

# INTERMARRIAGE

## AND THE JEWISH FUTURE

A NATIONAL STUDY  
IN SUMMARY

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designed and directed  
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of the century until 1960, the rate of Jewish intermarriage stayed well below 10 percent; in fact, for reasons that are still unclear, it even declined slightly during the last half of the 1950s. But after that, the figures began to change rapidly. From 1961-1965 the rate rose to 17.4 percent and from 1966-1972 it climbed to 31.7 percent.

These statistics, alarming in themselves to a small group that a generation ago lost one-third of its total world population in the Holocaust, are doubly threatening when viewed together with other disturbing trends—the sharp decline in the Jewish birthrate, quite possibly to below actual replacement level; the increased divorce rate and other evidences of family turmoil in the Jewish community; the reduction in synagogue and communal involvement; the growing ignorance about Jewish religious and cultural matters among American Jews as a whole.

Elihu Bergman, Assistant Director of the Harvard Center for Population Studies, predicts, on the basis of unpublished projections by colleagues (questioned by some), that 100 years from now the American Jewish community will have dwindled to between 10,000 and 940,000 persons. Bergman bases this ominous forecast on the low Jewish birth rate and the erosion of Jewish identity, and argues that intermarriage is the greatest factor in this assimilation process. On the other hand, some American Jews believe that intermarriage in the United States today need not, as it did in earlier periods here and in Europe, lead inevitably to total assimilation; they even argue that intermarriage may actually add new familial connections and influences to dwindling Jewish numbers.

A number of the factors which contribute to the spiralling intermarriage rates among Jews—their acceptance by the better colleges and professional schools, their quick climb up the economic ladder, and their general success in American society—are, by virtually any standard, positive developments. And many of the values that most modern Jews endorse—universalism, brotherhood, equality, and the like—make condemnation of intermarriage a special dilemma for some people, particularly since there is no expectation that the Jewish partner will reject his or her Jewishness.

Many Jews are troubled by intermarriage without really being able to explain to themselves or to others, including their children, why they feel this way. Parents, particularly, find themselves uneasy at the prospect of their son or daughter marrying a non-Jew because the arguments that come to their minds in opposition to such marriages appear to run counter, in many respects, to the principles by which they raised their children. It is difficult for many fathers or mothers, in the 1970s, to say to their children, "Don't marry the man or woman you love because that person is not Jewish." And unless

there is a strong religious conviction, it is equally hard to insist on the conversion of a non-Jewish spouse as a condition of marriage. These difficulties do not necessarily reflect an intrinsic conflict between liberal values and opposition to mixed marriage, though it may reflect the ambivalence of some Jews about their Jewish commitment.

At the same time, there are some signs of a greater commitment to Judaism's survival on the part of some young Jews—a reflection, in part, of the general ethnic resurgence in America and of the collapse of so many secular messianic dreams. Though it is too early to tell how widespread and durable this movement will prove, it does suggest that the pressures for assimilation may not be entirely irresistible, and emphasizes the importance of helping Jews to find acceptable ways to remain in the fold. For many reasons, therefore, the Jewish community needs to know more about the dynamics of intermarriage and about the relationships of intermarried men and women to Jews and Judaism.

Few empirical studies have been conducted on this subject, and most of those which were done involved single communities. The National Jewish Population Study does, as mentioned, contain some useful data; but it was not designed to permit intensive analysis of intermarriage and most other reports have concentrated on the rates and causes of intermarriage, rather than on its consequences.

Because there is so little in the way of hard facts to support the passionately held positions on all sides of this issue, the American Jewish Committee undertook, in 1976, to sponsor a study on the effects of intermarriage. This study, directed by Dr. Egon Mayer, Associate Professor of Sociology at Brooklyn College, was conducted in eight American communities with the participation of the local chapters of the American Jewish Committee and with the cooperation of many individuals and groups in and out of the AJC.

The study sought to examine the impact of intermarriage on the couples involved and on their families, as well as on their ties to the Jewish community. The goal was to locate a representative sample of intermarried couples and to determine, through a questionnaire and in-depth interviews:

- 1) whether intermarriage leads to a diminishing identification with Judaism and the Jewish community on the part of the Jewish spouse;

- 2) whether intermarriage promotes conflict between marriage partners;

- 3) whether intermarriage causes alienation between the Jewish spouse and his or her parents, siblings, extended family;

- 4) how non-Jewish spouses feel about the introduction of Jewish content into their family life and about efforts to provide Jewish

observances at home, the celebration of religious rites of passage for children, involvement in Jewish organizations, were marked by the same sex differences. Born-Gentile wives married to Jewish men were also more likely to convert to Judaism than were the born-Gentile husbands.

Ninety percent of the marriages studied were intact, and for over 80 percent of the spouses it was their first marriage.

The sample included a full range of age groupings, though the percentage of respondents aged 50 and over was larger than it should have been, given the low rate of intermarriage before the 1950s.

Eighty-five percent of the couples studied were parents, and approximately 30 percent have more than two children.

