

**KOSHER AND CHRISTMAS TREE:
ON MARRIAGES BETWEEN JEWS AND NON-JEWS IN SWEDEN,
FINLAND AND NORWAY**

Lars Dencik¹

Roskilde University, Denmark

1. Background

A questionnaire entitled "Questions about Jewish Life" was sent to the affiliated members of the Jewish communities in Sweden, Finland, and Norway. They were asked to fill it out and return it by mail to the central office of the communities. Respondents were granted full anonymity; however, they were asked to indicate some personal data such as gender, age, number of children, degree of education, political preferences, and so forth.

The questionnaire was comprised of 72 questions, most of them with several sub-questions. It also included a section of 13-22 questions addressing local conditions in each of the respective communities.² The questions related to issues such as Jewish identity, degree of observance of Jewish traditions and practices. It also surveyed their attitudes surrounding the position of women in Jewish life, inter-marriage, Israel, and a number of other topics of concern to Jews in the Diaspora.

A "Jewish community" in this context is an organization in which any Jew (according to halachic rules) can become a member. A few years ago the Stockholm Jewish community—but so far no other Jewish community in the Nordic

¹ Sociologist Karl Marosi, Copenhagen, has assisted computing the data presented in this article.

² The questionnaire has been developed in collaboration between me, Professor Sigvard Rubenowits (then chairman of the Jewish community of Gothenburgh) and sociologist Karl Marosi in Copenhagen and is based on a questionnaire initially used by the Institute of Jewish Policy Research in London.

(Scandinavian) countries—changed its admittance rules so that children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers could also become members. Membership is wholly voluntary and implies paying an income-related fee (“tax”) to the Jewish Community. The Jewish communities in the countries surveyed organize synagogal, educational, social and cultural services for their members. It is estimated that between one-third and one-half of the Jews living in Sweden, Finland and Norway are affiliated members of a Jewish community.

All of the Jewish communities investigated claim to be an “Einheitsgemeinde,” or municipality. The dominant religious orientations, however, vary from community to community. Stockholm, by far the largest of the Scandinavian Jewish communities, is predominantly Conservative (Mazorti), whereas the Helsinki and Oslo Jewish communities claim to be Orthodox, as do the small communities of Malmoe and Turku. The Gothenburg Jewish community can best be described as Liberal Orthodox.

During the summer and fall of 1999, the questionnaire was sent to the adult tax-paying members of the Swedish Jewish communities in Gothenburg (1193 questionnaires) and Stockholm (3978 questionnaires). The Malmoe community (820 questionnaires) was surveyed in the fall of 2001. Out of these questionnaires, approximately 45% were filled out and returned.³

In Finland, the 898 registered members of the Jewish community of Helsinki and the small community of Turku (100 members) were asked to fill out the questionnaire in February 2001, and 51% did so.

³ Some of the main results are reported in Dencik, L. "Jewishness in Postmodernity: the case of Sweden" in Gitelman, Z., Kosmin, B., Kovacs, A. (eds.): *New Jewish Identities: Contemporary Europe and Beyond*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2003.

In the fall of 2002, 603 questionnaires reached the members of the *Det Mosaiske Trossamfund* (The society of believers in the Mosaic faith⁴), the Jewish community of Oslo, Norway. 306 filled in questionnaires, representing approximately 51% of the respondents.

There are no indications that the answers recorded are biased in relation to the total memberships of the respective Jewish communities.

The data presented here, however, do not cover the Jews in the investigated countries that are not registered as members of their respective Jewish communities. These persons constitute the majority of Scandinavian Jews, particularly if extra-halachic criteria are adopted.

2. Marriage patterns

The questionnaire asks respondents about their civil status: whether they are single, married, divorced, widowed, or living in unmarried cohabitation (Q.69). There are no significant differences between the countries with respect to civil status. In Sweden, 57% of the respondents are married and 8% are cohabiting. In Finland, the corresponding figures are 54% and 12%, and in Norway 57% and 7% respectively. Approximately two-thirds of the members of the Jewish communities in the investigated Scandinavian countries are married or in marriage-like relationships. Between 8% and 10% of the respondents in each of the countries are divorced and an additional 3% have established a new relationship post-divorce. Around 13% are single, having never been married, and 10-11% are widows or widowers. The ensuing discussion does not distinguish between those formally married and those cohabiting with a partner,⁵ but lumps them together under the heading "married".

