

Transformations in the Composition of American Jewish Households

Sylvia Barack Fishman

- *About half of recent marriages involving an American Jew are marriages between a Jew and a non-Jew. This means that about one-third of recently married American Jews have married non-Jews. Younger Jewish women's rates of intermarriage are almost identical to those of men.*
- *Proportions of singles in contemporary Jewish communities are now unprecedented. Among American Jews aged 25 to 34, more than one-third of women and more than one-half of men are not currently married. This situation is partly related to education.*
- *Delayed marriage and nonmarriage contribute to a low American Jewish fertility rate, well under replacement level (i.e., fewer than two children per Jewish family). The vast majority of Jewish women, however, still place great value on having children. Along with low fertility rates, the American Jewish population is aging.*
- *The high school years are very important for later patterns of behavior, including Jewish family formation. Community leaders, policy planners, and parents can enhance the likelihood that children will grow up to want to create their own Jewish households. Educational programs for teens are a top priority.*

Introduction: Diverse Reasons for Common Behaviors

Jewish societies around the world have certain commonalities, but also differ from each other in significant ways. Indeed, Jews who travel are often struck by attitudes, behaviors, and life circumstances among Jews in other countries that seem quite different from their own. This is true even when statistical "bottom lines" appear similar.

Thus, although demographer Sergio Della Pergola documents that rising rates of intermarriage are observable to varying extents in Jewish communities worldwide,¹ recent research shows that the reasons for intermarriage and the reactions to it can differ dramatically from place to place.² From a public policy standpoint, it is important to recognize and analyze these differences. Effective strategies for dealing with intermarriage must be responsive not only to the fact that it occurs, but even more so to the circumstances that generate it.

Endogamy and Exogamy Both Influenced by Wider Culture

This paper considers the specific contexts of contemporary intermarriage in the United States, and possible policy responses. As demonstrated by both the 1990 and 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Studies (NJPS), respectively conducted by the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF) and the United Jewish Communities (UJC), about half of recent marriages involving a Jew are marriages between a Jew and a non-Jew, which means that about one-third of recently married American Jews have married non-Jews.³

Although those concerned with Jewish cultural continuity often regard rising intermarriage rates as a specifically Jewish phenomenon, contemporary American Jewish attitudes, values, and behaviors clearly reveal the broader cultural influence. Partly because endogamy was a widespread cultural norm at mid-century, most affiliated American Jews within all the major wings of American Judaism assumed that their children would marry Jews. In the post-World War II years up to 1970, when the mixed-marriage rate was under 10 percent, the relatively limited number of Jews who married across religious-cultural lines were largely men, and substantial proportions of their non-Jewish wives converted to Judaism.

In contrast, American Jews today are intermarrying in a fluid cultural context characterized by porous boundaries. The majority of American Jews, like non-Jews in their socioeconomic and educational cohorts, regard intermarriage as part of the American lifestyle. American Jewish resistance to intermarriage has been replaced in recent years by the view that intermarriage is normative.

The great majority of American Jews believe that intermarriage is inevitable in an open society, and fewer than half actively oppose such marriages among their children, according to a study published in 2000 by the American Jewish Committee (AJC).⁴ When asked whether "it would pain me if my child married a gentile," only 39 percent of American Jews agreed, including 84 percent of Orthodox, 57 percent of Conservative, 27 percent of Reform, and 19 percent of "just Jewish" respondents. Of Jews who said that their Jewishness was "very important" to their lives, only 54 percent said their child's marriage to a non-Jew would be a source of pain.

Partly as a result of these and other shifting attitudinal norms, rates of conversion to Judaism have not risen proportionally along with intermarriage. Only one out of five non-Jews who marries a Jew converts, and many do not do so until long after the marriage.⁵ Younger Jewish women's rates of intermarriage are almost identical to those of men, and men in general are far less likely to convert into another religion than are women.