Educational attainment, occupational status and income were all higher for the respondents than for both the national average and the national Jewish average. Born-Jewish women were more likely than born-Jewish men to have the same level of education as their spouses, and to have met their spouses at college.

The family background of the born-Jewish spouses in this sample closely approximated the religious affiliation patterns of American Jews, including a substantial representation of the Orthodox (see Table 1).

The born-Gentile spouses also represented a variety of religious backgrounds (see Table 2).

Just over 21 percent of the non-Jewish respondents and 3.3 percent of the Jewish respondents had converted to their spouses' religion—again figures consistent with data from other studies. The rate of conversion was highest in the 20-39 age groups.

**Table 1**

**Denominational Backgrounds  
of Born-Jewish Respondents**

	<u>Percent</u>
Orthodox	11.1
Conservative	29.3
Reform	26.7
Not affiliated	32.9

**Table 2**  
**Religious Backgrounds of**  
**Born-Gentile Respondents**

	Percent	
	Converts	Non-Converts
Protestant	53.7	45.1
Catholic	17.7	30.8
Other	13.5	6.3
None	11.4	17.7

*Note: Totals across do not equal 100% because some respondents did not answer this question.*

### **The Sample**

The goal of the study was to obtain a large representative sample from the national population of intermarried couples. Because this goal proved difficult to achieve, it is important to indicate some of the limitations of this particular sample.

Since there is no central listing of Jews, much less of marriages and religious backgrounds, it was necessary to rely on a variety of strategies for locating intermarried couples. Most of the couples in this study were identified as intermarried by members of the local Jewish community. Thus, although efforts were made to randomize as much as possible, the respondents do not, in a strict sense, constitute a random sample. A number of resulting biases can be identified:

1) All the Jewish spouses included in the sample had to be known, at least to some members of the Jewish community, as Jewish. Thus, the most assimilated intermarried couples in the community were probably underrepresented.

2) Ninety percent of the marriages studied were intact. Since this is a higher percentage than for marriages as a whole, intermarried couples with severe marital problems were probably underrepresented.

3) As with any study on a sensitive personal topic, the refusal rate (the percentage of people contacted who declined to be interviewed) was high. One obvious result was a smaller sample than had been hoped for. But it is also possible that couples most sensitive about their intermarriage, for whatever reason, were underrepresented.

4) All the communities studied were large metropolitan areas with sizeable Jewish populations—the kind of communities in which most

American Jews live. Couples living in small towns, where both intermarriage and assimilation may be harder to avoid, are not represented in the sample. It is possible that their experiences differ significantly from those of couples who were included.

These biases are important enough to make this investigation less than a definitive study. But there are a number of reasons to view its findings as significant and reliable. In the first place, the study yielded a richer lode of relevant data than most earlier researches in this area. And on those questions where it was possible to compare the results with the more representative National Jewish Population Study, the findings were, for the most part, consistent.

Even more important is the fact that virtually all the biases tended in a similar direction—an overrepresentation of couples with more positive feelings about, and ties to, the Jewish community. Thus, while it is possible that, from a Jewish communal perspective, the effects of intermarriage are more damaging than these data suggest, it is highly unlikely that they are less so. Also from a Jewish communal perspective, the sample contains an overrepresentation of the kind of families most likely to retain some contact with the Jewish community. *They are the group the community has to work with.* If the goal is to develop a viable communal response to intermarriage, then this sample has considerable insight to impart.

## THE FINDINGS\*

One important area probed by both the written questionnaires and the personal interviews was the family background in which the partners to the intermarriage, particularly the born-Jewish spouses, grew up. The findings not only corroborate earlier studies and conventional wisdom to the effect that those who intermarry come from less religious and less intensively Jewish homes than those who don't; they also provide clues as to the religious and cultural background and experiences that those who intermarry bring to their marriage.

### **Family Background of Born-Jewish Spouses**

Almost 70 percent of the parents of the born-Jewish spouses belonged to a synagogue, and over 65 percent were perceived by the respondents to have been "somewhat religious" (as compared to "very religious" or "not at all religious"). It is not clear, however, just how much of a religious involvement these perceptions indicate.

More revealing, perhaps, are the data concerning the religious and ritual objects that were available and/or used in the homes in which the born-Jewish spouses grew up (see Table 3).

In interpreting these data it is necessary to take into account the ritual and religious significance of the various objects checked off by the respondents. Keeping separate dishes for meat and dairy foods, and using a *hardalah* set and *tfillin*, obviously connote a far deeper religious involvement than owning Jewish books or a menorah, particularly if these are the sole marks of Jewishness in the home. The data suggest that only 10 to 20 percent of the respondents were raised by parents who kept a kosher home or laid *tfillin*, and a similar percentage were raised by parents who did not even own Jewish books or a menorah. The vast majority grew up in homes with some objects that are generally associated, in at least a minimal way, with Jewish identity; but a considerably smaller number experienced religious observance or practice.

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\*Some tables do not total 100% because of minor deviations due to rounding.

