

Relatively Speaking: Constructing Identity
in Jewish and Mixed Married Families

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The Jean & Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies
University of Michigan

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Foreword

The David W. Belin Lectureship in American Jewish Affairs provides an academic forum for the discussion of contemporary Jewish life in the United States. It was established in 1991 through a generous gift from the late David W. Belin of Des Moines and New York. Mr. Belin, who in six and a half years earned undergraduate, master of business administration, and law degrees from the University of Michigan, all with high distinction, had a distinguished legal career including public service as Counsel to the Warren Commission Investigating the Assassination of President Kennedy and Executive Director of the Rockefeller Commission Investigating the CIA. He also served the American Jewish community in a variety of leadership positions at the national level and was the founder of the Jewish Outreach Institute. In endowing this annual lectureship, he stated that his primary motivation was "concern for the future of American Jewry, both from the perspective of Jewish Americans as well as from the perspective of all Americans in light of the manifold contributions that Jews have made to the growth and development of our wonderful nation." David Belin passed away on January 17, 1999.

Dr. Sylvia Barack Fishman, Brandeis University Associate Professor of Contemporary Jewish Life/Sociology of American Jews, directs the graduate program in Contemporary Jewish Life. Her work explores Jewish identity in various subgroups, and the constructions of gender roles in Jewish societies. Her most recent books include *Jewish and Something Else: A Study of Mixed Married Families* (American Jewish Committee, 2001), *Jewish Life and American Culture* (SUNY Press, 2000), *A Breath of Life: Feminism in the American Jewish Community* (Free Press, 1993), and *Follow My Footprints: Changing Images of Women in American Jewish Fiction* (Brandeis University Press, 1992).

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I. New Perceptions of Peoplehood

Concepts such as race, ethnicity, and religious difference, which once seemed determining and solidly significant factors in people's lives, are today "a matter not of essence but of choices," a voluntary and perhaps even an "artificial" construct.¹ It is the individual, rather than the group, who decides what his or her affiliation — or lack of affiliation — with a particular group may mean. Individuals also differ in their interpretations of the character and significance of the social groups themselves.

This individualism or personalism in understanding the meanings of social groups has been ratified by many social scientists. During the past century, cultural historians have transformed the way communal stories are interpreted. Rather than depicting the evolution of a particular national, ethnic or religious group as "a grand narrative in which the many individuals are submerged," some currently influential methods focus on the "micro" picture, a multiplicity of small stories, "a multifaceted flow with many individual centers."²

A preference for analyzing social change through myriad small details, called "thick description" and advocated by cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz,³ fits felicitously in some ways into contemporary social scientific analysis of the American Jewish community. This essay explores my recent research on the internal dynamics in American Jewish and mixed-married families, based on 254 in-depth interviews with husbands and wives in four American locations (New England, New Jersey, Atlanta, and Denver), augmented by four focus group discussions with teenagers growing up in mixed-married households. I analyze the texts provided by these many and diverse individual stories, as each of the informants has interpreted his or her own life, behaviors, and goals.⁴

I am especially interested in the ways in which husbands and wives negotiate the ethnic and religious character of their households, the ways in which these negotiations change over time, and the impact of extended family members and friends on these continuing negotiations. I asked my informants to recall both the quotidian and the life-transforming, to describe their daily, weekly, and yearly routines. I asked them many questions about the ways in which they interpret the events and decisions in their own lives.

But sometimes my interpretations of informants' lives differ from the ways in which they understand themselves. When ethno-religious societies

seemed relatively defined and stable, social scientists measured characteristics through formally defined yardsticks, often derived from the behaviors and attitudes which characterized these particular societies in the past. However, today, in our times of enormous societal flux and change, it is much less clear what particular behaviors may mean — what their significance is to the individuals, societies, and families who do or do not perform them. Today, it is not a given that the social scientist is “objective,” and has authority beyond that of his informants to interpret and analyze observations. The task of the social scientist becomes especially complicated under these conditions.

In the current intellectual climate the semiotics or meaning of behaviors, rather than the behaviors themselves, have become the primary focus of exploration for some of my colleagues. Society, and the “social structures and processes that were seen as the determinants of a society . . . are now increasingly viewed rather as products of culture.”⁵ Cultures are themselves defined by networks of meanings, in some ways not appreciably different from those in a literary text. As Geertz articulated this hypothesis:

... Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.⁶

Like literary texts, the significance of social behaviors is viewed as depending on individual interpretation. In some cases, this reluctance to assign meaning or value to particular behaviors veers into relativism: what a behavior means, whether it is appropriate or good, depends on the way it is seen, understood, and interpreted. Later in this essay, I suggest that tendencies toward relativism pervading some academic circles are also prevalent in liberal Western society at large, and have played a significant role in the decline of certain traditional Jewish family and communal values once regarded as self-evident. I argue that these tendencies have contributed to the erosion of “tribal” feelings of loyalty among Jews, both on a personal and on a communal level. Finally, I show that an environment of relativism has also had an impact on the exclusively Jewish ethno-religious commitments in some Jewish and especially mixed-married households.

Interestingly, the relativism that has affected the practice of some social scientific research, and has profound ramifications for Jews and other ethno-religious minority groups, has also colored responses to the contemporary American national crisis. Thus, while ethno-religious identity build-

ing in Jewish and mixed-married families is the main focus of my discussion, I begin with a brief preamble of reflections about anti-Americanism and collateral anti-Zionism since September 11, 2001, because I believe that these phenomena are related in interesting ways to the topic at hand.

