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Transformations in the Composition of American Jewish Households

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

What are 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 Surveys (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.

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 particular 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…." The Chanukah song is played frequently on pop music stations.[6]

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 percent Jewish.

The United States was very 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 entire American Jewish denominational spectrum.

For example, Kiryas 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 freedomly express ourselves."[7]

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.

The incorporation of feminism into American Judaism is another example of this phenomenon. It 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 daily early-morning *minyanim* (prayer groups) for *kaddish* (the prayer of mourning) 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* (coming-of-age ceremony for girls) is ubiquitous in American Jewish communities, including the Orthodox. American feminism is part of American Judaism.

Jews Are Attractive to Non-Jews

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 Kristina 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 twenty-five to forty-nine, 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.[8] 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 parents. 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."[9] 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 above-mentioned 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 above-mentioned 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* (Chanukah candelabrum) 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 above-mentioned 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 thirteen 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.

Notes

1. Sergio Della Pergola, "International Intermarriage Rates," paper presented at the International Intermarriage Consultation at the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, December 2004 (posted at HBI/edu).
2. Intermarriage Consultation of the Rappaport Center for the Study of Assimilation at Bar-Ilan University, Israel, June 2005.
3. *The National Jewish Population Survey 2000–01: Strength, Challenge and Diversity in the American Jewish Population* (Mandell L. Berman Institute-North American Jewish Data Bank, 2003). For an analysis of these data and full bibliographic information on the NJPS studies, see Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Double or Nothing? Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage* (Hanover, NH and London: University Press of New England, 2004), 6–7, 169–176.
4. 2000 American Jewish Committee Public Opinion Survey.
5. Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Choosing Jewish: Conversations about Conversion. American Jewish Committee Research Report* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2006).
6. HBO Comedy Special, first aired 15 October 1996.
7. Robert Hanley, "In the Ashes of Arson at Kiryas Joel: Tensions of Bitter Factionalism," Metro Section, *New York Times*, 29 July 1996, B1–B2.
8. Fishman, *Double or Nothing?* 169.
9. David Sacks, *Welcoming the Intermarried into Your Jewish Family* (New York: Jewish Outreach Institute, 1995, rev. 2000).