Delayed Marriage and Nonmarriage

Intermarriage, however, is far from the only metamorphosis in American Jewish households. American family life has changed in diverse ways, and so has Jewish family life. Sweeping transformations in the composition of Jewish households provide the societal context for marriage between Jews and non-Jews. One of the most dramatic changes is also one of the least discussed: delayed marriage and nonmarriage, particularly among well-educated middle and upper-middle class Americans, including American Jews. Jewish societies are often regarded as being exceptionally family oriented, encouraging men and women to marry early, stay married, and remarry in case of divorce or widowhood.

In historical Jewish communities, a congruence of religious values, economic necessities, and cultural and societal pressures made married adults and their families central, and marginalized the unmarried. Today, however, proportions of singles in contemporary Jewish communities have reached unprecedented levels. Delayed marriage, nonmarriage, and accompanying plummeting fertility rates affect not only unaffiliated Jews but also a broad swath of highly identified young American Jews across denominational groupings.

Among American Jews aged 25 to 34, more than one-third of women and more than one-half of men are not currently married. This situation is partly related to education: American Jews attend college almost universally, and disproportionately both men and women go on to graduate and professional schools.⁶ Although young adults who identify as Orthodox have earlier marriage patterns than those who describe themselves as Conservative, Reform, or unaffiliated, extended singleness is seen among significant portions of the Orthodox as well. This is in part because most American Orthodox Jews do not substantially differ from the educational patterns characteristic of other Jews in their socioeconomic age cohort.⁷

In past decades, this very pattern of higher education facilitated marriage: since Jews have overwhelmingly attended college, their proportions on the college campus far exceeded their proportions in the general population. The college years were exactly when most American Jews met their future spouses, because the concentration of single Jews in colleges, graduate, and professional schools is higher than in almost any other environment. Today, however, Jews, even more than non-Jews, report that they do not feel "ready" to become seriously involved when they are in college.

A culture of postponement has become widespread. Many American Jewish young adults, like others in their socioeconomic cohort, take a year or two off after college before beginning graduate or professional training. Subsequently, they establish their careers before becoming interested in permanent romantic commitments. Postponed marriage and nonmarriage of American Jews is related to this phenomenon as well, both a symbol and a symptom of the coalescence of American and Jewish values. Indeed, the fact that significant segments of even the Orthodox population remain unmarried until well into their thirties and forties is dramatic testimony to the phenomenon.

Current Low Fertility Rates

Delayed marriage and nonmarriage contribute to a low American Jewish fertility rate, well under replacement level (i.e., fewer than two children per Jewish family).⁸ Interestingly, the vast majority of Jewish women still place great value on having children. Jewish women are less likely than any other religious or ethnic group to state that they wish to remain childless.⁹ Nevertheless, higher education among Jewish women is statistically related to lower birthrates, probably via later marriage, as well as the desire to establish a career before beginning a family. Not least, Jewish men, in addition to the role that they play in late marriages, have a part in family decisions as well, and may resist the disruption of patterns that children bring. For all these reasons, Jewish couples are not having the children they wish to have partially because they are delaying the beginning of their family formation.

Patterns of family formation reflect changed social norms. Some single women choose to have biological children without male partners. Some gay or lesbian couples also choose to have biological children. These Jews can also face fertility challenges. Because fertility rates are so low, increasing numbers of couples and Jewish singles choose to adopt children, and much of that adoption is of children from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Many parents intend to convert these children to Judaism, and many - even among the non-Orthodox - want the children to be converted by an Orthodox *beit din* (rabbinical court) so that they will have Jewish marriage options when they grow up. However, partly because of pressures surrounding the intermarriage situation as discussed below, some Orthodox rabbinical courts in the United States are unwilling to convert children whose parents cannot promise they will be raised in strictly Orthodox fashion.¹⁰ Some observers estimate that about 15 percent of American Jews consider adoption, and the conversion of adoptees is extremely important to Jews who take this course.

Diverse Types of Jewish Families

In addition to the culture of postponement, American Jewish households today are increasingly affected by divorce: many Jewish divorcees join the singles population for a number of years. Others remarry and, if they have children, become part of blended families with complicated familial relationships. As we have noted, the American Jewish community also includes growing numbers of what are sometimes called "alternative" types of households, such as gay and lesbian households or single-parent households by choice. These do not represent large statistical populations, but their presence and prominence in Jewish communities is a symbol of change. Many American Jews in alternative households are very interested in making connections with the Jewish community, confounding stereotypes that alternativeness also means lack of interest in Jewish connections.

