

THE WILLIAM PETSCHER  
INTERNATIONAL JEWISH FAMILY CENTER

**SINGLE AND JEWISH:  
Communal Perspectives**



THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE, Institute of Human Relations, 165 East 56 Street, New York, NY 10022-2746

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The William Petschek National Jewish Family Center was created by the American Jewish Committee in 1979 as an expression of its commitment to the family as the indispensable social institution for maintaining and enhancing Jewish identity, communal stability and human fulfillment. Its goal is to promote research on family problems, help clarify family values and stimulate the development of innovative programs to help meet the needs of parents, would-be parents and their children. It also strives to encourage an awareness and responsiveness to those needs in the Jewish and general communities.

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**Papers and Comments**

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## Foreword

The increase in the number of young, single adults in the United States has become an issue of major concern for the Jewish community. The Talmudic judgment that "mating is as hard as splitting the Red Sea" has been complicated by the broad range of life choices available to single adults in contemporary society. Current data indicate that more and more young adults are choosing to postpone marriage and family formation. In view of these trends, the Jewish community confronts a dual challenge: how to enhance the Jewish involvement and affiliation of unmarried young adults, and how to increase the probability that they will ultimately form Jewish families.

Within the context of its commitment to strengthening all facets of Jewish family life, The William Petschek National Jewish Family Center sponsored an all-day conference, *Single and Jewish: Communal and Personal Perspectives* in November 1986. Although two years have passed, the issues related to the Jewish single population have not disappeared. Indeed, the numbers have grown while the communal response continues to lag behind the needs.

To provide background material which can help cope with the ongoing needs of Jewish singles, we are pleased to publish the papers, discussions, and recommendations of the AJC Conference, *Single and Jewish: Communal and Personal Perspectives*.

Following the Workshop Summary Reports, Dr. Rosen called on respondent Dr. Steven M. Cohen, Professor of Sociology at Queens College, City University of New York, author of *American Modernity and Jewish Identity* (1983) and *American Assimilation and Jewish Revival* (1988). Professor Cohen was also the co-editor of the recently published *The Jewish Family: Myths and Reality* and has done considerable research on the Jewish community of New York under the auspices of UJA-Federation of New York. He is currently engaged in a study called *Jewish Family and Jewish Involvement: Young Adults Who Are Single, Childless, Intermarried and Divorced*, an examination of the implications of new family configurations of young Jewish adults.

## NEGOTIATING THE SINGLE LIFE

### Summary and Recommendations

Steven M. Cohen

First, I would like to supplement the excellent presentation we've heard from Peter Stein by giving you a particularly Jewish slant on the problem. The reason Jews are so concerned with this issue now is that in the late 40s and early 50s young adult Jews -- like my own parents -- married quite early. The marriage age at the time was young compared to both previous and later periods. During the late 60s and early 70s, Jews, like other Americans, postponed marriage. As a result we now have many parents who remembered getting married early having children who were marrying late. That caused a crisis mentality, one which produced some positive results, such as the creation of The William Petschek National Jewish Family Center. On the other hand, the rapid social changes of the 60s took the Jewish community unawares. Actually, institutions always lag behind major population trends, just as demographers often lag behind in discerning those trends. (Indeed, in a recent speech, the president of the Population Association of America pointed out that demographers have failed to predict every major demographic trend that has hit America in the last twenty years.)

We cannot blame a community that is taken unawares by a major social revolution and then needs some years to understand the revolution to calm down from a crisis mentality and begin to adjust to change. My sense is that the community is, in fact, adjusting to it. A decade ago, the reaction of parents and Jewish organization board members was that somehow we have to get our kids married right away. As we have heard from several speakers, the community has endorsed other goals as well. Aside from the goal of getting single Jews married, we are also hearing of a second sort of goal, the need to serve singles' human needs, and social needs, at various ages. And third, we hear of a need to increase the Jewish involvement of singles, particularly in the public sphere. I suggest we have heard all too little about the articulation of interest in helping single Jews be Jewish in the privacy of their homes or as individuals, rather than as members of a large organization. I think we need some attention to that area as well.

