

RESISTANCE TO ASSIMILATION: NORTH AMERICAN
JEWISH OPPOSITION TO INTERMARRIAGE

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The marital assimilation of its members into North American society is an issue determining continued ethnic group survival (Gordon, 1964, p.124). The Jews of North America, never representing more than 3% of the population, have historically been resistant to intermarriage (Lazerwitz, 1978). During the past 20 years, however, their once fairly low rate of marrying out has undergone substantial change. From a low of 2%-3% before World War II and a plateau of 6%-7% from the 1940's until about 1960, the rate of intermarriage by Jews in the period from 1966-72 has been estimated to be from 14% to 32% (Massarik and Chenkin, 1973; Lazerwitz, 1980).

Part of the explanation for increased intermarriage among Jews can be associated with a change in the assimilative climate of North America. Jews, who in previous years had to adjust to exclusion from jobs and neighborhoods (Goldberg, 1970), are now finding a decline in anti-semitism (Stember, 1966, p.107; Erskine, 1966, p.651) and only some latent forms of such discrimination (Selznick and Steinberg, 1969; Glock and Stark, 1966). This decline in negative feelings has included a greater readiness to consider marriage to Jews (Stember, 1966, p.107). And, opportunities for such liaisons have increased as Jews leave confined social settings and seek out the more cosmopolitan atmospheres of mixed communities (Ringer, 1967).

North American Jews, also, have been influenced by growing up in the North American environment. Many have accepted the American ethos that a spouse is selected on the basis of egalitarian, universalistic principles (Schwartz, 1974). Romantic love is the justification given for crossing ethnic boundaries in the choice of a marriage partner. Parents defend their opposition to children marrying outside the ethnic group on the basis of the assumed instability of such marriages; they have not been able to raise issues concerning group survival (Sklare and Greenblum, 1967). Unfortunately for these parents, claims of marital problems among intermarried couples have proven to be largely fallacious, as many of these marriages turn out to be as happy as can be expected by American norms (Sherrow, 1971; Sklare, 1964).

Group barriers to intermarriage have thus declined under these dual forces of acceptance by others and receptiveness to more general North American values. Marrying out does not represent a major crisis for a

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family, nor does it incur the negative sanctioning of friends. Inter-marriage has become a private affair. Jewish families have even begun to place marrying out into the framework of their ethnic identity by insisting on a Jewish marriage ceremony for the intermarrying child (Sklare, 1970, p.56) and synagogue readily accept as members Jews who have married non-Jews (Gordon, 1959).

Within this general framework of increasing acceptance of inter-marriage, many Jews still remain resistant to the general assimilationist trend and firmly oppose the idea of intermarriage. Depending on the community studied and the phrasing of the question, studies have found that from 29% to 67% of respondents strongly disapprove of inter-marriage in their families (Schwartz, 1974); some 50% in a U.S. National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) (Massarik and Chenkin, 1973) disagreed with the statement that it is "all right for Jews to marry non-Jews." This paper will examine the factors which account for this resistance to the conceded strength of the melting-pot, assimilationist forces in North American society.

Method

A survey of attitudes toward Judaism and Israel was conducted among North American Jews in 1978/79 (The Jewish Attitude Survey). Jewish Agency representatives in eight regions of North America assisted in the study by obtaining responses from 167 individuals who were in contact with their offices. Another 248 replies were obtained through the aid of personal contacts in the same areas. In total, 415 questionnaires were returned from four communities in Canada and fourteen in the United States. This included all the major concentrations of Jewish population and several small, relatively isolated, Jewish communities.

Since this study is intended to be analytical (see Hyman, 1955) -- or inferential -- the non-probability sampling procedure still provides adequate variance on key variables to allow measuring the impact of different factors on the opposition to intermarriage. The extent to which this sample varies from the national Jewish population can be determined by comparing key background variables with the U.S. NJPS sample of 1970 (Massarik and Chenkin, 1973; Lazerwitz and Harrison, 1979). These comparisons are shown in Table 1.

Compared with the U.S. National Jewish Population Survey, the sample is weighted toward those of a younger age, which bias contributed to a higher proportion of college graduates and a lower incidence of foreign born. Declared synagogue affiliation showed fewer belonging to the Reform Movement (Liberal) and more electing the "no preference" category; nevertheless, the sample seems to be more religious, as the proportion of those keeping a "kosher home" i.e., observing the Jewish dietary laws, is higher. There is also an over-representation

of those who have visited Israel. The sampling bias might be viewed as positive in relationship to the research problem, given possible recent changes in the area of assimilation and the greater relevancy of intermarriage to the young.