**Table 3**  
**Religious and Cultural Objects**  
**in the Parental Homes**  
**of Born-Jewish Respondents**

	Percent		
	Own Use or Display	Own But Do Not Use	Do Not Own
Mezuzah	54.7	9.1	36.1
Sabbath Candle	45.2	23.3	31.3
Kiddush Cup	32.8	22.3	44.9
Menorah	66.9	14.7	18.4
Havdalah Set	12.1	6.5	81.4
Talith	27.8	24.4	47.7
T'fillin	14.0	21.8	64.2
Seder Plate	47.2	13.5	39.3
Jewish Bible	35.5	43.7	20.7
Jewish Prayer Book	46.1	31.0	22.9
Jewish Books	47.5	35.0	17.4
Separate Dishes for Meat and Dairy Foods	7.1	22.3	70.6
Kipah	38.5	26.1	27.8
Jewish Musical Records	25.5	22.5	52.0
Jewish Art Objects	44.9	18.6	37.6
Poster, etc.	24.9	14.9	60.3

In the face-to-face interviews, slightly over 10 percent of the respondents described their parents as anti-religious. Approximately 20 percent said their parents had insisted on some ritual observances; most of the rest reported an explicit or implicit desire on the part of their parents for Jewish identity—"a sense of being Jewish"—without much actual religious practice or cultural involvement.

A small minority of the born-Jewish partners had an intensive Jewish education; the largest group had some Jewish education but not a great deal; and a significant group appears to have had no Jewish education at all (see Tables 4A and 4B).

**Table 4A**

**Amount of Jewish Education Reported  
By Born-Jewish Respondents  
(By sex)**

	Percent	
	Male	Female
1-5 years*	39.0	38.0
6+ years	19.0	8.0
No answer/None	42.0	54.0

*\*Most respondents in this group had less than four years of Jewish education.*

**Table 4B**

**Type of Jewish Education Reported  
By Born-Jewish Respondents  
(By sex)**

	Percent	
	Male	Female
Day School or Yeshiva	11.7	3.0
Sunday or Afternoon School	64.9	62.6
Yiddish School or other (e.g. tutoring)	6.5	8.4
Can't recall	16.7	26.0

Though very few of the born-Jewish respondents grew up in an exclusively Jewish environment, the vast majority grew up in neighborhoods where at least half their peers were Jewish, and between 15 and 20 percent were raised in a predominantly non-

Jewish environment. The degree of contact with non-Jews increased when dating began, but only a minority said that they dated "mostly non-Jews." Thus, while the typical respondent had extensive social contacts with non-Jews, he or she also had extensive Jewish contacts. In such a setting, intermarriage must be viewed as a possible, but not as an inevitable outcome.

The born-Jewish partners reported that their parents grew more and more uneasy as their sons' and daughters' contacts with non-Jews moved from friendship to dating to marriage (see Table 5). Though a majority of the parents were clearly opposed to their children's intermarriage, most were not strongly opposed; and approximately one-third were perceived by their children as neutral.

**Table 5**

**Parents' Attitudes Toward Friendship, Dating, and Marriage Between Jews and Gentiles**

	FATHER			MOTHER		
	Percent			Percent		
	Friend-ship	Dating	Mar-riage	Friend-ship	Dating	Mar-riage
Strongly opposed	.6	11.5	19.7	.9	12.7	21.3
Opposed	6.7	33.4	39.5	11.0	38.9	39.7
No opinion	58.0	48.5	35.0	53.9	41.1	33.7
Approved	29.2	6.6	5.8	27.6	6.3	5.1
Strongly approved	5.1	****	****	6.3	.9	.3

In sum, the typical born-Jewish spouses in the sample studied came from homes which, though neither non-Jewish nor anti-Jewish, were not intensively Jewish, particularly in religious terms. While most reported that their parents were opposed to the intermarriage, it did not, in light of their upbringing, represent either an unnatural development or an act of rebellion. Nor was the parents' opposition great enough to rupture their ties to their children when the latter proceeded with the marriage.

### Family Background of Non-Jewish Spouses

As might be expected, the non-Jewish respondents grew up in a more exclusively non-Jewish environment than did their spouses. Most said they had few, if any, Jewish friends while they were growing up, and the majority reported dating mostly non-Jews. And not surprisingly, the typical non-Jewish respondent was much more ignorant about Jews and Judaism at the time of the marriage than his or her spouse was about Christianity.

The findings also indicate that the parents of the non-Jewish respondents were somewhat more religious than their Jewish counterparts. Approximately three-quarters of these parents belonged to a church; fewer of the fathers were perceived by their children to have been "anti-religious," and more of the mothers were perceived as "very religious." And though many of these parents, too, were opposed to their children's intermarrying, a majority of the respondents said their parents were either neutral or favorably disposed toward their marriage (see Table 6).

**Table 6**

**Parental Attitudes Towards  
Children's Intermarriage  
(Non-Jewish Parents)**

	Percent	
	Convert	Non-Convert
Favorable	19.5	22.6
Neutral	31.7	29.4
Unfavorable	48.8	48.8

### Married Life

*Marital Harmony:* Many of the questions in the study were designed to elicit information as to agreement or disagreement between the spouses about lifestyle, religious involvement, child-rearing, and related matters. The vast majority of couples reported family harmony (or at least the absence of intense conflict) on most matters, including ethnic and religious issues. Though self-report data are not altogether reliable, and the high percentage of intact marriages in the sample may have skewed the responses to some degree, they do seem to negate the widely held assumption that intermarriage results in friction between the spouses and does not

work. In this sample, at least, it seems to have worked well enough.

