

## Intermarriage: Can Anything Be Done?

By Jack Wertheimer, September 2013



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**The battle is over; or so we're told.** A half-century after the rate of Jewish intermarriage began its rapid ascent in the United States, reaching just under 50 percent by the late 1990s, many communal spokesmen appear to have resigned themselves to the inevitable.

Some speak in tones of sorrow and defeat. Encouraging endogamy, they say, has become a fool's errand; few Jews are receptive to the message, and short of a wholesale retreat into the ghetto, no prophylactic measure will prevent them from marrying non-Jews. For others, the battle is over because it *should* be over. Not only, they say, are high rates of intermarriage inevitable in an open society, but they constitute glorious proof of just how fully Jews have been accepted in today's America. The real threat, according to this view, emanates from those who stigmatize intermarried families as somehow deficient; with a less judgmental and more hospitable attitude

on the part of communal institutions, many more intermarried families would be casting their lot with the Jewish people.<sup>1</sup>

To anyone familiar with Jewish history, these views must sound novel in the extreme. For Jews, after all, intermarriage has been a taboo since antiquity. First enshrined in biblical texts prohibiting Israelites

from marrying into the surrounding nations, the ban was later expanded in the rabbinic period to encompass all non-Jews. Nor, contrary to the fevered imaginings of anti-Semites, are Jewish endogamy norms the product of clannishness or misanthropy. Rather, they were introduced as a means of insuring Judaism's transmission—by born Jews as well as by the converts to whom Judaism has almost always been open—from one generation to the next.

For any small minority, such transmission is no simple undertaking; history is littered with examples of extinct national groups and faith communities that, for want of a successful strategy to preserve their distinctive identities, were swallowed by majority cultures. In the Jewish community, though some always strayed from its embrace, the norm was upheld, and those who did stray were regarded as transgressors of a sacred proscription.

Against the whole sweep of Jewish communal history, then, to declare defeat on this front is a decidedly abnormal if not a preposterous response. What is more, it is totally at odds with, if not subversive of, the view held by the more engaged sectors of the American Jewish community today: Jews who affiliate themselves with synagogues and the major organizations. In a much-discussed [2011 survey](#) of New York-area Jews, nearly three-quarters of those for whom being Jewish was “very important” said they would be “very upset” if a child of theirs married a non-Jew. Among the synagogue-affiliated, the same strong preference for endogamy was expressed by 66 percent of Conservative Jews and 52 percent of Reform Jews; for Orthodox Jews, the figure rose to 98 percent. Similar patterns have surfaced in a national survey of Jewish leaders, including younger leaders who are not yet parents.

It is simply not true, then, that the battle against intermarriage is over. But what should or could be done to counteract it, and how should American Jewish institutions address the issue?

This is a tale that must be told in parts.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this essay, “intermarriage” refers to a union between a Jew and a non-Jew; if the latter has converted to Judaism, he or she is counted as a Jew.

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## 1. Causes and Consequences

**It is impossible to understand** today's defeatist response to intermarriage without first taking in the sheer dimensions of the phenomenon and the rapidity of change that has accompanied and followed from it.

For much of the 20th century, intermarriage rates among Jews hovered in the single digits. Then, in the second half of the 1960s, they suddenly jumped upward, rising to 28 percent in the 1970s and from there to 43 percent in the second half of the 80s. By the late 1990s, 47 percent of Jews who were marrying chose a non-Jewish spouse. Although no national survey has been conducted since the National Jewish Population Study [NJPS] of 2000-01, there is reason to believe that rates have continued to rise over the past decade.

What accounts for the massive uptick? A good portion of the answer can be traced to broader trends in America society. Until the 1960s, as the historian Jonathan Sarna has observed, Americans of all kinds strongly favored marrying within their own religious and ethnic communities and frowned upon cross-denominational unions. But those barriers no longer exist, leaving Jews to face "a cultural mainstream that legitimates and even celebrates intermarriage as a positive good." In a further reversal, *opposingsuch* marriages now "seems to many people to be un-American and [even] racist."

Reinforcing this trend is the fact that American society in general has become a far more hospitable place. Where discriminatory policies once limited the numbers of Jews on elite university campuses, in certain industries or neighborhoods, and at restrictive social and recreational clubs, today's Jews gain easy entry into every sector of American society. Not surprisingly, some meet and fall in love with their non-Jewish neighbors, colleagues, and social intimates.

**Each of these factors**, intensified by the social mobility and porous boundaries characteristic of contemporary America, especially among its educated and affluent classes, has contributed to the domino-like effect of ever-increasing intermarriage. In turn, the intermarriage wave is what has contributed to the sense among rabbis, communal leaders, and others that resisting the phenomenon is like trying to alter the weather.