On September 11, 2001, American lives and assumptions about life were transformed.⁹ However, in the days, weeks, and months following those first dramatic attacks, it became apparent that across the world, and in some American locales — especially on some American college campuses — numerous persons regarded what happened on September 11 as a matter of interpretation, rather than self-evident facts. The word “terrorism” was viewed as a subject of interpretation as well, and was used or withheld according to political orientations. For some discussants, “militant” continues to be a more acceptable term than “terrorist,” because the former implies a freedom-fighter or protester model, rather than a criminal model.

Deliberate disinformation served clear political purposes in many Muslim societies with anti-American feelings. Reports, first spread by the Internet and then by newspapers, in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Gaza, and elsewhere asserted that Israel and the Jews were responsible for the devastation. According to Internet and newspaper reports, and soon according to the willingly deluded man-on-the-street, the Mossad arranged for the World Trade Center and the Pentagon to be attacked. It was reported and is still widely believed in Muslim countries that 4,000 Jews received calls from their rabbis or from the Mossad that the WTC would be attacked, and that is why “no Jews were killed” in the cataclysm.

Both news organs and the population in these areas acquire a propaganda advantage, at least internally, when they reverse the identity of victim and victimizer. As Salman Rushdie reports, hatred of America and Israel continues, and has even been exacerbated by the accuracy with which Osama bin Laden and his terrorist networks were identified as the villains responsible for the murder of thousands. At the most extreme end of this continuum of ignorance and disinformation, “those elements in the Arab and Muslim world who blame America for their own feelings of political impotence” plunge ever more deeply into “anti-American radicalism”:

... Even if that [Palestinian/Israeli] settlement were arrived at tomorrow, anti-Americanism would probably not abate. It has become too useful a smokescreen for Muslim nations' many defects — their corruption, their incompetence, their oppression of their citizens, their

economic, scientific, and cultural stagnation. America-hating has become a badge of identity, making possible a chest-beating, flag-burning rhetoric. . . . What America is accused of — closed-mindedness, stereotyping, ignorance — is also what its accusers would see if they looked into a mirror.⁷

Rushdie also comments that “there seem to be as many of these accusers outside the Muslim world as in it.” He notes that he has “been struck, even shocked, by the depth of anti-American feeling among large segments of the population” in Britain and Europe.

Equally striking is the fact that certain groups of American intellectuals seem possessed by anger at America, not her attackers, asserting that America herself is responsible for, and guilty of causing, the violence of the terrorists. Just hours after the World Trade Center had imploded and collapsed, while smoke and fires were still smoldering in New York and Washington, “teach-ins” on college campuses featured professors explaining to confused and frightened students that the real villains were America and the American government.

Edward Rothstein demonstrates in a powerful *New York Times* article on September 22, 2001, “Attacks on U.S. Challenge the Perspectives of Postmodern True Believers,” (A17) that the “cataclysms” in New York and Washington challenged the assumptions of post-modernists and post-colonialists. Post-modernists reject “assertions that truth and ethical judgement have any objective validity.” Post-colonial theorists assert that cultures that have experienced Western imperialism have ideas that are equally valid — and often more valid — than those ideas that we may think of as “universalist principles of the West.” Rothstein supports his argument by quoting post-colonialist ideologues, such as Edward Said, one of the founding theorists of post-colonialism, who, Rothstein tells us, claims that the West’s “myth of universality” is little more than a “strategy of imperial control.” Said asserts that the West’s “false universals” are used to legitimate “corporate profit-taking and political power.” American notions about personal freedoms are nothing more than “ideological, cultural constructs” that serve the purposes of the greedy, resource gobbling capitalist state.

Building on the analyses of Rushdie, Rothstein, and others, I do not suggest that the government of the United States is free of guilt, but it has become increasingly clear that attacks on the United States on September 11 constituted an unmitigated, premeditated, and unprovoked evil, part of

a series of actions, planned by a fundamentalist extremist worldwide network, engineered to cause injury and pain to the United States and its friends and interests. As such, it comprises an act of war.

The Islamic fundamentalist suicide pilots of September 11 were well-educated, middle-class men who had not experienced particularly difficult lives. They, and many of the terrorists preceding and following them, have come from countries such as Saudi Arabia that are neither impoverished nor oppressed by the United States. Terrorist animosity toward America is fueled not by privation or misery, but by radical extremist Islamic hatred of Christian, capitalist America. As Bernard Lewis masterfully demonstrates in a powerful new study, "for Bin Laden and those who follow him this is a religious war, a war for Islam and against infidels." Lewis shows that for some Moslems the divinely revealed truth of their religion is an absolute worth killing and dying for, hundreds of years of history seem immediate and personal, and "2001 marks the resumption of the war for the religious dominance of the world that began in the seventh century." Lewis warns that "for the members of the Al Qaeda it is the seduction of America that represents the greatest threat to the kind of Islam they wish to impose on their fellow Muslims." *

I feel a special responsibility as an academic and as a Jew to speak out and assert that not every event is composed of "relative" truths. Historical events are real, and not every story has two equal sides. Contemporary Jews have frequently found themselves at the wrong end of historical revisionism and of post-modernist ideology. The most obvious examples of this are found in the diverse claims of Holocaust revisionists that the Holocaust never happened, or that its events have been greatly exaggerated. Even more insidious is the assertion, often aimed at Israel, that only a pure and innocent government has the right to invoke historical events on its own behalf. At risk is the idea that a democratic government, even an imperfect one, has a primary responsibility to defend the well-being of its own citizens, and that these citizens need not be guiltless in order to have a right to demand this protection of their government. It is hard for many liberal Americans to come to terms with a situation in which their government must put its citizens first, and act with absolute — not relative — resolve.