The reason that we are so concerned about Jewish involvement of singles is that Jewish involvement (of the public or the private sort) is heavily concentrated among residentially stable, affluent families of a conventional nature; that is, married couples with children or married couples whose children have left home. The empty-nest couple and the couple with school-age children are the two types of families which have unusually high involvement in Jewish life. And, therefore, it comes as no surprise that organizations in the Jewish community whose boards are filled with these people take a long time to become aware of the problem of singles except, when, of course, their own children are involved.

It takes a long time to be reminded of the needs of Jewish single parents. As a little aside, I remember I was at a meeting of the Jewish Education Committee in New Haven, and a suggestion was made regarding the next series of lectures which cost \$18.00 for three lectures. Someone said we ought to provide for the students and the old people who need special subsidies: they should be allowed to come in free or for \$6.00. And discussion went

back and forth and I said, "Well, it so happens that many of the students in New Haven who are at Yale are fairly affluent. And the evidence on older people, especially Jews, is, in fact, that they have a considerable amount of disposable income. The people who really need the subsidy are single parents," and the whole group said: "Right!" There was an immediate reaction that this was the right thing to do.

I am not telling the story to tell you what is happening at New Haven. I am telling you the story to say that my sense is that we are not confronted by ideological opposition and barriers to participation of single people in the Jewish community. Rather, we are dealing with the social profile and networks of the individuals who are typically decision-makers in Jewish life. Too often, they are isolated from the needs, problems, and concerns of people who are not like them; in this case, "not like them" means "not married with school-age kids."

One theme which has run through the various models that have been presented is that we can learn a valuable lesson from success stories. Much of Jewish life is spent bemoaning failures and shortcomings and problems. But maybe, in line with the popularity of *In Search of Excellence*, and the many books written about successful corporations and corporate stars, it can be helpful to recognize Jewish success stories. We have heard a lot here today, and I am sure there are more examples across the country that demonstrate the feasibility of working successfully with singles and others. What do we learn from these success stories? First, we keep hearing from everybody a refrain on Harold Schulweis' statement that "If we want Jews to address our public agenda, we first have to address their private agenda." The constant theme running through all the presentations is that you have to listen to the single people, you have to put the single people in charge of their own programming, or at least have sensitive workers who may be married, but who are listening to the singles' concerns. In a sense, you want to put the clients first.

Second, we are hearing a lot about diversity. We need to recognize that there are a lot of different single populations; different age categories, different marital categories, and different parental categories, and even suburban-urban differences. There may be regional differences that we have not been able to assess because, frankly, most of us are from the Northeast, but there may be a different pattern of single life in California than there is in Atlanta, than there is in Boston. And while we may not be astute enough to experience and to understand these differences, we have to be able to differentiate.

Third, the successful program seems to be tailored to the occupational identities and/or the leisure interests of single people. One of the things that I understood when I heard the talk about the Capitol Hill Group was that here we were using Jews' occupational identities, in this case, government employment, as a basis for organization. There is no reason why the same model can't be repeated in other urban areas where we have large concentrations of Jews in various fields, such as medicine, accounting, law, finance, real estate, especially in the New York area, or science and engineering in Boston. It is conceivable to me that prominent Jews, like the Tisches, can fulfill the same function in their industries that Larry Smith and Rudy Boschwitz filled among government workers in Washington. The model can be repeated. The concept has broad implications and is supported by the words of a prominent Jewish advertising executive, who said: "If you advertise a Bible class for everybody on Sunday morning, you get nobody, but if you advertise a Talmud class for tennis players, you'll get a big crowd." This is true, because what you are talking about is utilizing the pre-existing identities of Jews and getting them to feel comfortable identifying in that environment from the beginning.