And yet, unlike the weather, intermarriage results from human agency. Undoubtedly, larger social forces are at work; but individual Jews have chosen to respond to them in particular ways. They have decided whom they will date and marry, and, when they marry a non-Jew, they have again decided how their home will be oriented, how their children will be educated, and which aspects of Judaism and of their Jewish identities they will compromise for the sake of domestic peace. Whatever role “society” plays in these decisions, it does not dictate them.

It is important to raise this point early on because of a running debate about how best to understand the “why” of intermarriage in individual cases. What motivates an individual Jew to choose to marry a non-Jew? Many researchers locate the source in poor Jewish socialization: specifically, the experience of growing up in an unaffiliated or weakly affiliated home and receiving a thin Jewish education. Undoubtedly, this holds true in numerous cases. But to suggest that intermarriage is merely or mostly a symptom of poor socialization is to ignore those Jews whose parents are highly engaged, who have benefited from the best the Jewish community has to offer, and who nevertheless, for one reason or another, have ended up in an interfaith marriage.

A more productive approach is to view intermarriage not simply as a symptom but as a complex and dynamic human phenomenon with both multiple causes and multiple consequences—consequences that affect the lives of the couple in question, their families, and the relevant institutions of the Jewish community. It is the consequences that most concern us here, for in their aggregate they comprise the challenge that has long faced Jewish leaders and policy makers.

To begin with the couple: when two people from different religious backgrounds set about establishing the ground rules of their home life, whose religious holidays will they celebrate? Will children be raised with the religion of one parent, with no religion, with two religions? If in Judaism, will the Gentile parent participate in religious rituals in the home and synagogue? And how will this new nuclear family relate to its extended family? If the intermarried family identifies itself as Jewish, will children visit with non-Jewish family members on the latter’s holidays— joining grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins for Christmas and Easter dinners and perhaps church services? How to deal with inevitable changes in feelings, as when spouses rediscover strong residual emotion for the religion of their birth, or when divorce occurs and partners are no longer invested in the need for compromise?

Faced with divided or multiple loyalties, one or both partners may respond to any of these questions by simply avoiding religious differences, by making serial accommodations, or by

succumbing to resentment and temporary or permanent discontent. None of these responses is neutral, and each can have a ripple effect far beyond the intermarrying pair.

Parents of Jews face their own challenges, starting when an adult child announces his or her decision to marry a Gentile. If the decision collides with the parents' understanding of Jewish responsibility, father and mother must come to grips with their powerlessness to alter it. When grandchildren are born, they must reconcile themselves to the possibility that their descendants may be lost to Judaism. If they are intent on maintaining their ties to children and grandchildren, as most parents quite understandably are, they must make whatever peace they can with the new realities.

In doing so, parents often turn to Jewish institutions to help smooth the way for their intermarrying or intermarried offspring. Some parents have insisted that rabbis officiate at interfaith weddings. When grandchildren arrive, they may clamor for a change in the longstanding rabbinic definition of Jewish identity as determined solely by the mother. (The Reform movement has already instituted that change.) There have also been demands for extending to Gentile spouses the opportunity to participate in synagogue governance with full membership rights.

**A half-century ago**, none of this would have been imaginable. Now it is taken for granted, and the end is not yet in sight. What is more, both the challenges and the demands have been met by many of the relevant Jewish institutions with a response ranging from acquiescence and accommodation to outright enthusiasm.

Today, hundreds of rabbis, far from turning away couples seeking rabbinic blessings, lead nuptials with all the trappings of a traditional ceremony: a groom with a yarmulke perched on his head, the breaking of a glass, even some form of the traditional Jewish marriage contract and some of the traditional "Seven Benedictions"—all designed to create the impression that a perfectly normal Jewish wedding is in progress even though one partner is not Jewish in any sense. A considerable number of rabbis and cantors are also happy to co-officiate at weddings with Christian clergy, each side incorporating elements of its own religious traditions and thereby blurring the boundaries between them. All that is asked, if it is asked, is a vague promise from the couple that children will be raised as Jews.

Congregations also permit non-Jewish spouses to take part in religious services and serve on synagogue committees that set policies for how a Jewish life should be conducted. (A rabbi of my acquaintance reported his befuddlement when a member of his synagogue's religious-education committee appeared at a meeting one Ash Wednesday evening with a cross etched on her forehead.) In a step further, at least one major rabbinical school appears set to permit intermarried Jews themselves to enroll and train to become spiritual leaders of the Jewish community.

