

What We Know About Intermarried Families

Edmund C. Case

In autumn 2013 the Pew Charitable Trust issued a comprehensive research report, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*. Because the research was undertaken by a prestigious organization and not commissioned by any Jewish group, it received especially wide coverage in the press and was the catalyst for conferences, scholarly debates, and worry and soul-searching, as well as comfort and affirmation among different segments of the Jewish community.

The headlines of *A Portrait of Jewish Americans* were that there is a major trend toward secularism among Jews, especially young Jews; that the rate of intermarriage continues to be high; that intermarriage and secularism are related; and that this all leads to less Jewish engagement and fewer children raised as Jews.

The Pew Report does make it abundantly clear that there is a huge amount of intermarriage:

- 44% of married Jews are intermarried.
- There is more intermarriage among children of intermarried parents (83% of married Jews whose parents were intermarried are themselves intermarried), but still 37% of married Jews whose parents were in-married are intermarried.
- The rate of intermarriage is the highest it has ever been—58% of Jews overall and 71% of non-Orthodox Jews who married from 2000–2013 are intermarried.
- 1.3 million adult U.S. Jews (25% of all adult Jews) have one Jewish parent versus 48% of Millennial Jews—those born after 1980.
- Currently 1.8 million children live in households with one Jewish adult.

The Pew Report's emphasis on secularism and its relationship to intermarriage is problematic, however, because of how the Pew survey asked people their religion. If they responded Jewish, they were counted as "Jews by religion." If they did not say their religion was Jewish, they were asked whether "aside from religion" they considered themselves Jewish or partially Jewish; if they said yes, they were counted as "Jews of no religion." This designation covers such a wide range of possible connotations and patterns of behavior that its meaning is far from clear.

Judaism can involve religion and community and culture and much more. The Pew Report found that, even among Jews by religion, only

- 39% belong to a synagogue;
- 39% believe in God with absolute certainty;
- 31% describe religion as very important in their lives; and
- 29% attend religious services at least once a month.

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Those levels of identification do not sound very “religious.” Theodore Sasson (2013), a sociologist at Middlebury and the Cohen Center at Brandeis, wrote in a recent article, “I suspect that many respondents who answered ‘Jewish’ in response to the religion question would have also liked to indicate ‘agnostic’ or ‘atheist’ but the survey forced a choice.”

There is an association between intermarriage and “Jews of no religion” as defined in the Pew Report: 79% of married Jews of no religion are intermarried, versus 36% of married Jews by religion. But our experience at InterfaithFamily (IFF) suggests that it is not fair to tar the intermarried with the brush of secularism/not religiosity: interfaith couples are not less spiritual, or less interested in a relationship with the sublime, or less responsive to meaningful supportive ritual at times of sadness and of joy than in-married couples. Art Green (2103), a prominent theologian and rector at Boston’s Hebrew College Rabbinical School, writing recently in *eJewishPhilanthropy* about whether people are “religious,” notes, “The question is not: ‘Do you believe that God created the world, and when?’ but rather, ‘Do you encounter a divine presence in the natural world around you’ and ‘What does that encounter call you to do?’”

We have found that young Jews and interfaith couples are experiencing and interested in that call, but that current forms of Jewish religious expression may not be satisfying their spiritual interests and needs. A split between spirituality and religion may well produce the survey answer, “My religion is not Jewish.”

Our experience also suggests that interfaith couples may come to say that their religion is not Jewish because of the reception they have experienced over the years in Jewish communities. One of the very interesting findings in the Pew Report is that 89% of intermarried Jews are proud to be Jewish and 67% say being Jewish is important to them; yet only 59% have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people, and only 39% say religion is very or somewhat important in their lives. Perhaps 89% are proud but only 59% have a sense of belonging because of the way they have been treated or their perception of the way they have been treated.