The dual-career household is probably the most pervasive transformation within American Jewish families. Most Jewish households with children under 18 include two working parents. In the United States - perhaps unlike some other countries - such households tend to be two-career, not just two-paycheck, families. The majority of women with children under age six work outside the home for pay, across denominational boundaries. For most of them, their work is part of a lifelong career plan.

In the modern Orthodox community in the United States, women are as likely to be involved in high-power careers as they are in Conservative, Reform, and secular households. Sociologists Moshe and Harriet Hartman, who compared American and Israeli levels of education and levels of career accomplishment, found that American Orthodox families were more likely than non-Orthodox American Jewish families to have occupational spousal parity: if the husband was a doctor, the wife was also a doctor or some profession of an equal status.¹¹ Thus, across the denominational spectrum, the two-career household has become the normative family with children in the United States.

Along with low fertility rates, the American Jewish population, like the Jewish populations of many Western countries, is aging. With enhanced-wellness approaches as well as medical responses to disease and aging, more Jewish households are composed of elderly couples and singles. Elderly households consist both of "young" old, active Jews and aging, less robust seniors who require family or community assistance.

Contemporary pluralism in Jewish family types has also brought more recognition of households that have special challenges. Although historical Jewish communities almost certainly included such households, societal emphasis was on the normative family, and there was less official recognition or response in previous eras than in American Jewish communities today. Households that have physical or emotional challenges, children with special needs and disabilities, spousal abuse, child abuse, and substance abuse have evoked programmatic responses, literature, publicity, special schools and programs, and a culturewide awareness that all Jewish families are not alike.

Intermarriage as Part of Pluralistic Culture

It is largely in this context of pluralistic models of contemporary Jewish families that intermarriage occurs in the United States. The same social fluidity that characterizes family life also characterizes American culture. Instead of the cultural hegemony of middle-class, Middle- American, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) culture that provided the dominant images and language for American culture until the late 1960s, Jewish images, language, and customs have become increasingly familiar to the American public and increasingly popular. Jews in many other countries report that their cultures have not been Judaized to the extent of American culture; in some cases, their

cultures are openly hostile to Jews and Judaism. The Judaization of the broader culture is arguably unique to the United States, and, even if not unique, marks a departure from many other situations that Jews have lived in and are living in today.

On one hand, this cultural fluidity has fostered overt expressions of Jewish culture in American environments. These expressions range from high to low and popular culture. For example, most universities offer some sort of Jewish studies; many have Jewish-studies departments or programs. Radio and television announcers, who once were schooled to be as "Middle American" as possible in their pronunciation and word choice, now routinely use Yiddish and Hebrew words as part of their cultural toolkit.

It is, indeed, commonplace for non-Jewish American newscasters to use words like "chutzpah," "schlep," and "tushy," and to respond to an announcement that two movie stars have gotten engaged or married by exclaiming "mazel tov." For several December seasons Jews and non-Jews alike have sung along with entertainer Adam Sandler, who performed his Chanukah song to a sold-out audience of mostly non-Jews for an HBO special broadcast: "it's time to celebrate Chanukah, take out your harmonica, drink your gin and tonica...."¹² The Chanukah song is played frequently on pop music stations.

National Public Television and Radio both use Jewish programs to raise money from a very broad population, such as violinist Yitzhak Perlman playing klezmer music in the streets of Warsaw. These programs are played repeatedly for a general U.S. population that is only 2.5 percent Jewish.

The United States was much different in the 1940s, 1950s, and even the early 1960s, when ethnic and religious groups were still in the "melting pot" mode and playing down their distinctiveness. This author recalls that when growing up in Middle America in Sheboygan, Wisconsin in the 1950s, no one played klezmer music at their wedding - not even most religious Jews, since it was not popular among the general population. Now that non-Jews like klezmer music, Jews like it too.