II. Constructing American Hybrid Identities

At the opposite pole of the certainties burning in the hearts of radical

Muslim extremists, most American Jews share a deeply liberal and tolerant physical, intellectual, and psychological milieu with other highly-educated Americans in their socio-economic cohort. Many liberal Americans believe that all conflicts can be solved through compromise and negotiation, that every situation can be seen in another way, and that tribal appeals are almost always suspect. Chester Finn reports that educators are made profoundly uncomfortable even by the word "patriotism," and that they do not educate children and teenagers to understand the need for it:

In the case of September 11... assumptions forged during the Vietnam conflict and then tempered by the post-modern doctrines of multiculturalism and diversity, have overwhelmingly shaped the pedagogical and curricular guidelines for elementary and secondary school teachers that has [*sic*] poured forth from educational organizations, state and federal agencies, and a plethora of commercial groups.⁹

If highly educated liberal Americans have trouble articulating an absolute loyalty to their own country, even after the bloody attacks of September 11, it should not be surprising that within this liberal ethos the attempt of a particular ethno-religious group to promote endogamy and to advocate against exogamy — marriage across ethno-religious boundaries — can appear to be a racist enterprise. American Jews have been very influenced by the notion that advocating for Jews to marry Jews may be somehow un-American.

In an October 14, 2001, *New York Times* column, for example, "The Ethicist," Randy Cohen, was asked the following question:

Some friends and I use a Jewish Internet dating service. When I mentioned an ad placed by a Hispanic woman who likes to date Jewish men, a female friend of mine remarked that "they should stay away from our stuff." I argued that the Hispanic woman was npfront about her ancestry and so did nothing wrong. Please shed some light.¹⁰

This question, and Cohen's multi-layered response, reward close attention and deep description. Cohen transmits a very interesting gender difference in responses to this question. The male questioner assumes that any honest American has the right to use the Jewish Internet dating service. However, the female friend is upset with the idea that those eligible Jewish

men who use the dating service looking for Jewish women — a category of persons reputedly in short supply — may be captured by an enterprising non-Jewish woman.

Cohen's answer to the questioner is instructive. The first paragraph of Cohen's answer reflects the current assumptions of the great majority of American Jews that intermarriage is inevitable, and not necessarily problematic, in an open society.

You can, of course, be Hispanic and Jewish — Jews in Barcelona do it every day — and if that's the case here, problem solved. But even if the controversial Hispanic woman is a gentile, I still see no problem. She has been open about her background and her desires. (Although she may want to examine the feelings that draw her to a group rather than a particular individual.) If another participant in the dating service finds her appealing, then the two of them can rendezvous. It's not for some third party to veto that decision. The Jewish dating service should be a way for people who wish to date Jews — perhaps primarily but not exclusively other Jews — to do so; it ought not be a segregated Semite preserve.

Recent research shows that fewer than half of American Jews today actively oppose mixed marriage. According to a study recently published by the American Jewish Committee, when asked whether "it would pain me if my child married a gentile," only 39 percent agreed with this statement, 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 Jewishness was "very important" to their lives, only 54 percent said it would pain them to have a child marry a gentile.¹¹

However, the second paragraph of Randy Cohen's answer effectively articulates the reasons why many American Jews are concerned about the impact of mixed marriage on Jewish families and communities:

Needless to say, a whites-only dating service would be repugnant, trading on racism, on superficial characteristics over which people have no control. By contrast, a Jewish dating service defines people by their behavior and beliefs, by something volitional. In theory, anyone can choose to embrace Jewish customs and to search for a like-minded spouse with whom to establish a Jewish

household and live according to Jewish precepts. That is, members of a minority culture, eager to preserve and practice a way of life, may honorably seek each other out online or in person. That isn't to say, however, that you may impose this belief on other people. So let the Hispanic woman and her Jewish suitors dance the night away.

Note that Cohen begins this paragraph by distancing Jewish concern about endogamy from racism. The concept of Jewish peoplehood is fraught with discomfort for most American Jews today, especially outside the Orthodox world. The traditional Jewish construct of the "chosen people," repeatedly articulated in biblical texts and foundational to Jewish thinking for much of Jewish history, has been rejected or explained out of recognition by many American Jewish thinkers, as well as ordinary American Jews. Thus, although many would agree with a definition of ethnic groups as "a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood,"¹² Cohen's formulation skirts ethnicity by descent — that is, an ethnicity that comes to a person by virtue of their forebearers, and emphasizes ethnicity by *consent* — an ethnic group identification entered into voluntarily.

Conceptions of ethnicity in general (not just Jewish ethnicity) have undergone profound change during the second half of the twentieth century. Scholars utilize constructionist theories of ethnicity, which view ethnic identity as fluid, continually being negotiated and renegotiated.¹³ They propose that race and ethnicity are social constructs, perceptions of difference created by persons both internal and external to the perceived group. Some social scientists emphasize the importance of boundaries in creating discrete ethnic groups.¹⁴ To use a homely metaphor, ethnographers who emphasize boundaries see ethnicity as a kind of shopping cart being pushed across time and space; the contents of the shopping cart keep changing, although the cart retains the same name, and thus its distinctiveness.¹⁵ In contrast, another group of social scientists emphasizes "the nuclei, the centers of ethnic culture," rather than the boundaries, which may be porous and changing. According to this theory, it is exactly the "cultural stuff" at the heart of ethnic group life that maintains dynamic group distinctiveness and cohesiveness.¹⁶ Thinking about these two theories of ethnic distinctiveness and referring back to the dilemma posed to ethics

columnist Randy Cohen, we see that Cohen emphasizes the cultural nucleus of Jewishness, and accepts the boundaries of peoplehood mostly as a way of protecting "a minority culture, eager to protect and preserve a way of life."