The Pew Report does show that intermarried Jews engage in fewer Jewish behaviors than in-married Jews: they have lower rates of attending synagogue, participating in Passover seders, fasting on Yom Kippur, lighting Shabbat candles, belonging to a synagogue, and donating to Jewish organizations, and they have fewer Jewish friends. It is important to remember that surveys such as this lump all intermarrieds together—those who are engaged Jewishly and those who are not. Actually the behaviors of engaged intermarrieds look a lot like that of engaged in-married Jews. The important issue, then, is how can we help the intermarried become more engaged.

A key question over the last 20 years has been how intermarried families are raising their children in comparison with in-married families. The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey reported that 28% of intermarried couples were raising their children as Jews; the 2000–01 follow up survey estimated the figure to be 33%. According to Sasson, “because these figures were well below 50 percent (the demographic threshold for breaking even), the general view was that intermarriage would drive down the Jewish population.”

The Pew Report found much higher rates of Jewish childrearing among intermarried couples: 61% of intermarried families are raising their children with

some Judaism (compared with 96% of in-married who say they are raising their children Jewish by religion): 20% are being raised as Jewish by religion; 25% as partly Jewish by religion and “partly something else;” 16% as Jewish but not by religion or “mixed;” and 37% as not Jewish at all.

But Sasson also points out, and the authors of the Pew Report then agreed, that much more valuable information than parental intent had initially been overlooked. For the first time, there are data on how the adult children of intermarriage have actually turned out. Sasson describes an “unexpected tendency of most young adults with intermarried parents to identify as Jewish.... There appears to be a trend of young adults raised in non-Jewish or partly Jewish households opting in.” He concludes, “The propensity of adults with intermarried parents to identify as Jewish [has] steadily increased, from 25 percent in the [Jews who are now] 65-and-older group, to 37 percent in the 50-64 age group, to 39 percent in the 30-49 group, to 59 percent in the 18-29 group.” In other words, 59% of Jews born after 1984 to intermarried parents are identifying as Jewish. That is very big news.

Sasson then shows that intermarriage has contributed to a Jewish population increase. The percentage of Jews in the total U.S. population has stayed steady despite huge immigration from Latin America and Asia. Children of intermarried Jews are part of the reason why this percentage has not declined. Sasson also notes that there has been only modest decline in the observance of some rituals, such as seders and fasting, because a significant proportion of the children of intermarrieds who identify as Jewish are religious—basically half of them are Jews by religion as defined in the Pew Report, and half are Jews of no religion.

Sasson acknowledges that most of the younger Jews who identify as Jewish but who are children of intermarried parents will probably marry people who are not Jewish; whether in the future they or their children will consider themselves to be Jewish is impossible to predict. A key issue is what these intermarried parents who are currently raising children are doing to strengthen their Jewish identification, in particular around Jewish education. The Pew Report says only about 22% of interfaith families enroll their children in one or more formal Jewish programs (compared with 82% of in-married, nearly four times as much), 5% of interfaith families enroll their children in yeshiva or day school, 13% in religious school education, and 14% in Jewish day care or sleepaway camp.

Sasson identifies the challenge as follows:

The real challenge we face going forward... is how to engage the growing population of young adults who grew up in intermarried homes. This is a population that feels itself a part of the Jewish world but typically knows little of it. How Jewish organizations address this challenge will determine—more than any inexorable laws of demography—the future character of American Jewry.

That challenge raises the issue of how Jews and Jewish communities respond to interfaith families—and whether they are tolerated, accepted, welcomed, or embraced. As previously mentioned, the Pew Report found that 89% of intermarried Jews are proud to be Jewish, but only 59% have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people. In 2013, the Jewish Outreach Institute released an interesting study, *Listening to the Adult Children of Intermarriage* (Olitzky, Golin, & Roham, 2013). Its key finding was that young adults with one Jewish

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parent are just as interested in many Jewish activities as those with two Jewish parents, but they participate in such activities less frequently when the programs are offered by Jewish institutions and prefer exploratory, self-guided activities. These data suggest two important and interrelated questions: Why would intermarried Jews feel proud to be Jewish but not feel like they belong? Why would young adults with one Jewish parent be interested in Jewish activities but not participate?