⁴ The very small Jewish community in provincial Trondheim is not included in the study.

⁵ In actual fact, whether one is formally married or cohabiting as an unmarried couple nowadays, especially in Sweden and to some less extent in Norway, has only marginal impact on their legal status

Married respondents were asked whether their partner is Jewish or not, and, if Jewish, whether he/she is so by birth or by conversion (Q.70). With respect to this question, there are considerable differences between the three countries. Out of those members of the Jewish communities that are married in Sweden, 31% live with a non-Jewish partner; in Finland, 51% of the married respondents live with a non-Jewish partner; and in Norway, the corresponding figure is 43%.

The composition of the category "Jewish partner" also differs between the countries: 63% of the married members of the Jewish communities in Sweden are married to a partner that is "Jewish by birth" and an additional 5% are "Jewish by conversion". In Finland the corresponding figures are 35% and 14%, and in Norway, 43% and 14% respectively.

A major factor explaining the differences in Jewish marriage patterns as observed above is the size of the Jewish communities in the respective countries. According to an estimate by Sergio Della Pergola, a demographer at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the number of Jews living in the Scandinavian countries in the year 2000 was as follows (Table 1):

Table 1: Number of Jews living in the Scandinavian countries today.⁶

Denmark	6400-8000	≈	1,2 per thousand of the population	
Finland	1100-1500	≈	0,2	- " -
Norway	1200-1500	≈	0,3	- " -
Sweden	15000-19000	≈	1,7	- " -

and social standing as well as on the civil rights of the children, for instance with respect to their rights to inherit their parents.

⁶ The variation in figures for each country depends on the adaptation of different criteria. The lower figure refers to the "core" group (Persons born by Jewish parents and observing some Jewish practices) and the larger figure to an estimate of an "enlarged" group of Jews, including children of non-Jewish mothers but Jewish fathers in each of the countries.

The likelihood of meeting a Jewish partner is, of course, higher in a country with a larger Jewish population. The situation in Finland and Norway demonstrates that the reverse holds as well: The lower the likelihood of meeting a suitable Jewish partner, the higher one's propensity to engage with a non-Jewish partner.

3. Attitudes toward intermarriage

Question 41 surveys the attitudes surrounding the issue of intermarriage, asking whether respondents agree with the general assumption that “A Jew should marry a Jew” (Table 2). There is a remarkable correspondence between the countries with respect to this issue. In all three countries, a slight majority of the respondents agree with the proposition that a Jew should marry a Jew.

The proportion of respondents who disagree with this statement differs between countries: on the whole, around one-third of the respondents fall under this heading. However, in Finland, those who disagree to the proposition that a Jew should marry a Jew amount to 39.1% of the sample, while in Norway, only 26.9% disagree. Sweden's Jews in this category fall statistically in between their neighbors to the east and the west.

Table 2: Attitudes among Swedish, Finnish, and Norwegian Jews to the proposition that "A Jew should marry a Jew"

In percent

	Country			
	<i>Sweden</i>	<i>Finland</i>	<i>Norway</i>	Total
Agree completely	20,6	20,7	18,3	20,4
Agree by and large	30,0	29,2	31,9	30,0
Neither – or	19,2	11,2	22,9	17,1

Disagree in part	12,4	24,5	11,8	14,1
Disagree completely	17,8	14,4	15,1	17,1

Generally, the affiliated Jews in the Nordic countries thus support the idea that intermarriage should be avoided on a societal level. When asked about the same issue but with a personal nuance, the respondents answered differently. One of the questions asked affiliated members of the Jewish community, regardless of civil status and of the religion of their partner, “*Could you, as a matter of principle, consider marriage to a non-Jew?*” (Q. 3). Their answers are shown in Table 3.