Table 1. Jewish Attitude Survey Compared with U.S. National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) of Adults (Percentages)

Characteristics	Jewish Attitude Survey 1978/79	U.S. NJPS (a) 1971
N	415	4,035
<u>Age</u>		
20-39	77	30
60 or older	3	27
<u>Synagogue movement</u> (American Jewish denomination)		
Orthodox	17	10
Conservative	34	44
Reform	14	34
No preference	35	12
College graduates	63	35
Foreign born	13	21
Kosher home (observance of Jewish dietary laws)	45	30
Visited Israel	68	16

(a) Source: Lazerwitz and Harrison, 1979.

Resistance to Assimilation

The resistance-to-assimilation variable used in this study comes from questions about the feelings of the respondents concerning the marriage of a Jew to a non-Jew. It was assumed that opposition would vary by perceived closeness to the marrying individual, and separate items were included for a member of the family and for a good friend who chose to intermarry (Stouffer, 1949). Since it is also possible that special standards are associated with those who hold more visible positions in the community, questions were included for the leader of the Jewish community and a Jew prominent in public life. Finally, the respondents were asked to express their opinions concerning the intermarriage of religious and of non-religious Jews, since they might perceive each

group as having different obligations to the ethnic community.

Respondents could answer questions by indicating if they strongly disapproved, disapproved but understood, considered it a private affair, or felt it was good for the Jewish community. These terms come closer to actual reactions to the phenomenon and vary along a scale measuring opposition to intermarriage.

Table 2. Reactions to Intermarriage (Percentages)

Question: How do you feel about the following Jews who might marry a non-Jew?	Strongly disapprove	Disapprove but understand	Consider it private affair	Good for the Jewish community
A leader of the Jewish community	45	21	34	(.2)
A religious Jew	44	16	39	(.5)
A member of your family	37	28	34	(.5)
A Jew prominent in public life	35	19	45	(.7)
A good friend	25	28	47	(.2)
A non-religious Jew	20	29	51	(.5)

Few of the respondents consider intermarriage good for the Jewish community, irrespective of the status of the Jew (see Table 2). There is, however, a wide swing in sentiments from strongly disapprove to considering intermarriage a private affair, depending on the characteristics of the subject person. A near majority strongly disapproves of the marriage of a leader of the Jewish community or of a religious Jew to a non-Jew. Individuals holding these positions are seen, in a manner similar to that associated with Rabbis (Elazar, 1976), as representing the highest standards of the community and are expected to demonstrate a greater commitment to the survival of the ethnic community.

A greater ambivalence develops when considering the intermarriage of a family member or of a good friend. A tendency exists for reacting to the marrying out of a family member in a more understanding manner; still, opposition is at almost the level expressed for community representatives. With the good friend, there is a decided swing to seeing intermarriage as a private matter, this probably reflecting the reality that many good friends are marrying out.

Answers concerning intermarriage for Jews prominent in public life and for non-religious Jews show a similar pattern to that found for good

friends: a high likelihood of considering it a private affair. The role of the prominent Jew, however, seems to polarize the community somewhat, with 35% strongly disagreeing with his intermarriage -- possibly seeing him in a representative role -- and 45% considering this a private affair.

All items relating to intermarriage were factor analyzed; it was found that they form one dimension. Each item can be seen to correspond to a high or low degree of opposition to intermarriage. All six items were, therefore, combined into an index of opposition to intermarriage, which is used in the following analysis.

Reference Groups: The Importance of Israel

Opposition to intermarriage depends on accepting the exclusive importance of ethnic group membership. A feeling of closeness to or identification with role models who hold membership in the ethnic group, for example, can help foster solidarity (Merton, 1957, pp.281-386). Another frame of reference is an earlier historical period of triumph or disaster for the ethnic group: the biblical period, for instance, considered a time of grandeur for the group and generally accepted by others as a period when the Jewish nation made a major contribution to modern civilization; or, in contrast, the Holocaust, when Jews were killed because of their group membership. Present events, too, may serve to develop cohesiveness, such as instilling a sense of linkage to other group members under attack (Coser, 1956, pp.87-95). Thus, a feeling of closeness to Russian or Middle Eastern Jewry, symbols of Jewish resistance to external hostility, may heighten the awareness of Jewishness (Himmelfarb, 1980).

