

Thesis: The Jewish Community is Sufficiently Welcoming Towards Intermarried Families

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In a recent study reported in the **Forward**, BJPA director Prof. **Steven M. Cohen** claims that it's not a lack of welcome but a (real and perceived) lack of competence that's keeping intermarried families out of Jewish institutions.

Cohen's conclusion was that most interfaith couples feel like they have an open invitation to be part of Jewish life. The real problem, he said, is that they feel like they don't know what to do with that invitation.

"It's not that they feel unwelcome, but that there is a competence barrier," Cohen said. "They feel that their kids will be expected to do things they don't know how to do, and they themselves don't want to be part of a community where they don't know the choreography."

"I don't have the evidence to make a strong claim for competency being the issue," Cohen said. "But I certainly can say that it's not a matter of being more welcoming. So I don't want to push the competence thing too far. But I am willing to say that stigmatization and the response of welcoming, making personnel more sensitive to the intermarried and watching your language and having smiling ushers is not going to be effective."

(The finding arose in the context of a **study** for the **Foundation for Jewish Camp** about how to attract children of intermarriages to Midwestern Jewish camps).

Interestingly, in a 2007 **editorial** in the Jerusalem Post, **Paul Golin**, of the **Jewish Outreach Institute**, accused Prof. Cohen of 'splitting the Jewish community' by focusing entirely on promoting in-marriage and essentially, according to Golin, writing off intermarried families as a lost cause and speaking of intermarriage only in terms of something to be avoided. Golin writes:

"...we should be devising ways to ensure that the already intermarried and children of intermarriage have access to [existing Jewish] programming. Cohen provides no strategies for that goal. Page after page of explanation about how weakly intermarried Jews are connected to Judaism imply that it is not relevant to consider them in our programming.

Cohen's suggestion that lack of competence (and not lack of welcome) is the barrier to intermarried families' participation in Jewish institutions can be read as an answer to that charge: it identifies a specific problem area (perceived competence) and suggests the possibility of a solution (beyond simply promoting in-marriage).

But not everybody accepts his new findings: "I work with interfaith families every day, and the stories that I hear are not the stories of comfort that he is trying to suggest," said **Rabbi Kerry Olitzky**, Golin's colleague and executive director of the **Jewish Outreach Institute**.

One poignant example of a not very comforting story comes up in **Tablet Magazine's report** on burial and intermarried families. Traditionally, there has been no space for non-Jews in Jewish cemeteries. Recently, the Conservative Movement's Rabbinical Assembly took a progressive position to permit intermarried families to be buried within a Jewish cemetery, but in a strictly divided off section. Brooklyn's Reform **Congregation Beth Elohim's** Rabbi's response was:

“It’s like they are saying that they are segregated in life and not welcome in perpetuity.”

That sentiment was echoed by a congregant:

“Personally, being in a mixed marriage, my wife and I never thought about what would happen when we passed away,” said Pisano. “I always thought there would be space for me and my wife, never thinking I couldn’t be buried there.” He added, “I’m like a shoemaker with no shoes.”

(Beth Elohim is currently attempting to purchase a burial ground specifically meant to accommodate a shared burial space for both intermarried and in-married families).

Another example is found in various **Jewish responses** to Chelsea Clinton's upcoming marriage to a Jewish man: “As a rabbi, I would be delighted to see Chelsea convert,” Rabbi David Wolpe, a Conservative Jew who leads Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, recently told The Daily Beast. “That would be my dream scenario.” Although phrased positively, this is another expression of intermarried families as sub-optimal, if not actually undesirable.

According to Cohen's research, however, incidents like these do not actually add up to an unwelcoming environment for intermarried families – or at least an unwelcoming environment that actually affects their participation in Jewish communities. Perhaps that explains why, in a recent **USA Today article**, Prof. Cohen did not mince words in describing intermarriage as “the greatest single threat to Jewish continuity today.”