Coalescence of Values and Behaviors Even in Orthodox America

On the other hand, American Jews have incorporated much of American values into their notion of Judaism. This concerns not only their daily lives and values, but also their idea of what Judaism is. This coalescence of Jewish and American values characterizes the whole American Jewish denominational spectrum.

For example, Kirias Joel is an enclave of rebellious young Satmar Hasidim in the Monroe-Woodbury district of rural New York. *The New York Times* sent a reporter who wanted to know how such a traditionalist group could stage a rebellion against rabbinical authority. A young Hasid ungrammatically but poignantly said, "It is our democratic right to freely express ourselves."¹³

This indicates the extent to which in the United States - even in the ultra-Orthodox community - American values have been incorporated into the Jewish ethos.

Jews Are Attractive to Non-Jews

Feminism has also played an important role in the transformation of American Jewish family life and religious environments. It is not at all unusual, for example, for Orthodox women to attend early-morning *minyanim* (prayer quorums) for *kaddish* (the prayer of mourning) daily in the United States during their year of mourning, which they take on as a serious obligation. Women say *kaddish*, and male worshippers answer them, indicating a shifting communal norm. Similarly, the *bat mitzvah* celebration is ubiquitous in American Jewish communities, including the Orthodox. American feminism is part of American Judaism.

As America has become more Judaized and as American Jews have become more Americanized, not only Jews have changed but America as well. These changes have social as well as cultural implications. Intermarriage has risen not only because Jews want to marry non-Jews but also because non-Jews want to marry Jews. One striking example is that non-Jews subscribe to JDate, a Jewish online dating service, because they want to meet Jews to date and, hopefully, marry. A woman named Kristen Grish recently published a book called *Boy Vey: The Shiksa's Guide to Dating Jewish Men*. Jews of the opposite gender have a very good reputation among non-Jews.

Among Jews, however, Jews of the opposite gender do not necessarily have such a good reputation. Stereotypes of Jewish women, especially, are very negative: Jewish mothers are portrayed as overbearing and controlling, much like the "Polish" mother in Israeli culture; Jewish daughters are viewed as spoiled and demanding. In this author's research interviews, one of the most frequent themes was that Jews would describe Jews of the other gender in very pejorative terms.

In contrast, non-Jewish men mention the same characteristics when describing Jewish women, but in flattering terms. For example, whereas Jewish men describe Jewish women as "aggressive," "overly talkative," and "domineering," non-Jewish men say Jewish women are "vivacious" and "articulate."

Thus, while once it was predominantly Jewish men who married non-Jewish women, currently there is almost no gender gap. This author's interviews indicate that part of the explanation is that Jewish women - who generally prefer to marry Jewish men - get tired of waiting for a Jewish man who likes them as they are.

Children of Intermarriage Usually Also Intermarry

Even in a situation of intense fluidity, however, all segments of the community are not equally affected by intermarriage trends. Among American Jews aged 25 to 49, 22 percent of those who grew up with two Jewish parents are intermarried. Among those who grew up with one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent, 75 percent are intermarried.¹⁴ Thus, the widely discussed intermarriage rate of about 50 percent reflects two different populations with dramatically disparate rates. Young Jews with two Jewish parents are less than one-third as likely to marry a non-Jew as are those from intermarried. It is important to heed this difference in the face of cultural resistance to advocacy for endogamy. For example, a Jewish Outreach to the Intermarried (JOI) pamphlet written by Jewish communal leader David Sacks asserts that intermarriage is a phenomenon as fixed and inevitable as the "cycles of the sun and the tides."¹⁵ Research shows, however, that intermarriage is not random, and it is possible to enhance the possibility that a person will grow up to want to create a Jewish home by marrying another Jew.

One of the surprising discoveries from the abovementioned research interviews is that many Jewish singles have an attitudinal incongruence regarding the desire to have Jewish children and the need to marry another Jew. Most American Jewish singles say they would prefer to have Jewish children, but do not see a connection between this and marrying a Jewish person. Young American Jewish women, especially, often say, "I can have a Jewish child on my own. I don't need a man to create and raise a Jewish child."