For North American Jews, identification with ethnic group members who live in Israel can have special meaning. Israel represents an embattled society, but one where Jews are not a minority and no stigma is attached to being Jewish. Political and financial support of Israel presents an outlet for expressing Jewishness in terms which are religiously legitimate but can be entirely secular, and doing so is seen as acceptable behavior by other North American groups (Liebman, 1973 p.138). Finally, increasing Jewish identification relative to the more general American identity and, consequently, increasing pride in being a Jew, have been shown to develop out of extended stays in Israel for reasons of study or work on service projects (Sherrow et al., 1968, p.64; Herman, 1970).

Of course, Jewish ethnics, like most ethnics, belong to a number of other groups within the North American society, and can choose to emphasize one of these -- e.g., their particular occupational group, their local community, or even the larger national identity. The choice of emphasizing such a reference group that includes those who do not hold the same ethnicity can, though, act to reduce the commitment to

remain a member of the ethnic group.

The various reference groups were related to opposition to intermarriage. The results, given by use of a regression, are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. 'Opposition to Intermarriage' Index Related to Feeling of Closeness to Various Groups, Jewish and Non-Jewish (Regression Results)

	Zero-order correlation	Beta weight
Closeness to:		
Jews in Israel	.36	.25 (a)
Non-Jews in your community	-.28	-.16 (a)
Jews in North America	.18	.17 (a)
Non-Jews in North America	-.26	-.16 (a)
Biblical Jews	.23	.07
Middle Eastern Jews	.24	.08
Russian Jews	.18	-.04
Holocaust Jews	.18	-.01
	$r^2 =$.23

(a) Item meets a less than .01 significance level using the F Score.

A feeling of closeness to Israeli Jews was found to give the strongest impact on opposition to intermarriage. This frame of reference is positively reinforced by identification with other Jews in North America and negatively influenced by the choice of non-Jewish reference groups. Little additional variance is explained by identification with the Jews of the Holocaust or the biblical period, or with Middle Eastern or Russian Jews.

Resistance to intermarriage is thus seen to be rooted in the reality of the present, the existing membership group. Particularly, the existence of the State of Israel, with its principle of creating a Jewish society, acts to preserve group identity in North America. Hostility to Jews or recollections of the group's historical period are shown to have little impact in maintaining group identity. A feeling of closeness that is greater to non-Jewish groups, on the other hand, can result in a reduction of opposition to marrying out.

The Importance of the Ethnic Ghetto

The ghetto has been seen as an essential element in maintaining ethnic endogamy. As long as the life of the individual is confined to social relationships within the group, few ethnic members can develop the contacts with outsiders which might lead to marriage.

Jewish experience in North America during the last 20 years has been one of acceptance into the universities, professions, and neighborhoods of the larger society. Nevertheless, Jews maintain a degree of structural isolation through ethnically homogeneous friendship circles (Sklare and Greenblum, 1967, p.272). In our study, of the 75% who indicated that a majority of their close friends were Jews, 16% stated that they had only Jewish close friends. The importance of the ethnic group to opposition to intermarriage is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. 'Opposition to Intermarriage' Index by Proportion of Close Friends who are Jewish

Proportion of close friends who are Jewish	Per cent scoring "high" on opposition to intermarriage index
All	74 (65) (a)
Almost all	67(144)
Majority	40(94)
Half or less	22(104)
Gamma = .57	
Chi Sq. p <.001	

(a) Figures in parentheses indicate the total number of cases in each category.

A strong relationship (gamma equals .57) exists between the proportion of close friends who are Jewish and high opposition to intermarriage. Resistance to marital assimilation is highest among friendship circles consisting of "almost all" or "all" Jews. Having a mere majority of Jewish friends reduces the probability of opposition to 40%. Ethnic communities, when they develop the social isolation of their members, may be said then, to be a key factor in reinforcing opposition views on intermarriage.

Trends in North American Jewish Opposition to Intermarriage

A number of trends in the North American Jewish community may eventually lead to major changes in opposition to intermarriage. Jews are more likely to be of a native generation, less likely to have a religious upbringing, and more likely to be moving away from the Orthodox

synagogue movement (Lazerwitz, 1970; Goldstein and Goldscheider, 1974; Dashefsky and Shapiro, 1974; Himmelfarb, 1979). These trends are assumed to be highly related to a reduction in opposition to intermarriage, and a decline in Jewish group solidarity through intermarriage can be expected in the years to come.

Table 5. 'Opposition to Intermarriage' Index by Synagogue Movement (American Jewish Denomination) and Synagogue Attendance (Percentages)(a)

Synagogue movement	All	Attend synagogue services at least once a month	
		Yes	No
Orthodox	79(72)	87(54)	53(17)
Conservative	61(140)	65(57)	57(82)
Reform	38(55)	63(19)	25(36)
Not affiliated	28(144)	64(14)	24(130)

(a) See note a to Table 4.