All these activities show a special attention to the daily, weekly and seasonal calendar. Rabbi Alan Silverstein spoke about the different times at which singles groups celebrate tefillah (prayer), Oneg Shabbat and holidays. Young single groups often start activities at

10:00 at night. The slightly older group likes to start at 8:00 and go for an Oneg Shabbat afterwards. The oldest group would like the refreshments before the worship service. If the problem with planning singles' programs is stigmatizing singles, then we can plan any program for 10:00 at night, without calling it a "singles program." Since very few young marrieds with children would like to start a social evening at 10:00 at night, the program will automatically attract singles and young married couples. This is what I mean by attention to the daily calendar.

We also need attentiveness to the seasonal calendar. There are three times a year when Jews care about being Jewish in a very vital sort of way: Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur, Chanukkah and Pesach. Although other holidays, too, can be utilized (on Capitol Hill, they look for excuses, even some rabbi's yahrzeit, to have a party), these three holidays involve between 75 and 90 percent of American Jews. They are times when singles also will be searching for Jewish purpose, and many of you are providing events around the seasonal calendar. I guess that an avoidance of stigmatizing and providing a variety of techniques are very worthy goals.

We also need to attend to eliminating barriers to participation, of which there are several in Jewish life. One is alienation, the feeling that you are not part of this group, you are not being invited, or you have to be invited and you have to make sure the people there all like you. Second, the special barrier for single parents. We need to make program planners aware of the financial limitations of single parents with custody of children, which often means women. Third, the barrier of Judaic competence. Most Jews don't participate in Jewish life because they feel incompetent to do Judaic things. Many of the successful singles' programs remove that confidence barrier. Fourth, and finally, it seems that we would do the Jewish community a disservice if our programs only focus on the social needs of singles, if they are directed only to providing opportunities to date and get married.

Certainly these are good and worthy goals. But it seems to me that as long as we are fulfilling the dating and the "shadchanut" responsibilities, we also should be considering the possibility of giving single Jews the opportunity to be Jewish. I think it inappropriate to think of Jewish life as being the exclusive province of married people with kids. I, for one, am not really concerned about the future of the Jewish people vis-a-vis the decline in Jewish activity during singlehood; my own feeling is that they eventually return to Jewishness. For some policy makers the promise of the singles' return to the Jewish fold is good enough. For me, it is not good enough. The fact that now people spend many, many more years of their lives outside the conventional family, many more years of not lighting Shabbat candles, and many more years of their lives not committed to Jewish institutions because they don't have their kids going to Hebrew school, to me, that is a very serious problem. And if we can provide schooling, education, tefillah, Jewish service activities, campaign, whatever you happen to like, if we can provide experiences that involve singles as Jews in Jewish life, be it in the home or outside, then we are helping fill that gap. We are helping to build up the trough of Jewish activity, which starts at around the age of 17 and doesn't pop back up until age 35 or so. I think that losing those eighteen years is a serious problem for American Jewry. We have to start thinking about the rituals that we undertake, the activities we participate in, and how to bolster the involvement, the activity, the commitment of singles in the Jewish community.

It seems that everything that we've learned indicates that the problem really is not singles' motivation. One of the big fallacies in Jewish and general life is that when we see people not doing something that they ought to be doing, we immediately suspect that they are not doing it because they don't want to. They are not getting married because they don't care about families. They are not being Jewishly active because they don't care about being Jewish. It turns out that this motivational argument is largely incorrect. People do things (or don't) for social reasons, or because of the presence (or absence) of a mechanism and

social networks, a lot more often than they do or don't do things for motivational reasons. And it turns out, where Jews are concerned, that once they get married and have kids, their level of Jewish activities shoots way, way up. I want to stress that 90% percent of parents with children belong to something Jewish. That means that before they were parents with kids, they had some Jewish interest, but lacked appropriate means to express it. And it turns out that Jews continue to marry more than non-Jews, even though they marry later. All this means that Jews are committed, or at least potentially committed throughout their entire lives, to Yiddishkeit, to Jewish involvement, and to family. So let us not suppose that commitment is the big problem.

Our problem is to learn how to provide ways for Jews to express their Jewish commitment while they are single, even when they are not happily married to other Jews and in the midst of raising Jewish children.