Interfaith families today still report a lack of welcoming, a lack of more than toleration or acceptance, a lack of a genuine, unreserved embrace. The Pew Report and community demographic surveys do not ask about what attracts and repels interfaith families from Jewish life—but InterfaithFamily’s surveys do. We ask what factors contribute to interfaith families joining Jewish organizations and synagogues—and what they experience as barriers. Our surveys are not strictly speaking “scientific;” respondents are self-selected and may respond to more than one survey. But in 2012 we reported on nearly 700 responses, all from people in interfaith relationships who are raising Jewish children and are members of Jewish organizations. This is the best source of available data on these important issues.

ACTIONS AND ATTITUDES EXPERIENCED AS UNWELCOMING

The primary reason why interfaith families do not participate in the Jewish community is that they do not receive explicit expressions of welcome, but instead have unwelcoming experiences: 79% of our respondents said an explicit welcome by organization professionals mattered “a lot” to them. Here are two comments on our surveys about this issue: “I feel that deep down the clergy... would prefer I be Jewish,” and the “Neanderthal attitude of some members to non-Jews... offended my wife royally.” A 2013 survey by a major city federation, which I reviewed, asked interfaith families about barriers to affiliation with synagogues or other Jewish institutions. Ninety people in interfaith relationships responded, of whom 30% said they had had negative experiences and 37% said institutions are not welcoming. There were a striking number of comments about individual members of the community not being welcoming as well: “Many in the Jewish community question your faith and give you strange looks when you say you’re raising your children in an interfaith home;” “There were times when my spouse got the stink eye or cold shoulder at synagogue events;” “At a Shabbat service ... (Reform congregation) ... a congregant said to the non-Jewish partner ‘maybe people like you would be better suited at another congregation.’” Deep-seated negative attitudes about intermarriage are still expressed. In the 2011 New York Jewish Community Study, 56% of non-Orthodox in-married Jews said they would be upset if their adult child married someone not Jewish who did not convert.

One person in our surveys summed up the importance of a welcoming attitude this way: “as long as being an interfaith family is considered a problem, we will never be reached.”

Patrilineal Jews

The JOI study of young adults included this comment: “Jews with one Jewish parent often feel excluded by the Jewish community; this feeling is more

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pronounced among those whose mother is not Jewish. Patrilineal Jews are less comfortable identifying themselves as children of intermarriage in the context of a Jewish communal institution.” IFF surveys corroborate the view that non-acceptance of patrilineal Jews is “a real turn-off... even if the kids want to learn they are told that they can never be Jewish.” There were also many comments like this in the Federation survey mentioned earlier: “We are committed to raising our son Jewish, but it’s a challenge to find the right place to do that. I hear from (Jewish) people all the time that my son ‘isn’t Jewish’/‘can’t be Jewish’ because his mother is not Jewish. Of course I reply that my son can be whatever we want him to be, but it’s clear that he’s going to face this kind of thinking by others.”

Difficulty in Finding Rabbinic Officiation at Weddings

The difficulty in finding a rabbi to officiate at an interfaith wedding has important implications for how that family perceives the Jewish community. The JOI study contains this very powerful quote: “There are so many ways in which Jewish institutions can say implicitly that your family is second class such as the rabbi who won’t do interfaith marriages. You are saying my parents’ relationship is a problem, and you don’t want to replicate couples who look like my parents. And I look at them and think ‘the world could use more people like my parents.’”

In IFF surveys, 67% of respondents—all of whom were synagogue members raising children as Jews, and thus past the time when officiation would have been an issue for their own weddings—said they were attracted a lot (42%) or somewhat (25%) to synagogues if “the rabbi officiates at weddings of interfaith couples.”

There were numerous comments in the Federation study about difficulties people had finding rabbis to officiate at their weddings: “It was painful for us when my childhood rabbi refused to perform our wedding ceremony, though I promised to raise my children exclusively in the Jewish faith and have done so;” “searching for a rabbi for our wedding was not a positive experience.”