*Extended Family Ties:* Another widely held belief about intermarriage is that it tends to damage family ties. If this were true it would, of course, be a tragedy in its own right. It would also eliminate possible sources of Jewish content in the lives of intermarried families. All of the data make it clear, however, that the ties between the couples surveyed and their parents and other relatives were intact. Not only did most of the respondents say they got along well with their families, many even reported that their relationships with their parents were better than before the marriage. They saw their families as regularly as time and distance permitted, and in the vast majority of cases their spouses were accepted into the extended family. None of the respondents reported a total break with their families as a result of their marriage.

**Table 7**  
**Celebration of Jewish Holidays**  
**With Jewish Parents**

	Born-Jewish Husband			Born-Jewish Wife		
	Percent			Percent		
	Always	Some-times	Rarely Never	Always	Some-times	Rarely Never
Rosh Hashanah	30.9	17.4	51.7	32.5	15.0	52.5
Yom Kippur	27.8	17.5	54.7	32.7	13.8	53.4
Hanukkah	29.9	15.2	54.9	42.1	15.4	42.5
Passover	44.8	16.8	34.4	50.3	10.6	39.0

*Note: Percentages total 100 percent across.*

Though most respondents, Jewish and non-Jewish, report getting along well with their inlaws, the data suggest that the couples are in closer touch with their Jewish than their non-Jewish parents, perhaps simply because many of the couples live closer to the Jewish parents.

The data also reveal specific ways in which the couples' social ties with their extended families are cemented (see Table 7). A significant minority of the couples celebrate Jewish religious holidays with their

Jewish parents (but, except for Passover, a majority do not). The holiday most consistently celebrated with Jewish parents is Thanksgiving; and a sizeable minority of the couples also celebrate Christmas with their Jewish families (see Table 8).

These data suggest that for many intermarried couples the close ties with Jewish parents and extended Jewish family represent an opportunity to enrich the Jewish content of their family lives. In reality, however, shared holiday observances have more of a social than a religious or ritualistic meaning for most of the families.

### Religious and Ethnic Life

If intermarriage is a threat to Jewish continuity, it is so particularly because such families provide so little Jewish upbringing for their children. Thus a major concern of this study was the religious and ethnic life of intermarried families and the level of their Jewish identification.

Because there was a dramatic difference, in virtually every area studied, in the responses of couples whose non-Jewish spouse did not convert (mixed marriages) and the responses of couples whose born-

**Table 8**  
**Celebration of Christmas and Thanksgiving With Parents**

	Percent	
	Celebrate with Jewish Parents	Celebrate with Gentile Parents
<b>Christmas</b>		
Often	25.6	54.3
Sometimes	16.9	13.3
Rarely	7.3	9.8
Never	49.8	21.8
<b>Thanksgiving</b>		
Often	49.5	37.0
Sometimes	24.5	26.4
Rarely	9.0	12.1
Never	16.7	24.5

Gentile spouse had converted to Judaism (conversionary marriages), the data for the two groups were considered separately.

### Mixed Marriages

*Religious Identification:* Close to two-thirds of the Jewish respondents among the mixed-marriage couples declared that they thought of themselves as Jews and that being Jewish was important to them. A significant minority, however, indicated indifference to any expression of Jewishness, however minimal.

As might be expected, the vast majority of the non-Jewish spouses who did not convert do not identify as Jews. But surprisingly, close to 12 percent of these spouses do consider themselves Jewish, and another 7.3 percent consider themselves partly Jewish. Only about one-third currently identify with the religion of their birth—roughly half the number that did so prior to their marriage (see Table 9). More than three-quarters of the non-Jewish spouses report experiencing religious feelings—however they choose to define that—fairly often.

*Organizational Involvement:* Twenty-two percent of the mixed-marriage couples report some involvement with Jewish communal organizations and 37 percent contribute to the United Jewish Appeal. Though this level of involvement is lower than that of endogamous Jewish couples, it is not dramatically different. According to the National Jewish Population Study, approximately 40 percent of the Jewish population participates in the activities of Jewish organizations, most of them on a sporadic basis.

*Synagogue Involvement:* The Jewish involvement that probably exerts the greatest influence on the religious and ethnic identity of young children (and their parents) is participation in synagogue life.

	Percent	
	Prior to Marriage	Currently
Protestant	45.0	26.0
Catholic	30.0	10.0
Other	6.0	7.0
None/no answer	18.0	57.0

The data make clear that while 15 to 20 percent of the mixed-marriage couples surveyed do belong to a synagogue, and attend services with some regularity, the vast majority do not (see Tables 10A-C). It should be noted, however, that intermarried couples often find scant welcome in both religious and secular Jewish organizations. Lack of involvement does not always reflect a lack of desire on the part of the intermarried couples to belong.