Part of the reason is not only a lack of understanding about marriage, but also the individualism that is so pronounced in the United States. It is difficult for Americans, including American Jews, to accept the idea of dependence on another. This is closely connected to the abovementioned trend of extended singlehood. It is hard for many American Jews to consider making a permanent "purchase" - and they do think about marriage in that way. They have "lists" of characteristics they are looking for, and human relationships are commodified.

This phenomenon pervades singles life across the denominational spectrum, including, though to a somewhat lesser extent, the Orthodox. The West Side of Manhattan is now home to many Orthodox singles. They too have lists, which also include religious criteria.

American Culture Accepts Jews and Promotes Intermarriage

There is no positive reward today in the United States for escaping one's Jewishness. Formerly, being primarily associated with the non-Jewish community, including sometimes having a non-Jewish spouse, could promote one's career. Currently, the parents of young Jews who marry non-Jews do not have ambivalent feelings about being Jewish, but, rather, about advocating for an endogamous family. This ambivalence about encouraging a completely Jewish home - from not dating non-Jews

to not marrying them - is attributable to the prevailing ethos of multiculturalism. Most Jewish parents are uncomfortable saying, "I only want you to date Jews" because they are afraid it will sound like racism.

The general U.S. culture not only opposes manifestations of "racism," but actually advocates intermarriage. Over the past two decades, interfaith families and dual religious observances are frequently presented as a cultural ideal in television programming for children as well as adults. The media promote mixed marriage, and religious syncretism in mixed-married households. Popular television series' Christmas episodes present the inclusion of two religious traditions as tantamount to spousal generosity.

In one episode of *Thirtysomething*, for example, a Jewish husband and his Christian wife perform acts of religious generosity that echo O'Henry's story "The Gift of the Magi." At the end of the episode, to the background of "Silent Night, Holy Night," the Jewish husband, who had previously resisted Christmas symbols in his home, drags a Christmas tree home through the snow for his wife. He finds his beautiful non-Jewish wife in their warm and cozy home polishing a menorah for him.

Thus, Jew and non-Jew are united in marital loving kindness in the celebration of each other's religious traditions. They are both willing to give up something important out of love for the other. Here, there is a strong didactic agenda: an interfaith household is actually better than a single-faith one because it fosters empathy.

What is perhaps more striking is the extent to which the interfaith family as cultural ideal has been incorporated as a didactic element into children's programming. One Nickelodeon program for children, *As Told by Ginger* (2 December 2002), is particularly revealing. Ginger, the protagonist, discovers that she has Jewish as well as Christian ancestry. She is confused about how to honor her Jewish antecedents. At first, she refuses to participate in any Christmas festivities, because she wishes "to be fair to my Jewish heritage." However, she then feels she is not being "fair to my Christian heritage."

In the end, Ginger decides to include both Jewish and Christian symbols in her December life. Surrounded by colorful accoutrements such as a Christmas tree, hanging stockings, and a menorah, Ginger, her mother, and her friends joyfully celebrate her "evenhanded" solution to her double religious heritage. The episode is entitled, "Even Steven." Religious syncretism is presented as appropriate behavior in Jewish-Christian households, not only a symbol of American empathy and religious tolerance, but also a normalized cultural ideal.

Three Keys to Jewishness: Parents, Peer Group, and Jewish Education

American Jewish parents, then, find it difficult to say to their children, "I really care that you should be Jewish because..." When saying to a teenager: "I don't want you to date a non-Jew. I only want you to date a Jew," one must be prepared to add, "It matters to be Jewish because..." Many American Jewish parents, however, say that they have no desire to cast off their own Jewishness, but do not know why it matters to them. And because they are uncomfortable or confused about articulating it, they often do not. This author's interviews revealed, strikingly, that nearly two-thirds of the Jews who had married other Jews said their parents had spoken to them about interdating and intermarriage while they were growing up, and that there had been rules about dating in the household. In contrast, nearly two-thirds of the Jews who married non-Jews said their parents had never openly objected to interdating while they were living at home. They had not spoken to them about marrying a Jew. Today, it is not in college that young Jews start dating non-Jews; most American Jews who end up marrying non-Jews started dating non-Jews while they were still in high school living under their parents' supervision.