In all countries the majority of affiliated members of the Jewish communities could, as a matter of principle, consider marrying a non-Jew (although most of them are in actual fact already married; and most of them, except for in Finland, are married to a Jewish partner). The differences in attitude between the three countries largely reflect the differences in factual conditions: Sweden, although the most religiously liberal of the three Jewish communities, has the largest group of individuals who reject the idea of marrying a non-Jew. Finland, being an Orthodox community but also comprising the smallest community (Turku) in the investigation has, by far, the smallest percentage of people who responded “No”. In this, the smallest and most remote Jewish population (both geographically and linguistically), there is scant potential in the Jewish marriage market. Making virtue out of necessity is likely the operative principle underlying the Finnish Jews’ responses.

Table 3: Attitudes among Swedish, Finnish and Norwegian Jews to the prospect of oneself marrying a non-Jew: “Could you, as a matter of principle, consider marriage to a non-Jew?”

In percent

	Country			
	<i>Sweden</i>	<i>Finland</i>	<i>Norway</i>	Total
Yes	51,6	68,4	52,6	54,0
No	35,3	20,9	38,4	33,6
Don't know	13,1	10,7	8,9	12,4

Table 4 analyzes to what degree an individual’s marital status influences his or her stance on the question posed above, plotting the answers according to different categories of Jewish marital relationships—endogamous, exogamous, and converted-endogamous.

Table 4: Attitudes according to kind of marital relationship to the prospect of oneself marrying a non-Jew: “Could you, as a matter of principle, consider marriage to a non-Jew?”

In percent

Male respondents married to:			
	<i>Jew by birth</i>	<i>Jew by conversion</i>	<i>Non-Jew</i>
Yes	31	60	94
No	56	31	3
Don't know	13	9	3

Female respondents married to:			
	<i>Jew by birth</i>	<i>Jew by conversion</i>	<i>Non-Jew</i>
Yes	25	54	96
No	55	35	1
Don't know	20	11	3

There are clear differences among the three categories' attitudes toward the prospect of marrying a non-Jew. While virtually all of those who live with a non-Jew could also consider marriage to a non-Jew, less than one-third of those who are married to a partner who is Jewish by birth could, in principle, consider marrying a non-Jew. However, a majority of both men and women who have a spouse who has converted to Judaism would also consider marriage to a non-Jew. A curious detail in this context is the finding that 3% of the men and 1 % of the women who are actually living with a non-Jew report that they could *not* consider marriage to a non-Jew. In this question, there seems to be no remarkable differences between the sexes.

The hypothetical proposition of deciding for oneself “in principle” is quite different from approving or disapproving of one’s offspring’s decision to out-marry. Therefore, respondents are also asked to react to the following two propositions: “If I had a son who wanted to marry a non-Jew I would do all in my power to prevent that,” and “If I had a daughter who wanted to marry a non-Jew I would do all in my power to prevent that” (Q. 48 d. & e.). While these two statements may seem nearly identical, their halachic implications necessitate two different questions. If a daughter marries a non-Jew, her children are still Jewish according to *halacha*, while the offspring of an out-marrying son are not Jewish unless they convert.

The response patterns, however, show practically no difference at all with respect to the out-marriage of sons versus daughters. The only very slight tendency that can be noted is in Finland where a few more agree to the proposition that they would do all in their power to prevent a daughter and not a son from marrying a non-Jew. Suffice it, therefore, to present the results for the question of a daughter marrying a non-Jew (Table 5).

It is noteworthy that only a minority of affiliated members of the Jewish communities in all three Nordic countries would try to prevent their children from marrying a non-Jewish partner. It is also noteworthy that the largest proportion (26%) of potential ‘parental obstructers’ is found in liberal Sweden, with the relatively smallest proportion of intermarriage; whereas in Norway, with its small Orthodox community but larger proportion of actual intermarriages, a considerably smaller proportion of parents (15.3%) could imagine themselves fighting their child’s decision to out-marry. Again, these findings demonstrate the crucial role—more crucial, perhaps, than religious and ideological convictions—that the sheer size of a community plays in influencing the attitudes of actively involved Jews toward Jewish societal issues.