*Home Observances:* Not surprisingly, only a handful of the mixed-marriage couples surveyed keep a kosher home, own and use a *havdalah* set or other ritual objects, light Sabbath candles, or otherwise observe the Sabbath with any regularity (see Table 11).

**Table 10A**

**Affiliation of Mixed-Marriage Couples  
Belonging to Synagogues  
(18% of total)**

<u>Type of Congregation</u>	<u>Percent*</u>
Reform	34
Conservative	20
Orthodox	9
Unidentified	37

*\*These are percentages only of the 18% of the mixed-marriage couples who belong to synagogues.*

**Table 10B**

**Attendance of Born-Jewish  
Spouse at Regular  
Weekly Services  
(Mixed-marriage)**

<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Often	5
Sometimes	17
Rarely	26
Never	52

**Table 10C**

**Attendance of Born-Jewish  
Spouse at High  
Holy Day Services  
(Mixed-marriage)**

<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Often	27
Sometimes	14
Rarely	19
Never	40



**Table 11**

**Ritual Observances Performed by  
Born-Jewish Spouses  
(Mixed-Marriage)**

<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	
	<u>Light Sabbath Candles*</u>	<u>Light Hanukkah Candles</u>
Often	8	41
Sometimes	8	12
Rarely	12	7
Never	71	40

*\*These data are skewed by the fact that two-thirds of the born-Jewish spouses in the study were men, and lighting Sabbath candles is a woman's ritual.*

Fewer than half own and use a menorah, and less than one-half often light candles on Hanukkah. Indeed, while roughly one-third of the respondents reported owning and/or using a number of Jewish objects (see Table 12), not a single object on the list was owned *and* used by a majority. And a comparison of Tables 3 and 12 makes it clear that every item on the list is owned and used with less frequency in mixed-marriage couples than was owned and used by the families in which the born-Jewish spouses grew up.

*Raising Children:* At the heart of Jewish concern about inter-marriage is whether the children of such marriages will be part of, or lost to, the Jewish fold. The data summarized above bear significantly on this question; but the study provides data even more relevant to the subject.

Approximately one-third of the mixed-marriage couples surveyed said they thought of their children as Jewish, and would be upset if their children did not think of themselves as Jews. Forty-three percent of the respondents reported that their sons had been, or would be, ritually circumcised—a figure greater than might be expected.\*

*\*The study did not probe why more respondents said they had had, or planned to have, ritual circumcisions for their sons than said that they considered their children Jewish. It is likely that at least some of the respondents ignored the difference between religious and medical circumcision and reported the latter as "ritual circumcision," or that some of the respondents, convinced that circumcision was desirable for medical or hygienic reasons, agreed to ritual circumcision to please the Jewish grandparents.*

But fewer than a third of the couples said that their children had had, or would have, a Bar or Bat Mitzvah—a rite of passage with strong direct impact on the child—and some of the couples reported they were planning to have their children baptized and confirmed. In most cases, however, there were no plans to replace Jewish rites with Christian rites (see Table 13).

Perhaps the most sobering statistic, given the low level of Jewish content in the family life of most mixed-marriage couples, is the small number of such families that provide formal Jewish instruction for their children. Only about one-quarter, at most, of the children whose parents were involved in this study receive a formal Jewish education, and even fewer receive intensive Jewish schooling (see Table 14).

**Table 12**

**Ritual and Cultural Jewish Objects  
in the Homes of  
Mixed-Marriage Couples**

	Percent		
	Own, Use or Display	Own But Do Not Use	Do Not Own
Mezuzah	22.9	6.6	70.5
Sabbath Candle	16.3	16.9	66.8
Kiddush Cup	12.9	12.7	74.4
Menorah	43.5	12.2	44.4
Havdalah Set	2.4	3.8	93.8
Talith	8.8	12.3	78.9
T'fillin	4.9	9.8	85.3
Seder Plate	18.9	5.9	75.2
Jewish Bible	23.5	35.1	41.4
Jewish Prayer Book	23.8	23.0	53.2
Jewish Books	30.6	32.6	36.8
Separate Dishes	5.2	2.4	92.5
Kipah	20.1	26.1	53.8
Jewish Musical Records	18.4	13.2	68.4
Jewish Art Objects Posters, etc.	29.6	15.3	55.1
	15.1	9.3	75.6

What then do the data indicate about mixed-marriage couples and about the Jewish component of their lives? It seems fair to conclude that while most of the Jewish spouses have an abstract sense of Jewish identity, only a minority of them act on it; and even among the latter, very few act on it with any intensity. The majority of these couples express neither desire nor intention to have their children identify as Jews, and only a small proportion of the families studied will provide formal Jewish education or other experiences explicitly designed to raise their children Jewishly. Despite the fact that the sample selected for this study may be expected to skew the responses in the direction of optimism, the Jewish content of family life in mixed marriages is, by every index, less than it is among endogamous marriages.