The high school years are critically important for later behavior patterns, including Jewish-family formation. The 2000-2001 NJPS revealed that high school peer group has a powerful correlation with whom one ends up marrying. There are three factors in the high school years that can greatly enhance the possibility that children will grow up to marry Jews: parents, peer group, and pedagogy.

- *Parents.* It matters to have Jewish observances on a regular basis in the home. It does not have to be Orthodox observance. American Jews who grow up in strongly identified Reform or Conservative households where there is regular observance of Shabbat and Jewish holidays end up strongly identified as adults and want to recreate such a Jewish home. Rich Jewish home life even has an impact where there is intermarriage. Where there was regular observance in the parental home, when a child marries a non-Jew this spouse is more likely to convert to Judaism. Even if there is not a conversion, the Jewish spouse is more likely to want to create a Jewish ambience for the children.
- *Peer group.* Jewish teens who have mostly Jewish friendship networks in high school tend to replicate that pattern in college. They have a much greater likelihood of dating Jews and eventually marrying one.

Interestingly, this is also true of the non-Jews who marry Jews. These non-Jews tend to have many Jewish friends in high school, not necessarily because there are a lot of them, but because they are drawn to Jews and Judaism. For most of them, the person they marry is not the first Jew they become close to.

In the abovementioned interviews, non-Jews made revealing statements regarding what they like about Jews. They mentioned discovering with delight that Jewish families argue about politics and ideas at the table. Jews, conversely, may find it appealing to be with a group in which people do not interrupt each other.

- *Pedagogy.* Formal Jewish education is the third element in this triad. Jewish education that continues through the teen years dramatically affects the likelihood of marrying a Jew and creating a Jewish home. Each year of formal Jewish education after age 13 has more of an impact than the previous year, so that keeping Jewish teens in some kind of Jewish schooling through twelfth grade has a great impact.

Even supplementary school has an impact, and it may be because it affects the peer group. Most American Jews no longer live in densely Jewish neighborhoods. If the teens, however, go to a Jewish supplementary high school that brings them together, say, on Sunday mornings or Tuesday nights, they have enough Jewish friends that some can be considered "cool."

The "coolness" aspect is very important. If the only cool people a teenager knows are not Jewish, then coolness becomes a non-Jewish attribute. But if he or she is friendly with enough Jews so that some of them are cool, then it eventually becomes possible to meet and marry a cool Jew.

These three important factors give much reason for hope. They are things one can do something about; intermarriage is not inevitable. To be sure, when raising children there are no guarantees. However, community leaders and policy planners as well as parents can enhance the likelihood that children will grow up to want to create their own Jewish households.

A Top Priority: Creating Educational Programs for Teens

What can the Jewish community as a whole do? One important policy decision would be to place priority on creating supplementary high school programs in every community. In many communities there is only a choice between an Orthodox day school and high school, or nothing. Most parents, however, will not send their teenagers to Orthodox schools if not Orthodox themselves, so the lack of other alternatives means teenagers do not continue with Jewish schooling.

But if a community is large enough, it is possible to have a community high school, or a Conservative or Reform one. If, though, it is not large enough, a supplementary high school enables Jewish teens to know each other. In Boston, which also has several day school options for teenagers, the Prozdor supplementary school program has gone from 150 students to over a thousand.

Parents need to be less afraid of their homes being "too Jewish," and also need to learn how to articulate why being Jewish matters to them. Many parents have asked this author to request that their synagogues and Jewish community centers create workshops for parents to talk about their commitments to Jews and Judaism - that is, to help them learn to express their Jewish values.

Finally, Jewish communities need to appreciate the role of peer groups. It is important to create venues for Jewish teens to spend time together.

There is much that is positive, indeed a renaissance, in Jewish life in the United States. While only affecting a segment of the population, it facilitates creating programs. Through its proactive responses - or lack of them - the American Jewish community itself can have an impact on dynamic positive developments in the American Jewish population or, on the other hand, on stagnation and possible shrinkage. Much depends on whether the community can find the communal will to take those actions that can enhance the future of American Jewish households.

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Notes

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7304

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