Table 5: Attitude among Swedish, Finnish and Norwegian Jews to the perspective of their daughter (son) marrying a non-Jew: "I would do all in my power to prevent it."

In percent

	Country			
	<i>Sweden</i>	<i>Finland</i>	<i>Norway</i>	Total
Agree completely	12,2	8,9	5,7	11,2
Agree by and large	13,9	14,6	9,6	13,6

Neither – or	16,5	16,2	24,1	17,1
Disagree in part	15,4	18,8	18,8	16,2
Disagree completely	42,0	41,4	41,8	41,9

4. "Jewish couples" vs. "Mixed marriages"

We divided our Jewish married respondents in each country according to gender and then into two categories according to the religion of their partner. The “Jewish couples” category is further subdivided into “partner born Jewish” and “converted to Judaism” (Table 6).

Table 6: Intermarriage patterns by gender and nationality.

in percent

Gender	in a Jewish couple		in a mixed marriage
	<i>partner born Jewish</i>		<i>converted to Judaism</i>
<i>Sweden</i>			
Women	66	2,5	31,5
Men	59	10	31
<i>Finland</i>			
Women	49	5	46
Men	22	23	55
<i>Norway</i>			
Women	47	7	47
Men	37,5	22,5	40



The data in Table 6 convey considerable differences in marital status based on nationality, gender, and finally, the interaction between the two variables. In Sweden, for reasons already indicated, a much larger proportion of the Jewish community than in Finland and Norway is married to a partner who is also Jewish. In Finland and Norway, as compared to Sweden, a relatively larger proportion of Jewish partners were not born Jewish but have converted to Judaism. There are also marked differences in the marital patterns of men and women: in all three countries a sizably larger proportion of female members of the Jewish communities are married to a partner who was born Jewish. Particularly striking are the differences in all three countries with respect to living with a partner who has converted to Judaism. There is a far larger (three to four times) proportion of men whose wives have converted to Judaism than there are women whose husbands are converts.

The reasons for these differences have not been adequately analyzed, yet it seems justified to suppose that a patriarchal element persists in governing this pattern. It is either more attractive, important, or less of a problem for a non-Jewish woman to convert to Judaism and to share the religious orientation and lifestyle of her husband than it is for a non-Jewish man to convert to the religious orientation and lifestyle of his Jewish wife.

One question that arises is whether endogamous marriages influence a couple's tendency to have children. Most couples in the three countries have children; there are only small differences between the populations investigated. In Sweden, 75% of the respondents have children, whereas the corresponding figure in Finland and Norway is approximately 70%. Table 7 examines whether the number of couples

who have children is equally distributed throughout the three different categories of marital relationships discussed above.

More than nine out of ten, men and women living in a Jewish couple have children, and it seems to be of minor or no importance whether the partner is born Jewish or has converted to Judaism. In mixed marriages, however, the propensity to have a child is lower. Close to 25% of these relationships were childless at the time of this investigation.

Table 7: Number of couples having children according marital composition and gender of respondent

In percent:

Gender	Number who have children		
	in a Jewish couple	in a mixed marriage	
		<i>partner born Jewish</i>	<i>converted to Judaism</i>
Women	91	84 ⁷	76
Men	93	93	76

This study scrutinizes not only whether the couples are having children but also how they are raising them with regard to certain crucial Jewish issues and traditions. For instance, we examine to what extent the different couples adhere to the Jewish commitment of male infant circumcision—a custom that is virtually non-existent among the Christian majority population in the Scandinavian countries. Circumcision is a powerful and irreversible identity marker. Across Scandinavia, it is

⁷ This figure should be interpreted with care. It is based on a total number of only 37 couples of Jewish women living with partner who has converted to Judaism - as we have been able to notice above, it is quite unusual that a male non-Jewish partner converts to Judaism.

also publicly denounced as primitive, cruel, inhumane, barbaric, and a violation of the rights of the child.

In the following table we disregard the variations between the countries studied and collapse the data to represent a general picture of conditions in the Scandinavian (Nordic) countries⁸.

