What Attracts Interfaith Families to Jewish Organizations?  
A Report on InterfaithFamily Annual Holiday Surveys

Introduction and Summary

There has been a great deal of concern in the Jewish world about the degree to which interfaith families are engaged or disengaged in Jewish life and community. A headline of the New York Jewish Community Study of 2011, released in June 2012, was that interfaith families generally score low on that study’s index of Jewish engagement, while interfaith families who join synagogues or send their children to Jewish education score comparably to in-married families. Community studies like New York’s, and other available communal research, however, tell us precious little about what factors contribute to interfaith families joining Jewish organizations and expanding their connections to Judaism – or what they experience as barriers to that expanded connection.

Starting in December 2009, InterfaithFamily’s annual December Holidays survey and Passover/Easter survey have asked precisely those questions. This report sheds what is currently the most available light on these important issues: it summarizes and analyzes the responses of close to 700 respondents in six consecutive surveys who were in interfaith relationships, were raising their children as Jews, and were members of a synagogue or Jewish organization.

Interfaith families who are raising their children as Jews have a hierarchy of interests or needs that they want their synagogue or Jewish organization to address, apart from issues related to their being in interfaith relationships. More than half rated the following factors highly, in order of importance: opportunities for their children’s Jewish education and opportunities for their children to meet and socialize with other Jewish children; having a place to celebrate life cycle events and to attend High Holiday services; and opportunities to learn about Judaism. Less highly rated were opportunities to express spirituality, cultural and social events, opportunities for social action, and opportunities to have a leadership role in the synagogue or organization. The existence of friendships with and connections to other members was also very highly rated, while just under half rated highly the approach to prayer and ritual, the professionals, and the denomination.

As to issues directly related to interfaith relationships, interfaith families are attracted, in order of importance, by explicit statements that interfaith families are welcome; policies on participation by interfaith families; invitations to learn about Judaism and, to a much lesser extent, invitations to convert; the presence of other interfaith families; the offering of programming and groups specifically for interfaith couples; and officiation by rabbis at weddings of interfaith couples. Contrary to recent reports that interfaith couples feel comfortable attending Jewish activities, our surveys show that interfaith couples emphatically are interested in explicit statements of welcome and still report experiences of negative attitudes and disinverting behaviors as barriers to their expanded connection to Jewish life. Policies that limit participation by interfaith couples in ritual and leadership, perceived pressure to convert, the absence of programming and groups for
interfaith couples, and difficulties finding rabbis to officiate at weddings, are likewise reported as barriers to expanded connection.

The policy implications of these findings are that Jewish communities that want to increase engagement by local interfaith families need to:

• Ensure that local interfaith families receive explicit messages of welcome from the community and its organizations and leaders.
• Ensure that there are some Jewish clergy in the community who will officiate at weddings of interfaith couples so that their experience with the Jewish community at that critical point in their lives will help them connect to Jewish life.
• Offer programs and classes explicitly marketed as “for interfaith families,” and foster the formation of groups of interfaith couples and families in which they can explore and experience Jewish life together.

Methodology

InterfaithFamily has been conducting annual December Holidays and Passover/Easter surveys since 2004. Starting in December 2009, respondents were asked if they were currently a member of a synagogue or temple, a JCC, or another Jewish organization (respondents could define membership however they wished). If the respondents said they were a member, they were asked two questions about how important a series of factors were in attracting them to their synagogue or Jewish organization. The Passover surveys asked about Jewish organizations; the December surveys asked about synagogues. The first question asked about factors that are not related to interfaith family issues; the second question asked about factors that did. The answer choices were “A lot,” “Somewhat,” “A little,” “Not at all,” or “Don’t Know.”

We also asked two open-ended questions: “What if anything has been most helpful in your Jewish organizations [or synagogue] to you and your family exploring and expanding your connection to Judaism” and “What if any have been the barriers in your Jewish organizations [or synagogue] to you and your family exploring and expanding your connection to Jewish life?”

InterfaithFamily’s past survey reports have focused on the answers of respondents who are in interfaith relationships or intermarried, who had children, and who were raising or had raised their children as Jews, because it is the attitudes and behaviors of those families that we are most interested in exploring (and seeing replicated). Consistent with that focus, this report summarizes the answers of respondents who said they were in interfaith relationships or intermarried, had children, were raising or had raised their children Jewish, and were currently members of synagogues or other Jewish organizations.
General Factors that Attract Interfaith Families

We first asked “how important… in attracting you to a synagogue [or Jewish organization]” are the following factors that are not specific to interfaith families:

(See Appendix 1 for complete question and data table.)

