth. It was as if he had found someone who agreed with him for the first time in two and a half decades.

I later found out that was precisely the case.

If Lee actually practiced the religion, his family’s objections might be easier to understand. But he doesn’t. He left that community years ago — quietly, though, so nobody outside his family really knew.

One day, about six months into our relationship and long past saying “I love you,” he started to act a little strange after a trip to his family’s house for Passover, and it took me a week of relentless journalistic digging to find out what was up.

We were sitting on the bed in the apartment he shared with his former college roommate in a second-story walk-up in Brooklyn. The window was cracked open, the clouds and the setting sun frozen behind the stone angel that topped a nearby church. The windowsill was lined with a couple of

open cans of Pepsi, his watch, a bag of Cheez Doodles, and seashells from our first vacation together, when we knew that *yes, this was it*.

My heart raced as I waited for it. *Something bad happened. He doesn't love me anymore. He's been diagnosed with a horrible disease.*

“My family told me if I ever married you, they would disown me, because you're not Jewish.”

“That's all?” I asked with a smile and visible relief. He was stunned that I wasn't flipping out, and I explained that, if anything, I was concerned for him; that I didn't want to break up his family and wouldn't make him choose.

“You're not going to make me choose, but they are. And if they're going to force me to choose, that's the easiest choice I'll ever make,” he said.

The most common reaction when I tell people what's happening with my fiancé's family is shock and disgust.

“*Hello, what year is this?*” they gawk. “How can they do this to him? That's honestly just sick and sad. I'm so sorry.”

I tried to arrange visits with his mother, brother, and sister, hoping they would come around. I never got to meet his father, who outright refused. We showed up, going to a couple of Lee's friends' Orthodox weddings, and met several dirty looks and whispers with smiles.

When we began planning our own wedding, we chose a Sunday for the ceremony so they could all attend (no traveling on Friday night or until sundown Saturday), and made sure kosher meal options were available.

One of Lee's friends declined the invitation to be a groomsman because, “Well, you know. You understand.”

Lee told his friend that, yes, he did understand, texted him back, “All good,” and went back to watching the basketball game.

“It’s not all good!” I said, hand on my hip, standing in front of the TV, practicing for wifhood. “What does that mean, ‘He discussed it with his wife’s family and everyone thinks it’s best not to’? Why the fuck is it anyone’s business? He’s your friend! Their families aren’t even going to be there!”

I knew better than to drive a wedge between a man and his childhood friends, but I still wanted to angrily Sharpie through their names on our invitation list.

The whole fiasco, while disappointing, had a silver lining: the opportunity to see Lee communicate his own strong convictions in a rational and respectful way.

Toward the latter half of Sam and Aunt Fran’s six years together, the pressure began to build. At 27, she was thinking about marriage, and whereas Sam once believed he would be able to convince people to come around, that he might even have the strength to break away from the entire community and accept it if his friends disowned him, now he was literally pulling his hair out.

He was feeling pressure from both sides to choose either the love of his life, my aunt, or his family and the ability to attend his relatives’ birthdays and graduations.

“I don’t know what to do,” he would sob. “I don’t know what to do.”

My aunt offered to convert to Judaism, but even then, they would not be accepted since the bloodline of their children would not be fully Jewish.

In that relationship, my aunt says, she felt like she was the other woman

and Sam's wife was his religion.

“Some people have the strength to walk away, and other people can't,” she said.

As for the guilt she would have felt if he did choose her over his family, she doesn't think it would have been as bad as he thought it would have been. But the forbidden love affair had become a source of strain and tension, always in the back of their minds, lingering over every kiss and every day that passed, as more and more of their circle of friends got married.

In Sam's apartment on 31st Street, the dozens of conversations finally came to one final talk, one final night they would spend together. Holding each other, crying, knowing that this night would be their last, it was more painful and tormenting, perhaps, for him, than it was for her, because he was the one making the decision.

“I prayed that night, for her to be healed, for myself to be healed, and I wondered, and still do, why am I suffering?” Sam said. “Why am I being tormented? Why can't two people just be in love and be happy?”

Sam spent a year grieving before he met another woman — a Jewish girl, just 17 years old to his 28. She was nice, but, he says, there was no doubting it was “different.”

After he got married, he contacted my aunt several times. My aunt will tell you that just six months in, he asked her to go away with him, to skip town, which she turned down. He will tell you that he reached out to her over the years just to say hello, that he missed her, that he wanted to see how she was doing.

“I wouldn't trade those six years for anything,” my aunt says. “We had what most people didn't have forever. I know what a soul mate is, and what's what we were. Most people just say they were, but we were.”

My father called Lee's mother to ask whom invitations should be sent out to, even if there was no chance any of her family members would attend. It was, of course, a gesture of respect.

"Will it be a religious ceremony?" she asked him.

"No, the kids want to choose a nondenominational justice of the peace," my dad said.

After three weeks without a response from his mother, Lee finally called to ask her himself. I believe her answer would have been "no" even if we did have a rabbi and a chuppah.

Like my aunt, I accept it, and I understand it, and that does not mean I'm okay with it.

When things really came to a head, I overheard him in the other room.

"This is why I can't stand this religion. Can't you see what it's doing? You love Helaina, I'm your son, yet somehow this is distressing for everyone? It's crazy," he said. "I don't understand why the opinions of strangers matter to you so much. I'm sorry you feel it's selfish, but we literally aren't doing anything wrong or anything hurtful."

He was standing up for me, and for us, but really, he was standing up for himself.

Sam's marriage ended in divorce, but not before Sam and his modern Orthodox wife had three children together. And when they got divorced after 19 years, he called my grandmother to try to track down my aunt.

I was 11 at the time, and I remember the way my grandma said in that sweet, angelic way, that Sam had called, saying his name in a way that was playfully mischievous. Whoever he was, she liked the guy, and she got a

kick out of the fact that he'd called.

My aunt, by then, was married, having just officially tied the knot in Las Vegas on a whim after a common-law marriage that spanned nearly two decades.

"Maybe I was lonely; maybe I just wanted to reconnect with my first love," Sam says of that decision to make the call.

One thing was unmistakable: He told her he felt that he had "made a mistake."

Perhaps he had already attended all of those family events he would have been banned from, or perhaps, with enough decades to reflect, he knew he did make the wrong choice, and was hoping for a second chance.

Out of curiosity, I asked Sam: "What would you do if one of your three children wanted to marry someone who wasn't Jewish?"

"I wouldn't approve of it," he said. "I was brought up with these values, and it's been in my blood. I would tell any young man that's part of the Orthodox religion not to get involved with a non-Jewish woman. The pain is too much, as is the family destruction."

After some more consideration, he added, "If it was the only way, and one of my children loved them, I think I would want to try and understand, have them convert or whatever. I don't know how to think differently."

While Lee's ability to think differently has ended up estranging him from a select few people, it has ultimately solidified the feeling that our decision to get married is the furthest thing from a mistake either of us has ever made. We believe that if you're not actually harming anyone or anything, pursuing your own happiness is nothing to feel guilty about.

As for the wedding itself, we're looking forward to dancing an entirely

secular hora with friends and family who have no qualms about celebrating with us.

And we did end up choosing a Jewish man to marry us: a standup comedian who has his own dog rescue and could not be more perfect.

Helaina Hovitz is an editor and journalist living in Lower Manhattan who has written for the New York Times, Glamour, Salon, Vice, the New York Observer, Forbes, Teen Vogue, and others. She is the author of [After 9/11](#) and co-founder and editorial director of [Headlines for the Hopeful](#).

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