Ritual Participation by People Who Are Not Jewish

In IFF surveys, synagogue policies on who can participate in worship services and life-cycle events have a major impact: those with inclusive policies attracted 64% of respondents “a lot.” One person left a congregation that “did not allow the non-Jewish members of my family to fully participate in my son’s bar mitzvah.”

Responding to the Many Interfaith Couples Who Want to Expose Their Children to Both Religious Traditions

Perhaps the most difficult issue around welcoming is how to respond to the many interfaith couples who want to expose their children to both religious traditions. The Pew Report said that 25% of intermarried parents are raising their children “partly Jewish by religion and partly something else”: that amounts to 300,000 children. The Reform movement has a policy that recommends that synagogue religious schools not accept students who are receiving formal religious education in another religion. How to respond to these families from a Jewish position and perspective is a major issue.

In her 2013 book, *Being Both: Embracing Two Religions in One Interfaith Family*, Susan Katz Miller advocates for raising children in interfaith communities that teach children about both religions and celebrate both religions. She argues that having interfaith communities that celebrate and teach about both religions is good for the Jews, because this approach exposes people to Judaism who otherwise would not learn about it and some couples will not choose just the Jewish route.

Of course, there are compelling reasons for intermarried parents to choose to raise their children in one religion, while still honoring the other parent's religion. Jane Larkin (2013), one of InterfaithFamily's parenting bloggers, responded to Katz Miller in the *Forward*, in her article titled "You Can't Be Both (Jewish and Not)." She writes, "How could our family be 'really Jewish' if we recognized Jesus as the Messiah? How could we be 'really Christian' if we didn't? It seemed that by choosing a hybrid path, our family would simply be on the threshold of both faiths but not be truly part of either."

Larkin also writes that she and her husband did not want to put their children in the position of choosing between mother or father, and that choosing one religious identity provides a framework for imparting values that parents want to instill. Having one faith does not deprive or shield children from having full knowledge of their religious background, but provides a foundation and strong basis from which to discuss commonalities and differences and build knowledge of other religions.

When we posted Jane Larkin's response to Katz Miller on the InterfaithFamily Facebook page, we got this comment:

I'm the Christian spouse of a Jewish man. I'm not sure whether the idea—you can't be both—is true or not. But I am sure that if the main thrust of Judaism's engagement with interfaith families is the promulgation of the idea that if your identity and practice are not exclusively Jewish, you aren't Jewish at all—Judaism will continue to appear unwelcoming to interfaith families.

If Judaism wants interfaith families to be involved, it should get us excited about being involved by welcoming us, meeting us where we are, teaching us about Judaism, and taking the time to learn about who we are, rather than telling us what we should do to be Jewish enough to participate.

If Jewish congregations and communities spent half the energy figuring out how to and trying to be actively welcoming interfaith families that they do coming up with standards and conditions for our participation, Judaism wouldn't have to worry about losing interfaith families.

It is interesting to consider Susan Katz Miller's motivation. Her father was Jewish, and her mother was not. She writes, "Often, I felt marginalized as an interfaith child and had to fight to defend my claim to Judaism." She was another patrilineal Jew who did not feel accepted. She and her husband wanted their children not to be "tolerated or on the periphery in a single-faith context." They did not want one spouse "to feel left out—to feel like an 'out-parent' or guest in a church or synagogue."

Interfaith partners should not have to worry about their children being marginalized or just tolerated or feeling as if they are on the periphery; nor

should the Jewish partner have to worry that his or her spouse feels left out. Jewish organizations and communities have to figure out a way to welcome and engage families who want to expose their children to both traditions. Jewish communities cannot afford to turn their backs on these families.

Miller also points out that more of the teenagers and young adults raised in interfaith communities “lean Jewish,” in her words, than Christian. “Perhaps, having been giving a love for Judaism and basic Hebrew literacy in childhood, they will choose at some point in their lives to practice Judaism exclusively.”