These responses indicate that interfaith families who are raising their children as Jews have a hierarchy of interests or needs that they want their synagogue or Jewish organization to address. By far the most important interests are opportunities for their children’s Jewish education (85% said that factor attracted them “a lot”) and opportunities for their children to meet/socialize with other Jewish children (72%).

Next most highly rated are having a place to celebrate life cycle events (65%) and having a place to attend High Holiday services (59%). More than half rated opportunities to learn about Judaism highly (56% said that factor attracted them “a lot”).

Interfaith families express less interest in opportunities to express spirituality (38% said that factor attracted them “a lot”), cultural and social events (30%), opportunities for social action (22%), and opportunities to serve on committees and have a leadership role in the synagogue or organization (19%).

In terms of the characteristics of a synagogue or Jewish organization that attract interfaith families, by far the most important is the existence of friendships and connections to other members: 71% said that factor attracted them “a lot.” Just under half rated three other
organizational characteristics highly: the approach to prayer and ritual (49% said that factor attracted them “a lot”), the professionals (48%), and the denomination (44%).

Factors Related to Interfaith Families that Attract Them

We asked “how important… in attracting you to a synagogue [or Jewish organization]” are the following factors that are specific to interfaith families:

1. Welcoming/Unwelcoming Attitudes and Explicit Statements Indicating Welcome. The two factors that were rated most highly in the quantitative questions both involve explicit statements of welcome. The highest rated factor was that the professionals or rabbis say that they welcome interfaith families – 79% said this factor attracted them “a lot.” The second highest was that “the organization [or synagogue] says (in membership materials, bulletin, website) that it welcomes interfaith families” – 70% said this factor attracted them “a lot.”

The responses to the open-ended questions about what helped interfaith families who are organization members explore and expand on their Jewish connection were consistent with the quantitative responses. The most often mentioned helpful factor by far was a welcoming attitude coming from the organization or synagogue’s leaders and members. Some of the comments were:

- “Personal, welcoming attitude from clergy, lay leaders, and members that the status of ‘intermarried’ is not as important as wanting to experience connections to Jewish life.”
- “My spouse was welcomed as a genuine part of the congregation family in all aspects, as was
my son. This allowed me, as the Jewish partner, to comfortably express my Jewish identity without my spouse feeling alienated.”

- “They treat me like an important part of the Jewish community, even though I am not Jewish. They accept my children as Jewish without questioning our family’s choices.”

The open-ended responses provide more texture as to what interfaith families who are organization members experienced as welcoming:

- “Non-judgmental.”
- “Acceptance… without any reservations.”
- “Open to receiving my family in our Jewish journey where we are, without a lot of conditions and expectations about our practices.”
- “They never presume I know all the answers or traditions and they never make you feel dumb or different from any one else.”
- “Acceptance of questioning by my non-Jewish husband. His level of comfort has been the key to allowing our family to engage in increasing numbers of Jewish rituals and practices.”
- “The openness of the rabbis and cantor in accepting interfaith families and their help in figuring out how to incorporate things that work best for us.”
- “The sincere joy and appreciation shared by the rabbi… when my husband comes to an event, or a service.”
- “Appreciation for non-Jewish parents who are raising Jewish children.”

Open discussion of interfaith family issues was specifically identified as a helpful factor:

- “Seeing in a (Reform) synagogue bulletin that non-Jews are welcome to discuss anything, but especially religion and spirituality, with the Rabbi. Beautiful.”
- “Acceptance and welcome communicated in public (web site, brochures, etc.).”
- “The openness and graciousness of the clergy and the willingness of congregants to reach out and talk about issues relating to interfaith marriages.”
- “The previous senior rabbi was not welcoming and never talked about interfaith; the current rabbi welcomes us [and] talks about it.”
- “Clear statements about what is or is not appropriate for non-Jewish family members (e.g. should I say kaddish as a non-Jew for my Protestant father, or sit silently?)”