**Table 13**

**Selected Rites of Passage Observed or Planned by Mixed-Marriage Couples for Their Children (Reported by Born-Jewish Spouses)**

	<u>Percent</u>
Ritual Circumcision (of son)	43
Bar or Bat Mitzvah	30
Baptism	13
Church Confirmation	11

**Table 14**

**Type of Religious Education Currently Given to Children**

	<u>Percent</u>
Day School	6
Afternoon/Sunday School	19
Home Instruction	13
Other/None (including non-Jewish)	62

**Table 15**

**When Did Conversion Occur?**

	<u>Percent</u>
Prior to meeting spouse	15.0
Prior to marriage	40.0
Prior to first child, but after marriage	22.0
After first child	6.0
No answer	15.0

**Table 16**

**Reasons for Conversion  
Reported by Converts**

	<u>Percent</u>
Personal conviction	32.2
Influence of spouse and in-laws	38.0
For the sake of the children	8.9
Combination of above, and other reasons	20.9

**Conversionary Marriages**

Just over 21 percent of the born-Gentile respondents in the sample had converted to Judaism by the time of the study.\* Of this group, 40 percent converted prior to, and in connection with, the marriage, and another 15 percent before they met their current spouse (often in connection with an earlier marriage). This still leaves a large group (approximately one-third of all the converts) who converted after the marriage (see Table 15).

The data indicate that most of these later conversions were not entered into primarily for the sake of the children, but were the

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*\*It should be noted that 3.3 percent of the born-Jewish respondents had converted out of Judaism; but this is too small a group to analyze, and no effort was made to do so.*

culmination of long and thoughtful consideration. The most common reason cited for conversion was the influence of the Jewish spouse and family (see Table 16).

Conversion into Judaism was more common among women than men. Twenty-seven percent of the born-Gentile women, compared to 14 percent of the born-Gentile men, had converted to Judaism by the time of the study.\*

A larger proportion of converts were between 20 and 39 years of age than was the case with non-converts (see Table 17). The data on those under 20 years of age, however, point the other way; but those marrying this young are, in any case, not typical.

As might be expected, conversion was more common where the parents of the Jewish spouse were more religiously involved. In addition, it would appear that religious feelings combined with a lack of identification with the religion of one's birth on the part of the born-Gentile spouse play a part in the impetus for conversion.

The data reveal few significant differences between mixed and conversionary marriages on such matters as education, income,

	Percent	
	Converts	Non-Converts
Under 20 years old	1.0	15.2
20-29	18.9	10.3
30-39	41.0	32.9
40-49	22.2	20.3
50-59	13.7	14.6
60 and over	3.1	6.6

family harmony and ties to extended family. But they point to dramatic and important differences in religious and ethnic identification. Close to 83 percent of the converts consider themselves Jewish and another 6.4 percent consider themselves partly Jewish. The vast majority said that being Jewish was important to them.

*\*This pattern was reversed among the small group of respondents who converted out of Judaism; 11 of the 15 were men.*

*Organizational Involvement:* The families of converts are more involved in Jewish organizational life than the families of non-converts, but the differences are not dramatic. Thirty-eight percent of the converts said they contribute to the UJA, 9.4 percent said they were frequently involved in the activities of Jewish organizations, and 32.3 percent reported less frequent involvement.

*Synagogue Involvement:* The vast majority of converts are actively involved in their synagogues, and approximately two-thirds attend services with some regularity (the comparable figure for non-converts is less than one-third). According to the National Jewish Population Survey, fewer than half of all endogamous Jewish families are involved in synagogue life, making the affiliation rate of the converts doubly dramatic (see Tables 18A-18C).

*Ritual Activities and Objects in the Home:* Approximately half of the converts in this study light Sabbath candles, at least some of the time, and more than three-quarters regularly light Hanukkah candles (see Table 19).

As Table 12 indicates, the majority of mixed-marriage respondents did not own or use the religious and cultural objects listed in the study. Most of the respondents in the conversionary marriages, however, reported owning virtually all of these items, including items of considerable ritual or religious significance, and a majority said they used these objects. As the data on separate dishes indicate, few of the conversionary-marriage families are strictly observant; but in the homes of most of them, artifacts of Jewish life are visible and used (see Table 20).

**Table 18A**

**Affiliation of Conversionary-  
Marriage Couples  
Belonging to Synagogues  
(68% of total)**

<u>Type of Congregation</u>	<u>Percent*</u>
Reform	47
Conservative	18
Orthodox	11
Unidentified	23

\*These are percentages only of the 68% of the conversionary-marriage couples who belong to synagogues.

*Denominational Background:* Based upon the denominational background of the Jewish parents, the rates of conversion were 28 percent for Reform, 19 percent for Conservative, and 31 percent for Orthodox. While the vast majority who converted under Reform or Conservative auspices later affiliated with the same denomination, the vast majority of those who converted under Orthodox auspices are currently affiliated with Reform synagogues. Reform, Conservative and Orthodox converts all scored higher on measures of Jewishness than non-converts, but those who converted under Conservative and Orthodox auspices tended to score higher than the Reform group, and in some cases significantly so.