Herbert J. Gans noted decades ago that for Jews, as for other white ethnic Americans, ethnicity is largely voluntary and symbolic, rather than externally enforced! The voluntary, symbolic nature of ethnicity has become more pronounced as the years pass and educational, occupational, and social boundaries within American society have become increasingly permeable.¹⁷

The resilience of ethnic appeal over the decades came as a surprise to some assimilationists, who expected ethnic differences to disappear. However, as Glazer and Moynihan and later Michael Novak noted, ethnicity, instead of disappearing, seemed to be "unmeltable."¹⁸ Richard Alba demonstrated that interest in ethnicity is actually greater and more persistent among highly educated and socio-economically successful white ethnic Americans; the more educated and successful the white ethnic American, the more interested s/he is in passing ethnic identity along to the next generation of children.¹⁹

However, as Mary Waters has illustrated in her study of diverse American ethnic Roman Catholics, American ethnic identification and behavior are more and more selective, multi-sourced, and idiosyncratic to individual family units. In other words, any one family may well combine elements of Italian, Irish, German, and/or Polish customs and behaviors, for example. As Waters demonstrates, children within that household will often think of their idiosyncratic, hybrid family traditions as classically derived from one ethnic tradition, "typically Irish," or "typically Italian." Moreover, children will pick out the ethnicity they think of as being more socially desirable in their peer group to describe their own family tradition.²⁰

III. *Romeo, Juliet*, and Mixed Marriage in America

It is most appropriate to view Jewish behaviors within the context of other hyphenated American ethno-religious groups. The Jewish experience in America has been and continues to be strikingly, distinctively American, as American Jews coalesce Jewish and American values and behaviors to produce hybrid American Judaism. The permeable boundaries and multi-cultural ethos of contemporary American Jewish life, while they have emerged gradually, represent a new and challenging chapter in Jewish

history, and one for which the past offers few clear precedents. In the United States today Judaism as a faith tradition has been strikingly Americanized, creating commonalities and bridges between Jews and non-Jews who occupy the same socio-economic, educational, geographical, and political milieus. Contemporary American Jews routinely merge American and Jewish ideas, incorporating American liberal values such as free choice, universalism, individualism, and pluralism into their understanding of *both* Jewish *and* American identity. Indeed, not only have American Jews created a coalesced American Judaism, they have also created a distinctly Jewish notion of what defines the "true" America, in their own image.²¹ My recent research on mixed-married families, families whose ethnic and religious heritage makes them "Jewish and something else," focuses on the specific ways these couples construct the ethnic and religious identities of their households, taking coalescence several important steps further.

Mixed marriage is both a symbol and a result of the voluntary nature of ethno-religious identification in America. To many, America's promises are dramatically symbolized and fulfilled by marriage across religious and ethnic lines. Americans following their own hearts, unfettered by familial and communal preferences, illustrate the triumph of Romantic values such as the sanctity of the individual and the sacredness of personal passions — the very incarnation of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Religious bigotries and ethnic hatreds seem conquered when Americans whose grandparents were Irish or Italian Catholics, Orthodox Greeks, English Episcopalians, Chinese Buddhists, or Lithuanian Jews walk down the aisle, gazing at each other with love. The proliferation of mixed marriages, moreover, helps to diminish cultural mistrust and hatred, as family members from diverse backgrounds get to know and care about each other.

In what seems to many observers a beneficent cycle, Americans marry across ethnic and religious lines because boundaries have become so permeable — and boundaries become ever more permeable as more Americans create inter-ethnic and interfaith homes.

Opposing mixed marriages, as a result, carries the odor of demanding that Romeo and Juliet choose between the Montagues or the Capulets. Compared to prior social expectations, relatively few Americans today believe that ethnic and religious choices are necessary, because contemporary American culture encourages individuals and families to combine multiple heritages. Americans share in the festive events and symbols of many cultures: on St. Patrick's Day we can all be a "little bit Irish" through "the

wearin' of the green." Eastern religious strategies are incorporated into Western lives through yoga and meditation tapes. Protestant churches sponsor Seder programs for their congregants. Unlike societies in previous times, and in less tolerant countries today, marriage across ethnic and religious lines is not automatically viewed as apostasy or cultural betrayal. Jews can marry Christians without the baptism of one, or the circumcision of the other. Inter marriages are viewed by some as doubling, rather than diminishing, the family's cultural capital.

American Jewish resistance to intermarriage has in recent years been replaced by the view that intermarriage is normative, as we have noted earlier. Despite the pluralism and multicultural openness of American society, however, many observers worry about the impact of mixed marriage on American Jews and Judaism. The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey showed that the proportion of Jews in America is static or falling. This stagnation of the Jewish population arises from a combination of factors including a relatively small number of Jewish immigrants; and the pronounced tendency of American Jews to postpone marriage and childbirth, and to have fewer than two children per family — a fertility rate demographers consider well below replacement level. The 1990 NJPS also revealed a recent Jewish mixed marriage rate (marriages in the five years prior to the survey) of about fifty percent. Of these mixed-married families, fewer than one-third said they were raising their children as Jews.²² Looking at the shrinking proportion of Jews in America, the rising rate of recent mixed marriages, and the dramatic preference in mixed-married households for not raising Jewish children, some Jewish communal and religious leaders warned that the blessings of multiculturalism and pluralism might well cause a distinctive, coherent ethno-religious Jewish culture to be virtually loved out of existence in twenty-first century America.