One comment identified as a barrier, “being vague about their approach to interfaith families.” Another reflected a practice perceived as not welcoming: “Sometimes I feel excluded when I have to check NON JEWISH on forms…”

The New York Jewish Community Study of 2011 reported that the vast majority of the intermarried say they do not feel uncomfortable attending most Jewish events and activities – only 14% feel uncomfortable, compared to 10% of the in-married. (p. 144). The principal author of that study, Steven M. Cohen, has been quoted as saying that “If discomfort is not a major
obstacle to Jewish engagement, then welcoming is not the solution.” But as the responses
detailed above indicate, the respondents to our surveys – interfaith families raising their children
as Jews who have joined synagogues or Jewish organizations – emphatically indicate that they
are heavily influenced by welcoming attitudes and explicit welcoming statements. One
interesting comment even indicated that they give more weight to differences in openness to
interfaith families than to other factors:
• “Our synagogue doesn't offer childcare during Shabbat morning services, and we have begun
attending services at a different synagogue on Shabbat mornings that offers a wonderful
children's program that our kids adore. The problem is that the synagogue with the great
kids’ program is not as open to interfaith families, so while we enjoy attending services there,
we are unlikely to become members there.”

Moreover, in response to our open-ended questions, the most often mentioned barriers interfaith
families who are organization members encounter to expanding their Jewish connection had to
do with perceived unwelcoming attitudes from both professionals and members:
• “Unwelcoming attitudes from clergy, lay leaders, and members that the status of non-Jew (of
my partner) is more important than making connections to Jewish life.”
• “A rabbi who told my wife (who was actively living a Jewish life and raising Jewish
children) that he had no responsibility for addressing any of her spiritual needs.”
• “My rabbis have not been very accepting of my decision to marry a Catholic who has no
intention of converting.”
• “Some rabbis in my past have been very cold and rude to my partner and other interfaith
couples. We were tolerated but not accepted.”
• “I feel that deep down the clergy/professionals feel differently. I get the sense that they
would prefer I be Jewish. I think it is something they try to ignore.”
• “Neanderthal attitude of some members to non-Jews, which has offended my wife royally.”
• “The prejudicial attitudes of some members toward non-Jews, who made disparaging
remarks in the presence of my wife, not realizing she was not Jewish. My wife has since
disavowed any interest in the Temple.”
• “Resistance and non-flexible attitudes by Jewish members regarding interfaith families.”
• “Still the old school attitudes that it is not the norm.”

A finding from the New York Jewish Community Study exposes widespread negative attitudes
about intermarriage that could well explain the disinviting, unwelcoming attitudes our
respondents experienced: high percentages of parents in the New York study say they would be
upset if their adult child married someone not Jewish who did not convert. While only 6% of
intermarrieds and 12% of converts would be upset, 56% of non-Orthodox in-married Jews would
be upset. The responses to our open-ended question about barriers mentioned general statements
of negative attitudes that are consistent with the upset the New York study’s respondents
reported:
• “Broad statements in the Jewish community and press about the evils of intermarriage are
off-putting to say the least.”
• “I am sometimes discouraged by the things I read online and other places that seem to suggest that intermarriage is bad or a threat.”
• “I am a Jewish community professional… and I acutely feel that the Jewish institutions that I belong to, the JCC and the local federation (which I work for) still see us as ‘intermarrieds’ and are not reaching us as a family. Our daughter's Reform Jewish pre-school has done the most to make us feel connected to the community just because we are included. I am not sure how to fix this, but as long as being an interfaith family is considered a problem, we will never be reached.”

2. Policies on Participation by Interfaith Families. The next most often mentioned factor attracting interfaith families was the organization or synagogue policies about interfaith families participating in worship services and at life cycle events – 64% said that factor attracted them “a lot.”

Many responses to the open-ended questions mentioned policies about participation by non-Jews as a helpful factor or as a barrier:
• “Willingness to let my non-Jewish husband participate fully (other than aliyah) in my children's religious upbringing, including Bar Mitzvah. Welcoming us as a family, not worrying who is and who is not ‘officially’ Jewish.”
• “My previous synagogue did not allow the non-Jewish members of my family to fully participate in my son’s bar mitzvah. We have since left that congregation.”
• “When my daughters were born, my husband was not allowed to speak on the bimah for our first born, the second one he was allowed to read a prayer for our country. Now that our daughter's bat mitzvah is approaching, the involvement of the non-Jewish side of the family is limited due to what they can and can't participate in at our temple.”
• “Another barrier is the fact that non-Jewish spouses are not allowed to have leadership positions at the temple. They can serve on committees but not on the Board of Trustees.”