### **Other Findings**

*Rabbinic Officiation at the Wedding:* One of the most controversial issues raised by intermarriage is the appropriateness of rabbinic officiation at wedding ceremonies. Only 10 percent of the sample (49 couples) were married by a rabbi in the absence of conversion; thus, our data are of limited value with regard to this issue, and it would be inappropriate to provide detailed data on this question. In general, however, the Jewish commitment and practice among this small group was less than within conversionary marriages (particularly those involving conversion under Conservative or Orthodox auspices), greater than within other mixed marriages, but similar to mixed marriages in which the Jewish spouse had had a significant Jewish background.

The desire to be married by a rabbi, and the willingness to make an effort to find one willing to participate, suggest a basic Jewish commitment greater than is typical among the intermarried. It is likely that this prior commitment rather than rabbinical participation led to a higher rate of Jewish practice after the wedding, just as the prior commitment and practice of the born-Jewish spouses may have led to a higher rate of conversion among their born-Gentile partners.

### **The Effect of Jewish Background**

While there are not enough data to permit a systematic identification of the religious and cultural factors which influence the Jewish component in intermarriage, there is enough information about the background and commitment of the born-Jewish spouse to warrant a brief examination of some relevant data.

Given the relatively low commitment of the born-Gentile spouses to the religion of their birth and their lack of opposition to Jewishness in their family lives, it is reasonable to assume that the level of pre-

marital commitment to Judaism by the born-Jewish spouse played an important part in determining the Jewish religious and ethnic content of the couple's family life. This assumption seems to be corroborated by the findings on the Jewish spouses' Jewish education and personal commitment and their parents' synagogue affiliation.

When the data on Jewish education and synagogue affiliation are examined together with the responses of both spouses about how important their religious background had been to them just prior to their marriage, there is little doubt that religious background was subjectively of greater importance to the born-Jewish spouses than to the born-Gentile spouses (see Table 21).

**Table 21**

**"Thinking Back to the Time Just Prior to Your Getting Married, How Important Would You Say Your Own Religious Background Was to You?"**

	Percent			
	Born-Jewish Spouse		Born-Gentile Spouse	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Very Important	27.5	32.8	13.9	19.5
Somewhat Important	39.3	27.2	19.1	31.4
Unimportant	27.0	35.1	56.4	41.3
Tried to Avoid It	3.6	3.3	5.4	.9
Rejected It	2.6	1.6	5.8	6.8

The data also highlight the relationship between these background variables and several measures of the Jewishness in the couples' married life.

*Jewish Books in the Home:* 30 percent of the born-Jewish spouses who had had no Jewish education reported that they own and read Jewish books, compared with 36 percent for those with one to three years of Jewish education and 48 percent for those with four or more years of Jewish education. Also, 28 percent of those whose parents had not belonged to a synagogue reported that they own and read Jewish books, compared to 43 percent for those whose parents had belonged to a synagogue. Only 18 percent of the born-Jewish spouses who said their religious background had been unimportant to them before marriage said they owned and read Jewish books after marriage,

significantly lower than those experiencing Jewish rites. Most children of intermarriage are being raised without any ethnic or religious identification.

—Differences of religious background do not seem to contribute to estrangement from parents or to conflicts in family decision-making, including decisions about child-rearing. Relationships between both born-Jewish and born-Gentile respondents and their parents were consistently reported to be close and harmonious.

—The responses of mixed-marriage couples married by a rabbi suggested more Jewish practice than of those who were not (though still considerably less than in families where the born-Gentile spouse had converted), though there is no basis in the data for assuming that rabbinic participation was the cause, rather than the result of such greater commitment. In any event, the number of such couples in the sample was so small that any interpretation must be considered highly speculative.

### **General Implications**

The findings summarized above tend to reinforce the fear that intermarriage represents a threat to Jewish continuity. Most non-Jewish spouses do not convert to Judaism; the level of Jewish content and practice in mixed marriages is low; only about one-third of the Jewish partners in such marriages view their children as Jewish; and most such children are exposed to little by way of Jewish culture or religion. Thus, despite the suggestions of some Jews that intermarriage may actually add to the Jewish population by bringing non-Jewish spouses and the children of such unions into the Jewish fold, this study—conducted with a sample that made optimistic conclusions more likely—does not support this hope. It does, however, suggest steps the Jewish community might take to ameliorate the assimilationist threat inherent in intermarriage.

One set of data—the findings on conversionary marriages—merits particular attention and discussion. Conversionary marriages compare favorably not only with mixed marriages, but with endogamous marriages as well. In the conversionary marriage, Jewish identity is not merely asserted; it is acted upon, particularly with respect to religious affiliation and observance. Thus, in some ways, there is more reason for optimism about Jewish continuity in families where the born-Gentile spouse has converted to Judaism than there is in the typical endogamous family.

Identity formation is too complex a process for anyone to conclude from these data how many, and to what degree, the children of conversionary marriages will remain Jewish. It seems clear, how-

ever, that where conversion takes place, the fact that one of the spouses was not born Jewish is no obstacle to a Jewish family life.