Table 8: Proportion of circumcised boys in differently composed couples

In percent

Kind of partner			
	Jew by birth	Jew by conversion	Non-Jewish
<i>son is circumcised</i>	94,0	97,9	73,4
Men			
<i>son not circumcised</i>	6,0	2,1	26,6
<i>son is circumcised</i>	93,8	92,0	63,9
Women			
<i>son not circumcised</i>	6,2	8,0	36,1

Among the Jewish couples, the commandment of having one's son circumcised is highly observed, while it is considerably less so among the mixed couples. Most amazing, however, is the fact that in mixed couples, regardless of whether the male or female parent is non-Jewish, the degree of observance of the Jewish *mitzvah* is notably higher than the theoretically anticipated 50%. In relationships wherein the male party is Jewish, close to three out of four non-Jewish wives accept that this basic

Jewish *mitzvah* is carried out. The figure is slightly lower if it is the mother who is Jewish, but close to two-thirds of the non-Jewish (i.e. = uncircumcised) fathers do not prevent their sons from being circumcised.

Circumcision is practiced not only among the Jewish couples but also to a considerable extent among couples in which only one of the parents is Jewish.⁹ One might conclude that, in mixed marriages, the Jewish identity markers tend to penetrate the relationship so deeply that even halachically non-Jewish children become physically marked with a symbolic Jewish identity.

Another observation is that, whereas a son of a Jewish mother by definition is Jewish, more sons of Jewish fathers (whose children can only become Jewish by conversion) are circumcised. The highest degree of observance of the *mitzvah* of circumcision is found in couples wherein the female party has converted to Judaism, whereas the lowest degree of observance takes place in couples where the father is a non-Jew. On this level it seems that the paternal model has a decisive impact: in Jewish couples composed of one converted part, the observance of the *mitzvah* is higher if the father is a born Jew (and thus, circumcised).

A possible conclusion drawn from these data is that the male model of the father has the most decisive impact on the question of circumcision. In other words, the general rule seems to be, “Like the father, so the son.”

In terms of adherence to other Jewish observances, such as the commandments to light Shabbat candles and to follow the dietary laws of *kasruth*, the proportions vary among the different marital models (Tables 9, 10).

⁸ It should be noted that Denmark is not included here. The Jewish Community of Denmark (= *Mosaisk Troessamfund* in Copenhagen) has rejected the offer to have the investigation carried out also with its members.

⁹ Again it should be noted that the circumcision of boys is a highly deviating practice in the Nordic (Scandinavian) countries.

The lighting of Shabbat candles is quite a widespread custom. More than 80% of those respondents living with a Jewish partner do so at least sometimes. Interestingly, those who share their life with a partner who has converted to Judaism are even more observant of this *mitzvah* than are those who live with a partner who is a Jew by birth. The tendency to be more observant if the partner is a convert holds also with respect to keeping a kosher home. The *mitzvah* of *kashruth*, however, is far less observed in the Nordic Scandinavian countries—where it takes a real effort to obtain kosher food¹⁰—than is the custom of lighting Shabbat candles.

Table 9: Do you light Shabbat candles in your home?

In percent

Male respondent married to:			
	<i>Jew by birth</i>	<i>Jew by conversion</i>	<i>Non-Jew</i>
Yes, every Friday evening	42	50	11
Sometimes	40	41	35
No, never	17	10	55
Female respondent married to:			
	<i>Jew by birth</i>	<i>Jew by conversion</i>	<i>Non-Jew</i>
Yes, every Friday evening	43	62	16
Sometimes	42	24	41
No, never	15	14	44

The main divergence in the results of Tables 9 and 10 relates to the degree of observance of Jewish practices between the Jews living in Jewish couples compared

¹⁰ *Shehita* is prohibited both in Sweden and Norway. The fact that there live so few Jews in these countries also makes the distribution of imported kosher food very difficult. At best there is one tiny shop, usually in the community centre.

to those in mixed marriages. Out-married members of the Jewish communities, regardless of whether they are male or female, generally observe Jewish customs and *mitzvot* to a far lesser extent than do those in endogamous relationships. Amazingly, as many as 46% of the men married to a non-Jewish woman at least sometimes light Shabbat candles—a habit traditionally carried out by the wife—and 17% of these men at least keep a partly kosher home.