Within America's open society, with ethno-religious distinctiveness waning, large numbers of Jews have for decades been defined as much by what they were not as by what they were. Thus, Robert Bellah wrote in 1987, "It is part of Jewish identity and the maintenance of the boundaries of the Jewish community to deny that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah."²³ Peter Medding further suggested that, "paradoxically, as the religious aspects of Judaism have become relatively less central to the core of Jewish identity, and shared feelings have become more important, being not Christian has taken on greater salience as a defining element of Jewishness."²⁴

IV. Negotiating Two-Heritage Households

Is "not being Christian" still a defining characteristic of the religious identity of children growing up in mixed-married households? This is just one of many questions we face in our attempt to understand American Jewish families today. One important piece of the answer lies in the perhaps surprising fact that despite popular messages which blur religious differences, only a tiny minority of in-married American Jewish families celebrate non-Jewish holidays. The incidence of Christmas celebrations in in-married Jewish households has actually declined over the past few decades, probably as a result of the increased acceptability of Jews and Judaism in mainstream American settings.

However, in mixed-married households, in dramatic contrast, the intermingling of holidays from the faith traditions of both parents is one of the most prevalent characteristics. Most mixed-married families report some connection to both Christmas and Hanukkah, to both Passover and Easter. How these dual connections are handled depends on the way the household has designed its religious identity.

The great majority of mixed-marrieds incorporate substantial Christian celebrations into their family life. In our sample of predominantly Jewish-identified mixed-married households, nearly nine out of ten families talked about participating in Christian activities of some sort during the year. Christmas celebrations were the most frequently reported Christian activity in mixed-married families, with Easter celebrations second. In contrast, among conversionary households, fewer than ten percent celebrated Christmas at home but didn't go to church — no conversionary families in our sample went to church, and about half celebrated in the homes of extended family members. Among in-married households in our study, only 4 percent had Christmas celebrations at home.

In holiday celebrations, as in other aspects of family religious life, the gender of the Jewish parent made a difference. In households with a Christian mother, Christmas was celebrated at home in three-quarters of the households, and in church as well as home in 22 percent of the households. In mixed-married households with a Jewish mother, the percentage celebrating Christmas at home was 72 percent, but fewer than one percent went to church. In mixed-married households with a Jewish mother, 20 percent had no Christmas celebration in their home; but with a Jewish father, only one percent had no Christmas celebration in their home.

Husbands and wives in mixed married families often feel they are involved in an ongoing process of negotiating and juggling "yours, mine, and ours" religious identities. Concerns about these issues become especially focal in the yearly cycle of religious holiday observances, during the time period when formal religious schooling may be initiated, when the family makes decisions about institutional affiliations, and when individuals encounter joyous or sad life cycle events.

V. *Yiddishkeit* Versus *Menschlichkeit*?

One of the most striking aspects of our interview data was the empathy of spouses whose religion held the primary position in the household toward those whose religion was relegated to secondary status, especially when Judaism was the official family religion. Jewish spouses often said they felt as though their Jewish concerns wrestled with their love and compassion for their Christian husbands and their in-law families — as though there was a battle between *yiddishkeit* and *menschlichkeit*. Spouses who had insisted before marriage that their children must be brought up as Jews often became more and more concerned as the years passed that they were not being "fair" and had "taken too much away" from their fellow-traveler spouses. This guilty anxiety often became a vehicle for introducing or re-introducing Christian symbols into the household.

Thus, in households where both spouses had initially agreed that they would celebrate only Jewish holidays in their own house, and would celebrate Christian holidays in the homes of their Christian extended family, these resolutions often broke down gradually over the years. One of the most common reasons for the re-introduction of Christian festivities was the aging of the non-Jewish grandparents. As one Jewish wife put it:

I really love my mother-in-law. Every year we went to her house for Christmas and Easter dinners, and it was a special time for the whole family. But now she's older and it's too hard for her to do it. So I said I would do Christmas and Easter dinner in my house for the family. So every year now I make the Easter ham. Except one year when Easter came out on Passover. That year I still had Easter dinner in my house, but I didn't make the ham.

Strikingly, in many cases mixed-married spouses felt like their Jewish loyalties were at war with their empathetic family feelings. If they "deprived" their Christian spouse of Christian symbols they felt guilty. On the other hand, if they re-incorporated Christian symbols they had been determined not to incorporate they also felt guilty.

Just as the ethnically hybrid Roman Catholic families in Mary Waters' study often functioned in the absence of "context with a wider ethnic community beyond the family" and communal standards for behavior, and therefore developed very idiosyncratic familial patterns of behavior,²⁵ mixed-married families in my study also constructed idiosyncratic family traditions that blended diverse religious elements. In both cases, fewer families than might be expected want to have no ethno-religious celebrations in their household. It is important to them as Americans to include ethnic and religious symbols and ceremonies, even if the symbols and ceremonies they choose blend two or more religious cultures.

VI. Speaking Up for Jewish Families

Observers of the American Jewish community often attribute the rise in mixed marriage to the overwhelming pattern of Jewish youth attending colleges, and graduate and professional schools away from home. The assumption underlying this perception is that teenaged Jews do not date non-Jews when they are under parental supervision, and it is only when they leave home that they initiate romantic relationships with Christian partners. However, most Jews married to non-Jews who participated in our study said they had mixed friendship groups and dating partners while they lived at home, under their parents' supervision.

