

Bringing the Jewish community to where people are

Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky, executive director and Paul Golin, associate executive director of the [Jewish Outreach Institute](#), together wrote the book *Twenty Things for Grandparents of Interfaith Grandchildren to Do (And Not Do) to Nurture Jewish Identity in Their Grandchildren*.

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Integration or segregation?" reads like a civil rights question from the 1960s. But this issue has surfaced in the American Jewish community with reference to the interfaith population — nearly one million households — regarding how to serve and engage them when the majority are unaffiliated.

Shall we develop programs specifically for this population, separate from the mainstream? Or shall we simply try to engage them as we do anyone else, by developing programs of meaning regardless of where they fall on the spectrum of Jewish engagement?

It may sound like an esoteric question, but it represents a growing tension among communal professionals, as well as those responsible for allocating (the perceived) limited resources in the community. And it is particularly important to consider in light of the recent limiting of outreach program services in the Philadelphia area and, on the other hand, the success of the Boston community — a direct result of expending resources.

The good news is that most communities have reconciled the idea that we have to do something for interfaith families. Unfortunately, unlike other traditionally unaffiliated subgroups, this is a subgroup that is automatically characterized by some as having a "problem." Thus, programs are created to help work through the difficulties that might emerge, often using therapeutic methods.

When interfaith-specific programming is the only programming offered to interfaith families, it can serve as "cover" for the organized community. Community leaders can point to the "December dilemma," introduction to Judaism courses, and interfaith couples groups — all important programs in the panoply of opportunities — and say, "Sure, we serve interfaith families." Yet if that is all the community offers for interfaith families without consciously trying to move them deeper into the mainstream, it may inadvertently keep them on the outside.

At the other extreme are those Jewish institutions that believe in a "don't ask, don't tell" policy. The idea is that much of the intermarried population doesn't look any different than the generally unaffiliated households we're trying to reach. The logic of these "integrationists" is that enough of our community's educational and cultural offerings are open to anyone who's interested, so why do we need to "single out" interfaith families?

This approach requires interfaith families to somehow get up to speed on their own if they want to join our community. It raises too many high barriers — even if inadvertently — for such families to fully participate.

We recommend an approach that meets the needs of interfaith couples and their families not just through a combination of "segregation" and "integration" but also through a complete rethinking of our communal approach to interfaith outreach.

The integrationists are correct in suggesting that programs "open to all" will attract many more intermarried households than programs specifically for interfaith families. At the Jewish Outreach Institute we've devised a programming model called Public Space Judaism that follows our definition of outreach by "bringing the Jewish community out to where people are rather than waiting for them to come to us." This includes Jewish programming in secular public venues such as malls or parks, Jewish cultural events like street fairs and author readings, and welcoming, "low-threshold" events inside Jewish institutions themselves.

However, for those unaffiliated interfaith families that we meet in Public Space Judaism programs who would actually benefit from interfaith-specific programming, we must also have those programs to address particular interfaith needs. In this way, the integrated "we welcome everybody" programs can work together with the "interfaith-specific" programs to serve a larger audience.

Finally, we need to not only help the integration model work together with the interfaith-specific model, but also merge them together in every program. Each program, regardless of whether its target audience is a particular age cohort or interest group, must ask itself how it is also serving individuals from intermarried households, and what particular sensitivities need to be incorporated to do so. Providing greater leadership roles for actual intermarried individuals (or their children) will go far in helping identify those needs.

Integration or segregation? It's not "either/or." Rather it's "both/and—and more." That's our approach to Jewish communal growth.