We at IFF believe that will occur because the inherent beauty and meaning that Judaism can provide shine through whenever it is fairly presented. That is why InterfaithFamily, which used not to have anything to do with the kinds of interfaith communities that Miller describes, is now happy to work with them to present “the Jewish side of things”—because you never know how the children will turn out.

ENGAGING INTERFAITH FAMILIES JEWISHLY IS THE ISSUE OF OUR DAY

The demographic trends of North American Jewry make a strong case for why, as a community, we should be committed to engaging interfaith couples and families in Jewish life and community. Our argument, however, goes deeper. It emerges from our recognition of the profound beauty and meaning that Jews and their partners can derive from engaging in Jewish life and community.

InterfaithFamily started as an internet-based resource. It offers a great deal of content about how it feels to explore Judaism in an interfaith family, and it provides a great deal of information on where people can connect to welcoming Jewish organizations and professionals in their local community. Those who have studied how to engage interfaith families—a group of national funders in 2008, a task force of the UJA-Federation of New York in 2011, and other similar Federation efforts—have emphasized the need to get the message out to people in interfaith relationships that Jewish life is accessible to and can be very meaningful for them, and that Jewish communities actively welcome their participation. Effective messaging requires a high-quality web platform and social media activity, but that is not enough.

In 2011 InterfaithFamily started a new effort to have staff on the ground in local communities to (1) provide trainings for Jewish leaders on how to welcome and work with people in interfaith relationships and to (2) coordinate a comprehensive range of services and programs for people in interfaith relationships. We now have staff in Chicago, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Boston; will expand to Los Angeles and Atlanta in the fall of 2014; and plan to be in nine communities by 2016. The trainings we (and other organizations) provide aim to reverse the lack of welcoming that interfaith families report experiencing (as discussed earlier). The programs we provide include an officiation referral service in which our local staff connect with people looking for rabbis for their weddings or baby namings, building relationships with them and connecting them to resources in the community beyond the life-cycle event itself; a workshop for new couples who are seriously dating or newly married about how to talk about and make decisions about religious traditions; and Jewish learning experiences including “Raising a Child with Judaism in Your Interfaith Family” with class content

organized around eight universal parenting needs and the Jewish practices that address them. For example, parents want their children to be grateful for food and to be aware that others are hungry; the Jewish practice for that is saying the blessing over bread, the *hamotzi*.

The interfaith couples who participate in our workshops report in pre- and postprogram evaluation surveys that they want to incorporate Judaism in their lives and they want to share ideas with other interfaith couples facing the same issues. And Jewish practices resonate for them; about reciting the *hamotzi*, one parent wrote,

Usually I find I'm mindlessly eating... to get done, and get on with dishes/bath/etc. I love the idea of saying thanks to God first, and thinking about our connection to the world, about where our meal comes from, before eating. I think this will be a great addition to our nightly meal time—a deep breath so to speak.

Another parent said,

We talked about appreciating the food that we have and told the girls that there are people that don't have enough food to eat. This is the first time that we have ever talked about this. A. (aged 5) asked, "Can't we share our food with the people who don't have any?" We talked about what a mitzvah it would be to volunteer at a food organization and/or donate from our piggy banks.

Every night at dinner we discuss a mitzvah that we have done during the day. I also discussed many of the topics with my husband.

We have also started to have "Shabbat dinners." I don't make anything fancy; we just eat what we would normally eat, but we say the prayers over the candles, wine, and bread. When J. is a little older, I would like to introduce the concept of tzedekah to him and add that to our Shabbat dinners. But probably one of the most important changes we have made since starting the class is that we have decided to join a synagogue. Last Friday, we went to our very first service together as a family.

Interfaith families are clearly showing an interest in Judaism when we reach out, build relationships with them, and engage them in what we have to offer. Doing so requires a very major effort. And it requires adapting our attitudes to be truly welcoming and embracing, with all of the challenges that entails.

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