We can recall the diffidence with which Randy Cohen answered his questioners in his *New York Times* column when we note that among mixed-married participants in my study, 62 percent said their parents had made no comments to them discouraging them from marrying outside the faith. This absence of parental communication *vis-à-vis* dating and marriage was more pronounced among Jewish men married to non-Jewish women than among Jewish women married to non-Jewish men. Even when informants had contemplated college choices, few of their parents made it clear that they wanted their children to attend schools where they could meet and marry Jews, or that marrying Jews was an important family priority.

Where parents did attempt to guide their children, however, there was a positive relationship between parental guidance and the type of marriage entered into. One-third of both in-married and conversionary participants said their parents had strongly discouraged them from marrying out of the faith, and another 29 percent of in-married and 17 percent of conversionary households said their parents had mildly discouraged them. Only 38 percent of in-married participants said their parents had not commented on dating, marriage, and religion. Interestingly, although American parents often say they are nervous about advising their children on dating practices because they fear a backlash, negative reactions to discouragement of mixed marriage were reported in fewer than 5 percent of cases.

Socio-economic issues were unpleasantly linked to ethno-religious considerations according to some informants, who said that their parents' standard "speech" about dating Jewish girls was heavily tied into a kind of bourgeois package which included the Jewish girl, her parents' money, professional career direction, etc. According to these respondents, this Jewish-girl-as-a-middle-class-norm undercut the significance of a Jewish marriage as a value in and of itself. As one respondent put it, by marrying a Jewish princess he could become himself a "crown" prince:

You know, the standard parental thing. How did they express it? My mother was sort of a social climber, so she was always — she always had this fantasy of finding some, you know, wealthy Jewish princess or something, I think. That would sort of — what's the word — serendipitously elevate her status somehow. Marry a Crown.

Another described his parents' directives as a Jewish version of the all-American dream:

I knew what they wanted. They wanted me to be a doctor and they wanted me to marry a Jewish girl and they wanted me to have two-and-a-half kids and have a picket fence and probably live in another two-family house right next door to their house.

In comparison, in-married respondents recalled their parents speaking to them about Jewish homes and Jewish values in very direct ways that were not linked to economic and social mobility issues:

They were visibly pleased for me to have a Jewish girl-friend, bring her to dinner, bring her to Friday nights.

And as it was, it had become pretty clear pretty quickly to anybody I dated that I couldn't go out Fridays, couldn't do much of anything until Saturday night. And that always means because I'm Jewish and my dad wouldn't let me out on those days and so on and so forth. Those things never lasted too long.

In contrast to these families in which resistance to interdating was part of a multi-faceted, Jewishly active environment, according to many respondents, parental *laissez-faire* attitudes which were commonplace about their dating patterns extended to the prospect of mixed marriage as well. Indeed, even when parents were unhappy or agitated about an upcoming mixed marriage, they did not openly encourage as yet unattached siblings to date Jews exclusively.

VII. American Judeo-Christian Households

Just as children growing up in other mixed ethno-religious American households come to accept as normative the blended traditions of their families, the American construct "Judeo-Christian tradition" is not an abstraction for many children of mixed marriage. While some of these children will eventually choose to become exclusively Jewish, the great majority of the children of mixed marriage bring their Judeo-Christian outlooks with them into their new homes and as they participate in American Jewish communal life. Moreover, individuals and families go through ethno-religious evolutions, responding to internal and external changes in their own lives, and in the families and various communities around them.

Our study has shown that many, perhaps most, potential marital partners in interfaith relationships explore questions of household religion as soon as they perceive their relationship to be "serious" and heading toward marriage. Whether these first negotiations take place before marriage, or when the couple contemplates or embarks on childbearing, many sensitive issues are involved. Some couples decide to raise children with two faiths, some with no faith, some with both, and some with one faith only. Later, the birth of a child, the death of a parent, a shake-up in the workplace, the divorce of a friend — any of these events can and do precipitate spiritual responses and re-evaluations of decisions on the religious character of the home. In some cases, these lead to a deepening attachment to Judaism and

to the Jewish community. In other cases, the resoluteness of early decisions about the Jewish character of the household gives way to a variety of new negotiations. For mixed-married couples who have decided to raise children as Jews only, it is difficult to maintain an exclusively Jewish household environment.

These nearly inevitable Christian aspects of mixed-married family life stand in contrast to families in which the born-Christian partner has become a Jew by choice. In conversionary households, Jews by choice usually feel that they and their households are unambivalently Jewish. Jews by choice often announce to their own Christian parents and siblings: "We are a family. Please don't send our children Christmas presents or Easter baskets." In mixed-married households that have pledged to raise their children as Jews, however, it is much more difficult for parents to maintain an unambivalently Jewish profile. As long as one spouse does not consider him- or herself to be a Jew, it is hard to exclude Christian rituals, ceremonies, and culture from family life.

Many non-Jewish spouses cheerfully participate in their Jewish children's holiday celebrations. However, a substantial proportion find themselves feeling increasingly resentful about the fact that their children are growing up in a different faith tradition than theirs. Even when they say they have been warmly received by family members and Jewish synagogue communities, non-Jewish spouses often find themselves longing for their own traditions in their own households. Some report that they are disturbed by their children's use of Hebrew in household and holiday prayers — and yet they have decided that they do not wish to learn Hebrew themselves. Some say they harbor deep distaste for organized religion, and look forward to the day their children are old enough to share these feelings.

Adolescent children grow close to extended-family members on the basis of many factors, including their own personality and intellectual and extracurricular interests. Non-Jewish grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins become admired role models for many raised-Jewish children in mixed-married households.