A specific attitude that respondents identified in our open-ended responses as a barrier, which is related in many cases to policies about participation, involves recognition of “patrilineal” Jews:
• “I think the overall attitude to Jewish children of non-Jewish mothers (patrilineals) remains a very challenging issue for me. I am very invested in the choice we made to raise our children as Jews, and I hate the idea that someone thinks of my beloved children as second-class or that my generous gift of my children's religious life to the Jewish people might be scorned. I do not feel this in my congregation, but I am very well aware of this viewpoint in the broader community.”
• “Sometimes I feel excluded when… the temple does not consider my children truly Jewish, despite Reform doctrine which states only one parent needs to be Jewish, not just the mother.”
• “The view of not having a Jewish mother the kids can't be Jewish... a real turn off... even if the kids want to learn they are told that they can never be Jewish...”
Some comments mentioned issues particular to the Conservative movement as barriers:

- “We have been members for over 20 years and the Conservative movement is just beginning to accept interfaith families. We have met plenty of obstacles in our past 20 years that has made my non-Jewish husband feel uncomfortable.”
- “Unwillingness of the Conservative movement to recognize patrilineal descent or conversions performed by Reform or independent institutions.”

One person said, however, that “Times have changed for the better in our Conservative synagogue.”

3. Invitation to Learn vs. Invitation to Convert. Fifty-eight percent of respondents said they were attracted “a lot” by the Jewish organization or synagogue inviting non-Jews to learn about Judaism, while 32% said they were attracted “a lot” by invitations to learn about conversion. Twenty-four percent of respondents said that invitations to learn about conversion attracted them “not at all.” While a not insignificant percentage of partners in interfaith relationships clearly are open to and interested in learning about conversion, our survey responses indicate that almost twice as many are attracted by invitations to learn about Judaism. A few of the responses to the open-ended questions mentioned the absence of pushing to convert as a helpful factor and perceived attempts to convert as a barrier:

- “Openness to my husband and accepting what he determines to be his level of interest/involvement in Judaism (i.e. not pushing him to convert).”
- “The rabbi's attempts to convert my husband.”

4. Presence of Other Interfaith Families. Fifty-three percent of respondents said they were attracted “a lot” to a Jewish organization or synagogue if “there are a lot of interfaith families who are members.” Several of the open-ended responses referred to the presence of other interfaith families as a helpful factor:

- “The visibility of non-Jewish members encouraged us to join.”
- “Meeting other interfaith couples.”
- “Knowing that there are other interfaith families like us.”
- “What has been most helpful is other interfaith families. Meeting other non-Jewish women raising their kids Jewish.”

5. Programming and Groups “For Interfaith Families.” A previous report by InterfaithFamily on four of the holiday surveys concluded that significant percentages of interfaith families interested in Jewish life are interested in some programs that are marketed as “for interfaith families” and are attracted to synagogues and Jewish organizations that offer such programs. Expanding on that report, 45% of respondents to the six surveys were attracted “a lot” by the Jewish organization or synagogue offering programs “that are described as being ‘for interfaith families’.” Several of the open-ended responses mentioned this as helpful in expanding their Jewish connection:
• “The first thing that attracted me to the temple was the literature about programming offered to interfaith couples.”
• “Outreach and interfaith programming - opened the door to further exploration.”
• “Programs which introduce Judaism to those who are not completely familiar with it.”

Several comments mentioned as helpful factors programs and classes that may be community based and not centered in a particular organization or synagogue:
• “Classes in our community for interfaith families/couples. PJ Library has also been a great resource since we get Jewish themed books mailed directly to our home.”
• “We still don't have a synagogue. We have attended several services at one synagogue, but we haven't joined anywhere yet. The Mother's Circle class I am in seems like the best place for me to learn and explore Judaism in a comfortable environment.”

One comment indicated how programs can have a lasting impact because of the relationships that are formed:
• “The Intro to Judaism class that I took 10 years ago and the many friendships we made in that class motivated our decision to join this synagogue. The friends we made then are still our closest friends now.”