The three main synagogue movements of North American Jewry are said to vary in their readiness to oppose intermarriage: the strongest opposition coming from the Orthodox, then the Conservative, and with some ambivalence by the Reform (Sklare, 1964, 1970; Himmelfarb, 1975, 1979). Table 5, at first glance, seems to confirm the hypothesis that declared membership in a synagogue movement is related to opposition to intermarriage. When synagogue attendance, however, is included, those who attend at least once a month, regardless of affiliation, show a fairly high rate of disapproval of intermarriage.

As might be expected, the Orthodox Jews in this category had the highest opposition (87%); but the majority of each of the other denominational groups also disapproved, showing little difference in rate (about 64%). Those who declare Reform membership but infrequently attend services (less than once a month) share the lowest proportion of opposition with the non-affiliated -- some 25%. It might be noted in this connection that Reform members may include those who cite this denomination as a means of showing ethnic or religious identification under the cultural demands for belonging expressed by some sectors of North American society (Reed, 1979; Herberg, 1955).

The implications of synagogue membership were further explored by combining this variable with other status factors to show their combined impact on opposition to intermarriage. Generation, age, and sex were the factors chosen, and the results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. 'Opposition to Intermarriage' Index by Synagogue Movement, Generation, Age and Sex (Percentages)(a)

	Synagogue movement				
	All	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform	Non-affiliated
<u>Generation - number of grandparents born in the United States</u>					
None	52(325)	76(59)	66(110)	42(45)	28(116)
At least one	44(84)	92(13)	40(30)	20(10)	33(30)
<u>Age</u>					
17 to 28	50(202)	84(37)	61(70)	27(15)	28(80)
29 to 77	51(201)	77(34)	59(69)	44(39)	31(59)
<u>Sex</u>					
Male	53(183)	84(37)	61(64)	52(21)	30(67)
Female	47(215)	74(34)	60(75)	30(33)	29(63)

(a) See note a to Table 4.

Generation did not show an impact on opposition until at least one grandparent was born in North America (similar to the finding of Sharrow in his study of actual intermarriage). Table 6 reveals an apparent revitalization of resistance on the part of the fourth generation of Orthodox members and a bottoming effect among the non-affiliated, the latter displaying similar low levels of opposition irrespective of generation. This finding is reinforced by a relationship with age: younger members of the Orthodox movement are more firmly opposed to intermarriage, while age makes little difference among the non-affiliated. It is only among those belonging to the Reform movement that generation and age have the expected negative relationship. Among those declaring Conservative membership affiliation, although a lower level of opposition is found among the fourth generation, little difference in opposition is evinced by age, indicating a possible trend to a fairly high level of opposition (60%) within this movement.

A possibly reversing trend is revealed when the attitudes of men and women are compared. There had been a regular finding that men are more likely than women to marry out of the Jewish ethnic group. In the U.S. NJPS of 1971, intermarriages involving a Jewish male exceeded those involving a Jewish female by a ratio of about two to one (Massarik and Chenkin, 1973, p.296). This pattern may be changing with an increase in Jewish female heterogamy (DellaPergola, 1976; Farber, Gordon and Mayer, 1979). The data in Table 6 show that this reversal may have con-

tinued and that now men are more likely than women to oppose intermarriage.

When compared by synagogue movement, too, men are more strongly opposed than women in all cases (although the differences in the Conservative movement and among the non-affiliated are slight).

The direction taken by the North American Jewish community in its resistance to intermarriage reveals a dynamic nature. Some reaction to the high intermarriage rates is apparently being manifested, with increasing opposition by youth in the Orthodox and Conservative movements. For this opposition to have any impact on the total ethnic community, Jews would have to stop their move away from Orthodoxy and increase their synagogue attendance.

Factors Influencing Opposition to Intermarriage

Factors hypothesized as influencing opposition to intermarriage were included in a stepwise multiple regression. These factors consisted of the variables already described and other items, given below.

Professional Occupation

Occupation has an important role in influencing the level of Jewish identification, and professionals have been shown to have higher intermarriage rates (Ellman, 1971; Goldstein and Goldscheider, 1968).

Education

Assimilation has been found to be most advanced among better-educated individuals (Cohen, 1977; Goldstein and Goldscheider, 1968). In schools of higher education, Jews are exposed to more heterogeneous populations in a framework of more liberal values and attachments (Caplovitz and Sherrow, 1977). The over-representation of North American Jews among college graduates and in professional occupations gives these factors particular significance (Greeley and McCready, 1974).