Again, the comparison with conversionary households is useful. Although conversionary families also have a full set of Christian extended-family members, their relationship to them is different. They face their beloved Christian family with unambiguously Jewish eyes. As one Jew by choice commented:

We tell our children that grandma and grandpa's holidays belong to them only, just like a person's birthday belongs to them only. So we'll go there to visit before or after Christmas, not on Christmas, that's not our holiday. And if grandma gives them a goody bag to take home, well that's like taking a goody bag home from someone else's party. We can have the goodies, but the party doesn't belong to us.

VIII. Religious Integrity and Inclusiveness

One important coalesced American Jewish value is inclusiveness. American Jews pride themselves on their empathy for, and feelings of solidarity with, all people of good will, perhaps because Jews historically have frequently been vilified as "exclusive" or "clannish," and because Jews have suffered historically by being excluded, not only in Europe, but in the United States until relatively recently as well. As a result, as we noted earlier, the tribal passages in the Hebrew Bible or Jewish liturgy, and the historical Jewish concept of a "chosen people," make many American Jews uneasy. Although some still retain a feeling that there is an essential core of Jewishness that makes Jews more comfortable with each other than with non-Jews, this attitude is far more prevalent among older American Jews than among their children and grandchildren.

This American Jewish predilection for inclusiveness is important in analyzing personal and communal responses to rising rates of mixed marriage, since it makes inclusiveness feel more "comfortable" to most American Jews than exclusiveness. When unprecedentedly high rates of mixed marriage are placed in the context of the delight and pride American Jews feel about their perceptions that Jewish tradition harmonizes with American ideals, the stage is set for the powerful appeal of the "inclusivity and outreach" message.

Another very important American Jewish value is egalitarianism. Although historical Jewish societies were stratified into numerous hierarchies, including gender hierarchies, many American Jews believe that religiously based social inequality is unacceptable, even repugnant. In part because of this coalesced American Jewish preference for religious egalitarianism, and in part because of the demographic fact that large numbers of

Jewish men had married non-Jewish women, the American Reform movement rejected the principle of matrilineal descent, declaring that either patrilineal or matrilineal descent could make a child Jewish. Thus, according to the Reform movement's decision, the children of either a Jewish father or a Jewish mother could be considered Jews. This decision was hailed by many as more "fair" and just, since it did not discriminate against Jewish men in favor of Jewish women.

Both statistical studies and my interviews, however, strongly indicate that the cultural and religious impact of a Jewish mother in a home is greater than that of the father. The likelihood that children will be raised completely as Jews, rather than partly as Jews and partly as non-Jews, and the type and extent of Jewish education received by children, as well as terms of holiday observances and social networks, depend greatly on the gender of the Jewish parent.

It should also be noted that the principle of matrilineal descent favored and privileged Jewish women as wives, giving them somewhat of an advantage in the marriage "market." This was an important factor, because Jewish women in the United States today are delegitimated and disadvantaged by the negative stereotypes prevalent in contemporary American media, film, literature, and popular culture.²⁶ These stereotypes are deeply "nonegalitarian" in that they target Jewish women far more than Jewish men. The fact that Jewish women have lost the protection afforded by matrilineal descent, and yet are still subject to American cultural negative stereotypes contributes to rising rates of mixed marriage.

A paradoxical trend in American culture today is the celebration of ethno-religious differences as testimony to the sameness of all Americans. Americans share the experience of deriving from diverse, particularistic heritages, and the contemporary liberal ethos simultaneously accentuates and transcends differences. Valorizing the differences that unite, liberal Americans are fond of emphasizing commonalities that seem to span ethnic and religious boundaries.

Striking evidence of this ethos of unification through difference is found in department store decorations, magazine illustrations, and in a new species of greeting card now proliferating in stationary shops, exemplified most directly in the "Mixed Blessings Greeting Card Company." One card, for example, shows children who have respectively lit the solstice-based lights of Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanza holding hands in front of their tribal candelabras. The message inside this card prays that the season

of lights will "unite us all." These pictures, illustrations, decorations, and cards convey the impression that the messages of all religions are the same; it is only the packaging that differs.

However, research on American Jewish life shows that distinctiveness is a necessary attribute for the ethno-religious survival of minorities in an open society. The very NJPS data sometimes cited to claim that mixed marriage is inevitable clearly show that mixed marriage does not occur on a random basis. In-marriage and mixed marriage occur according to clear patterns. In-marriage is closely correlated to three factors: 1) Jewish education, both formal and informal, which is intensive and continues through the teen years; 2) a Jewishly connected home, which provides multi-faceted Jewish experiences in family settings; and 3) Jewish friendship circles. Each of these alone, and exponentially all three of these together, dramatically predispose an individual to marry a Jew and to establish a new Jewish family. In other words, the more Jewishly connected the parental family and the more Jewish education an individual receives, the more likely that individual is to establish a Jewishly connected home of his or her own.

We can usefully look to the ethnographic theories we spoke of earlier in analyzing Jewish communal approaches. Some policy planners take the approach that the most effective strategy is to reinforce the nucleus of Jewish life. Others take the approach that the community must reinforce its boundaries. The "nucleus" people believe that, if they make Jewish experience and education compelling enough, they can keep the boundaries around Jewish identification low. Those who favor more well-maintained boundaries feel that the permeability of boundaries is in itself problematic, and in many ways a betrayal of historical Jewish behaviors.