Table 10: Do you keep kosher at home?

In percent

Male respondent married to:			
	<i>Jew by birth</i>	<i>Jew by conversion</i>	<i>Non-Jew</i>
Yes	27	28	4
Partly	19	28	13
No	54	44	83
Female respondent married to:			
	<i>Jew by birth</i>	<i>Jew by conversion</i>	<i>Non-Jew</i>
Yes	25	38	4
Partly	21	19	18
No	54	43	78

5. Weinuka

Jewish life in Scandinavia is of course embedded in the culture and customs of the surrounding, dominantly Christian (albeit “secular Christian”), society. One of the strong and very popular traditions in these societies is the celebration of Christmas. This survey asks to what extent the culture of Christmas penetrates Jewish homes: for example, having a Christmas tree or giving Christmas gifts. The investigation found

that only 4% of the Jewish homes where both spouses are a Jewish by birth have a Christmas tree. However, there is a Christmas tree in 11% of the homes wherein the male partner is a Jew by conversion, whereas this is the case in only proportionally half as many homes where the converted party is female. It would seem that the paternalistic pattern referred to above repeats itself also with respect to Christmas trees. Interestingly enough this doesn't hold for those homes where one of the partners is a non-Jew: 38% of the homes where the male partner is not Jewish have a Christmas tree, compared to 48% of the homes wherein the female partner is a non-Jew.

The custom of giving Christmas gifts seems not to be gender sensitive. In about 72% of the mixed marriages, regardless of whether the male or female spouse is Jewish, one gives Christmas gifts. This custom also holds in approximately 25% of the households in which one of the partners has converted (slightly more if the wife is a convert), whereas Christmas gifts are given in less than 20% of the homes inhabited by a couple made up of two born Jews. Finally, there are families in which one lights both Shabbat candles and Christmas lights, or where the family both keeps kosher and has a Christmas tree.

Excerpt from the audio records of the roundtable

The study found that many Scandinavian Jews celebrate Chanukah, hold Passover Seders, circumcise their children, and hang *mezzuzot*, while not as many keep Shabbat or fast on Yom Kippur. A possible explanation for these findings is that the holidays of Chanukah, Purim, and Passover are national celebrations, wherein Jews commemorate and celebrate the persistence of Jewish peoplehood in the face of adversity and oppression. As a minority ethnic group, Scandinavian Jews can relate to these struggles. Shabbat and *kashruth*, on the other hand, are more private and

personal devotional rituals. The case of the *mezuzah* is interesting, as 80% of Scandinavian Jewish homes hang one on their doorpost. For those who can read the symbol, a *mezuzah* is a clear sign of a Jewish home. Non-Jewish neighbors, however, would most likely not notice this discreet symbol. The *mezuzah* is a sophisticated symbol that indicates to other members of the Jewish community that one is Jewish without alarming one's non-Jewish peers. The findings on the above areas of ritual observance support the overall observation that a majority of the Scandinavian Jews view their Jewishness as an ethnic identity rather than as a religion.

Concluding with the issue of intermarriage, the rising rates are indicative of a more general problem. Earlier, it was noted that very few people would try to prevent their child from out-marrying. Scandinavian Jews live in highly modern societies where individuality is a strong positive value, and hold paramount the idea that each individual should be able to choose for his or herself. This liberal idealistic orientation penetrates deeply into Jewish society. In terms of general values, the Jewish population in Scandinavia has, to a great extent, been an active bearer of modernity and of liberal open-mindedness.

Presently, one must understand the Scandinavian Jewish community as a kind of "Swedish smorgasbord" situation, where both Jewish and non-Jewish traditions and social customs are available to the population. In this "smorgasbord Judaism," a Jew is free to pick or reject what he wants, to mix according to her will, and to define one's own personal melange of postmodern Judaism. In this sociocultural context, it is not surprising that not only customs and ideals but also marriages end up mixing.