The concept of conversion is, of course, a matter of considerable controversy in the Jewish community. Many religious and communal leaders view it as a primarily Christian preoccupation, and regard conversions that accompany intermarriage as "conversions of convenience," from which little positive Judaism can be expected. Yet this study suggests that such conversions often provide a valuable reservoir of committed and involved Jews.

In mixed marriages, too, the study points to opportunities for the Jewish community to ponder. For while the findings document an absence of Jewish practice in such families, they also show that most born-Jewish spouses retain a sense of being Jewish and that as many as 20 percent of the families act on this identification in meaningful ways. Equally significant are the indications that the lack of Jewish involvement stems from the disinterest of the born-Jewish spouses rather than from opposition by the born-Gentile spouses, or the latter's desire to raise their children in another religion.

The not-insignificant minority of born-Gentile spouses—perhaps as many as 15 percent—who did not convert, but expressed some sense of identification with Judaism, may also point up a valuable potential for the Jewish community. Some of these born-Gentile spouses, particularly those who experience religious feelings, may be prepared to increase their connections to Judaism, either formally or informally, and to accept a more committed Jewish family life.

The changing role and position of women in America also merits attention in this regard. Traditionally, more Jewish men than women have intermarried; but there is evidence that the rate of intermarriage among Jewish women is rising. In this study, intermarried Jewish men have been more likely than Jewish women to infuse their family lives with Jewish content. If this is generally true (and there is conflicting data on the matter), it seems likely that a greater involvement of women in Jewish religious life would increase the Jewish component in intermarriage.

What must be kept in mind, in reviewing this and other studies of intermarriage, is that while the level of Jewish involvement and practice in mixed marriages is lower than in endogamous families, it is disturbingly low in the latter as well. If the decline of Jewish practice represents a threat to Jewish continuity, the threat cuts across exogamy-endogamy lines. A large minority of American Jews—perhaps even the majority—do little to express their Jewish identity and even less to pass that identity on to their children. Yet, in a free and open society, Jewish continuity can only be predicated on ongoing Jewish commitment and practice, and on the rediscovery by

many Jews of the bases of Jewish commitment.

While such a reacculturation is especially urgent for Jews who intermarry, and for their children, the question remains whether intermarriage is primarily a cause or a symptom of the general decline in Jewish identity, commitment and practice.

Certainly assimilation is not unique to the intermarried; nor can it be assumed that if the Jewish respondents in this study had married Jews, the Jewish quality of their family lives in all or even most cases would have differed significantly. (Undoubtedly, however, those who married spouses more Jewishly involved than themselves would have had a more Jewish influence in their homes.)

There are other relevant questions to be asked: To what extent does having two Jewish parents, rather than one, and an extended Jewish family, affect Jewish feelings in children? To what extent does having a Jewish spouse, *per se*, increase the likelihood that a previously uninvolved Jewish adult will intensify his or her Jewish involvement or that of their children? To what extent does the feeling and transmission of *dos pintele yid*—the Jewish spark—decline in the context of intermarriage? The answers are not at hand. But it seems safe to assume that intermarriage is both a cause and an effect of assimilation, and part of a much wider phenomenon. While it would be a mistake to ignore its dangers, it is equally wrong to try to deal with it apart from the broad context in which it occurs.

\* \* \*

The policy responses to this study must, of course, evolve from broad discussion within and among all segments of the Jewish community. But certain implications appear self-evident.

Since intermarriage is likely to increase, rather than decrease, in the foreseeable future, the greatest counterbalance to the assimilationist thrust of such marriages, in the short run, would seem to be an increase in the conversion rate among born-Gentile spouses. Since the study suggests that more such spouses may be open to conversion than is generally assumed, and that a failure to convert before marriage does not necessarily close the door to such a move later, the Jewish community would do well to examine what steps it can take to encourage such moves.

However, since the majority of born-Gentile spouses are not likely to convert to Judaism, the development of a constructive response to mixed marriages must be high on the Jewish communal agenda. For though the study reveals little Jewish content in mixed marriages, it points to apathy, ignorance and confusion, rather than rejection or hostility. The Jewish community should provide the positive experiences and increased exposures that may lead to greater involvement.

The findings all seem to suggest the need for formal and informal programs of outreach to the intermarried by communal organizations and the Jewish community as a whole. They also suggest that the most important focus of such outreach must be education, directed not solely to the Jewish spouse, but to the couple and to their children. The goal should be to enable both Jewish *and* non-Jewish spouses to learn more about the Jewish religious and cultural tradition, and to help them to make their family life and the education of their children more Jewish-oriented.

Obviously, the spirit in which outreach is conducted is as important as its content. Our attitude toward the intermarried should be that of welcome, not only because they are our children, or because communal etiquette requires it, but because their Jewish feelings and connections are of value and importance to us.

Nor is the urgency of adult Jewish education and communal outreach limited to the intermarried. If it is important to encourage more conversions to Judaism among the intermarried, it is even more important for many who were born Jewish to experience a learning similar to conversion.

There is a crying need to strengthen Jewish experience and identity among American Jews, from early childhood on, and to continue those ties in both endogamous *and* exogamous marriage. In the long run, this is the only way to assure Jewish continuity and to provide for a meaningful Jewish future.