Ultimately, American Jewish communities will create their own list of priorities, either through a process of thoughtful deliberation or through default and indecision. The inclusive model is currently attractive because of its "political correctness," since it avoids boundary maintenance and judgementalism — except against those who themselves seem to be passing judgement.²⁷ The alternate communal strategy for dealing with the challenges of rising rates of mixed marriage calls for focusing communal will into the intensification of a broad spectrum of identifiably Jewish cognitive and experiential opportunities for Jews of all ages. This strategy is opposed by some because it calls for painful reallocation of communal resources and difficult assessments as to what comprises authentic Jewish activities and attitudes. Moreover, such an emphasis would almost inevitably be

accompanied by some shrinkage in terms of computable Jewish population size. Serious economic and political ramifications accompany a reduction in the number of persons who can be counted as Jews, and some observers are frightened at the prospect of a smaller Jewish community.

There is no doubt that the dramatic increase in the proportion of mixed-married households has already had a profound effect on communal psychology among both Jews and non-Jews. On a very positive note, the acceptance of Jews and Jewishness in American culture is surely due, at least in part, to the fact that numerous Christian families include Jewish members. Conversely, most American Jewish families include some mixed-married members.

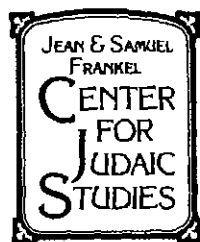
Jewish communal laypeople and leaders alike are concerned about the occurrence and ramifications of mixed marriage in their own families. Their concern is not based on "racism," as is sometimes alleged, but on familial and communal issues of continuity, popularly articulated in the question, "Will my grandchildren be Jewish?" As we have seen, by seeking to transmit what *New York Times* ethicist Randy Cohen calls their "minority culture" and their Jewish "way of life" on to the next generation, American Jews today are responding not only to the models of Jewish history, but also to the models provided by their non-Jewish ethnic neighbors. The contemporary American Jewish quest for cultural continuity is, to an extent not often realized, an articulation not only of traditional, historical Jewish values but of prevalent American values as well.

NOTES

1. Tamar Jacoby, "An End to Counting by Race?" in *Commentary* 111, no. 6 (June 2001): 37–40, 39.
2. Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 103.
3. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
4. See Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Jewish and Something Else: A Study of Mixed Married Families* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2001). A more complete exploration of these data is currently being prepared for *Double or Nothing: Jewish and Mixed Married Families in America* (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, Forthcoming, 2003).
5. Iggers, *Historiography*, 123.
6. Geertz, "Thick Description," 5.

7. Salman Rushdie, "America and Anti-Americans," *The New York Times* Op-Ed, February 4, 2002, A27.
8. Bernard Lewis, "The Revolt of Islam: When did the conflict with the West begin, and how could it end?" in "Annals of Religion," *The New Yorker* (Nov. 19, 2001): 50–63.
9. Chester E. Finn, Jr., "Teachers, Terrorists, and Tolerance," in *Commentary* 112, No. 5 (December 2001): 54–57, 54.
10. Randy Cohen, "The Ethicist: Group Dating," in *The New York Times Magazine*, October 14, 2001: 40.
11. *2000 Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion* (New York: American Jewish Committee, conducted by Market Facts, Inc. 2000).
12. R. A. Schermerhorn, *Comparative Ethnic Relations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970, 1978), as cited by Werner Sollors, *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), xii.
13. Developed by such thinkers as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Construction of Reality: A Treatise on the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, N.J.: Anchor Books, 1967); and Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse, *Constructing Social Problems* (New York: Aldine, 1977). The constructionist theory of ethnicity has been evaluated by James A. Holstein and Gale Miller, eds., *Perspectives on Social Problems: Reconsidering Social Constructionism* (New York: Aldine, 1993).
14. Anthropologist Fredrik Barth is among the more prominent advocates of the view that it is the "ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses," in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Boston: Little Brown, 1969), 15, 17.
15. Joane Nagel, "Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture," in *Social Problems* 41, No. 1 (February 1994): 152–76, 153.
16. One example of those who favor the nuclei as the definers of ethnic distinctiveness is John Higham, *Send These To Me: Jews and Other Immigrants in Urban America* (New York: Atheneum, 1975).
17. Herbert J. Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Culture in America," in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2 (January 1979): 1–20.

18. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, eds., *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), "Ethnicity and Social Change," 157-169; and Michael Novak, *The Rise of Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).
19. Richard D. Alba, *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 199.
20. Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 61-62, 121.
21. See Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Jewish Life and American Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 13.
22. Ariella Keysar, Barry A. Kosmin, and Jeffrey Schreckner, *The Next Generation: Jewish Children and Adolescents* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 48-58.
23. The term "ethno-religious identity" is drawn from John A. Armstrong, *Nations Before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982). The changing role of religious belief in ethno-religious identity is discussed in Robert N. Bellah, "Competing Visions of the Role of Religion in American Society," in *Uncivil Religion: Interreligious Hostility in America*, eds. Robert N. Bellah and Frederick E. Greenspahn (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 228.
24. Peter Y. Medding, Gary A. Tobin, Sylvia Barack Fishman and Mordechai Rimor, "Jewish Identity in Conversionary and Mixed Marriages," in *American Jewish Year Book* 92 (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1992): 15.
25. Waters, 130-131.
26. Sylvia Barack Fishman, *I of the Beholder: Jews and Gender in Film* (Waltham: Hadassah International Research Institute on Jewish Women Working Papers Series, 1999); and Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to be Americans: Jews, Gender and the Anxiety of Assimilation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).
27. See Bernard Susser and Charles Liebman, *Choosing Survival: Strategies for a Jewish Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), for a full development of this idea.



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