Jewish Home Background

A consistent finding in studies of intermarriage and assimilation is the importance of childhood religious background (Goldstein and Goldscheider, 1968; Lazerwitz, 1973; Cohen, 1974; Farber et al, 1979).

Religious Belief

Traditional beliefs have come to be separated from practice and found to have independent effects (Lazerwitz, 1973; Himmelfarb, 1975; De Jong et al, 1976). A belief index was constructed of these principles of belief: in a God who created the universe, in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) as the word of God, and that God would protect the Jewish people.

Contact with Israel

An index was developed from the following items that indicated contact with Israel: the existence of close friends or family in Israel, knowing North American Jew who emigrated to Israel, a regular exchange of letters with an Israeli, and an actual visit to Israel.

Jewish Ethnic Identity

It seemed useful to develop an intervening variable to measure Jewish ethnic identity (or the social-psychological identification in Cohen, 1977). Use of factor techniques led to a uni-dimensional variable which combined the importance to the respondent of rearing his children to be good Jews, of his leading a full Jewish life, of his making a contribution to the Jewish people, of Judaism being an important part of his life; his seeing himself more as a Jew than as an American or Canadian; and his feeling a responsibility to remain a Jew for the sake of parents and ancestors.

The stepwise multiple regression using all variables is shown in Table 7. As demonstrated by the regression, Jewish commitments and Israelis as a reference group are most directly related to opposition to intermarriage. They form two separate paths of resistance: the primary path is by a developed ethnic and religious consciousness; the secondary, which can be secular, is through contact with Israel.

Table 7. Factors Influencing the 'Opposition to Intermarriage' Index^(a)

	Zero-order correlation	Beta weight
N=375		
<u>Demographic characteristics</u>		
Male	.10	.10
Age	.08	
Professional occupation	.04	
Educational level	-.01	
Grandparent born in North America	-.03	
<u>Jewish commitments</u>		
Jewish ethnic identity	.57	.30
Synagogue movement	.47	.21
Ethnic structural segregation	.42	.16
Jewish home background	.28	.11
Religious belief	.40	.10
<u>Relationship to Israel</u>		
Israelis as reference group	.36	.10
Contact with Israel	.23	
	$r^2 = .45$	

(a) Measured by zero order correlation (r) and standardized beta weights deriving from a stepwise multiple regression. Betas only shown if they meet a less than .05 significance level as measured by F.

Jewish ethnic identity has the strongest impact on resistance and is reinforced with four additional direct Jewish commitments: religious belief, synagogue movement membership, ethnic structural segregation, and Jewish home background. These four variables were found to also indirectly influence opposition to intermarriage by contributing to the development of a Jewish ethnic identity.

The Israeli reference group, based on a feeling of closeness to Jews in Israel, makes a relatively smaller, but still significant, contribution to opposition to intermarriage. Contact with Israel plays an important intermediate role in that it contributes both to a greater closeness to Jews in Israel and to higher Jewish identity. (Jewish ethnic identity in itself has an additional indirect contribution by increasing the sense of closeness to Jews in Israel.)

The implications of the two primary paths toward resistance can be seen with the background trend variables. The only background variable that makes a direct contribution to opposition is that of sex, with men showing the higher opposition. The sole possibility for increased resistance to marital assimilation among those displaying the other background factors is that of contact with Israel. The young and those with professional occupations, more likely to be fourth generation and with high levels of education, were found to be more likely to have contact with Israel. Thus contact with Israel seems to be the one counter-force among those North American Jews prone to a greater tolerance of intermarriage.

Summary

Intermarriage is a challenge to Jewish group survival. The increase in marrying out by Jews in North America in recent years has been part of a trend of greater acculturation and less social exclusiveness, typifying an ethnic group that has become more highly educated, more professional, and more native.

Jewish ethnicity in an open society can be maintained primarily through the continuity of religious involvement or the maintenance of an ethnic ghetto. Jews belonging to the Orthodox movement, and to some extent to the Conservative synagogue movement, have proven more resistant to the idea of intermarriage. For all synagogue movements, resistance is based on synagogue attendance, acceptance of religious beliefs, and maintaining social isolation -- all of which lead to a higher Jewish social psychological identification. Although these factors may have had some revival within specific religiously oriented groups in the community, in general they are on the decline.

When these two factors lose their effectiveness, an alternative possibility is to maintain contact with a society where the ethnic group constitutes a majority. This can create the psychological distance from the general North American society necessary for maintain-

ing group solidarity. Identification and contact with Jews in Israel is shown to lead to opposition to intermarriage. Involvement with Israel increases the ability of North American Jews to combat the absorbing tendencies of their own society.

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