The absence of programs for interfaith families, on the other hand, was referred to as a barrier:
• “Not enough programs… for interfaith families.”
• “JCC needs more interfaith programming.”
• “Very few interfaith family-directed programs, so that my husband doesn't have definite connections with others going through the same life experiences that he is.”

Thirty percent of respondents said they were attracted “a lot” by the Jewish organization or synagogue organizing “groups of interfaith couples (havurah, interfaith discussion groups, etc.).” Some of the open-ended comments identified these as a helpful factor:
• “Interfaith Moms & Dads groups.”
• “Holding dinners for interfaith couples/families.”

Other open-ended comments mentioned the absence of these groups as a barrier:
• “I do wish for more interfaith groups.”
• “No interfaith group (chavurah, etc).”

6. Officiation for Interfaith Couples. Of respondents to the three December surveys about synagogues, 42% said they were attracted “a lot” if “the rabbi officiates at weddings of interfaith couples;” 25% said “somewhat,” 13% “a little,” and 21% “not at all.” Note that the respondents were all organization members who were raising children as Jews, thus past the time when officiation would have been a personal issue for their own wedding.

Several comments referred to rabbis not officiating as a barrier:
• “The fact that after being a member of a synagogue where my children attended since 5 years
old and where we all taught religious school, my oldest daughter who intermarried was refused to be married by the rabbi.”

- “Awful time getting a rabbi to officiate at my wedding.”
- “Our senior rabbi just retired. He performed interfaith marriages. Our new senior rabbi does not. I have expressed disappointment over this.”
- “It bothers me that our rabbi cannot bless an interfaith marriage.”

**Policy Implications**

We hope that the findings of this report will be helpful to individual Jewish leaders and organizations as well as local Jewish communities that want to see increased engagement in Jewish life and community by interfaith couples and families. The findings suggest several areas of concrete steps that could be taken to accomplish that desired objective:

- Ensure that local interfaith families receive explicit messages of welcome from the community and its organizations and leaders. In the long run, this will require significant attitudinal change among Jewish leaders to see potential positive Jewish engagement in interfaith families. In the shorter term, an important step towards this goal is making available and publicizing information about welcoming organizations, professionals, and programs, so that interested and potentially interested interfaith couples can hear they are welcome and find out what is available to them. A second important step is providing resource materials and inclusivity and sensitivity training to local Jewish professionals and lay leaders, to increase the chances that interfaith couples will experience a warm welcome when they do connect. These materials and trainings can help organizations and professionals resolve difficult issues around ritual and leadership participation, and how best to present opportunities for Jewish learning and for conversion.

- Ensure that there are some Jewish clergy in the community who will officiate at weddings of interfaith couples so that the couple’s experience with the Jewish community at that critical point in their lives will be positive and will help them expand their subsequent connection to Jewish life.

- Offer programs and classes explicitly marketed as “for interfaith families,” and foster the formation of groups of interfaith couples and families in which they can explore and experience Jewish life together.
Appendix 1

With respect to general factors:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How important is the following in attracting you to a Jewish organization:</th>
<th>A lot</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for children to have Jewish education (n=681)</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for children to meet/socialize with other Jewish children (n=684)</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendships and connections to other members (n=697)</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a place to celebrate life cycle events (n=693)</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a place to attend High Holiday services (n=696)</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to learn about Judaism (n=695)</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The approach to prayer and ritual (n=693)</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The professionals (n=688)</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The denomination (n=687)</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to express spirituality (n=691)</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural and social events (n=691)</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for social action (n=686)</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in committees/opportunities for leadership roles (n=680)</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2

With respect to factors specific to interfaith families:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How important is the following in attracting you to a Jewish organization:</th>
<th>A lot</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The professionals/rabbis say that they welcome interfaith families (n=686)</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The organization/synagogue says in membership materials, bulletin, website that it welcomes interfaith families (n=691)</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The policies about interfaith families participating in worship services/at life cycle events (n=672)</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Jews are invited to learn about Judaism (n=679)</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are a lot of interfaith families who are members (n=676)</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs are offered that are described as being “for interfaith families” (n=708)</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The rabbi officiates at weddings of interfaith couples (n=325)</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups of interfaith couples (havurah, interfaith discussion groups, etc.) are organized (n=656)</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Jews are invited to learn about conversion (n=616)</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>