Nor is the pattern of accommodation limited to synagogues. American Jewish organizations of all stripes, faced with the need or the desire to adjust to new realities, have adopted a slew of previously inconceivable policies. Few would think now of discriminating against an intermarried Jew applying for membership, or refrain from honoring such persons at fundraising dinners, or ban them from serving on or chairing a board of trustees. For some organizations, even Gentiles who are married to Jews may be elevated to high office.

In brief, diverted from their traditional role of encouraging families to deepen their connections to Jewish life into the unprecedented role of accepting, validating, and offering therapeutic counseling to families divided by religion, Jewish religious and communal leaders have largely adopted a formula out of the playbook of those urging an embrace of the status quo.

That formula places primacy on doing nothing that might alienate intermarried families and everything to bring them in, on the theory that intermarriage will actually contribute to the strengthening of Judaism and the Jewish people by the addition of a whole new population attracted to the faith of Israel. Through the unrelenting efforts of an "outreach" industry—comprising personnel at several organizations whose sole mission is to promote the perceived interests of intermarried Jews, social workers and counselors attached to Jewish community centers and federations of Jewish philanthropies, advisers to rabbinical boards, and others whose livelihoods are based on working with the intermarried—a set of five do's and don'ts has become implicitly enshrined as communal policy.

First, the best response to intermarriage is public silence; any talk about the subject is apt to drive away intermarried Jews and their extended families. Second, Jews contemplating intermarriage are to be treated with solicitude and never challenged to consider the personal or communal implications of their decisions. Third, the community should soft-pedal the importance of who stands next to a Jew under the bridal canopy, and likewise the importance of a Jewish pedigree in the creation of a Jewish family. Fourth, to ask intermarried families to commit themselves wholeheartedly to Jewish life is an imposition doomed to failure. Fifth,

insofar as the topic of the next generation comes up, Gentile spouses who permit and facilitate their children's Jewish education are to be praised but never asked to convert to Judaism.

## 2. The Results Are In

**Such are the beliefs** of those stressing not only the futility but the sheer counter-productivity of resistance. Enough time has passed by now to enable a fair test of this hypothesis and an overall assessment of the past half-century's experiment in intermarriage and its effects.

If we look at the phenomenon in the aggregate, a negative judgment is inescapable. The bottom-line fact is that in both religious and communal life, intermarried families participate at decidedly lower rates than their in-married counterparts. The 2000-01 NJPS offers ample evidence comparing the two populations. In the realm of religious engagement, four times fewer intermarried families than in-married families join and regularly attend a synagogue, and five times fewer keep a kosher home. The same trends obtain in the area of social and communal participation: three times fewer intermarried families report that two or more of their closest friends are Jewish, and four to five times fewer join and volunteer for Jewish organizations or contribute to Jewish philanthropy.

The picture is similar in local communities. According to the 2011 study of New York's Jewish population, in-married families outperform intermarried families by ratios of two-to-one or three-to-one on most measures of Jewish involvement; the largest gaps appear in relation to such key activities as "belonging to a congregation, lighting Shabbat candles, attending services at least monthly, and having closest friends who are mostly Jewish."

Communal surveys in other large cities like Chicago, Baltimore, and Cleveland tell the same tale. Asked whether spending time with Jewish friends is important, 64 percent of in-married families in Baltimore say yes as compared with only 14 percent of intermarried families; asked about "being part of the Jewish community of Baltimore," 62 percent of the in-married respond that this is very important as compared with only 8 percent of the intermarried. Mapping these large disparities, the sociologist Steven M. Cohen sums up the overall situation in the title of his 2006 study: *A Tale of Two Jewries*.

What about winning the allegiance of the next generation? Here, at least, the trend lines are partially mixed. The proportion of intermarried families claiming to raise their children as Jews seems to have increased from one-fifth in 1990 to one-third a decade later—still disappointingly low, but progress of a sort. More recent studies report wide variations: three-fifths in

communities like Boston and Cincinnati, one-half in Chicago, but under one-third in Baltimore, Cleveland, Detroit, Minneapolis, and New York. In newer communities, intermarried families accord even lower priority to a Jewish education: a 2011 survey of the East Bay area near San Francisco found only about one-fifth of the intermarried assigning importance to this goal versus three-quarters of the in-married.

How to explain these divergences? Clearly, not all intermarried families are alike. Levels of Jewish connection differ as between families with an unambiguous commitment to Judaism and families exposing their children to aspects of two distinct religions; between those residing close to vital centers of Jewish life and those living at a geographic remove; between those where the Jewish partner has benefited from a strong Jewish background and those where the Jewish partner has not (the “socialization” factor). The sex of the Jewish parent matters a great deal, too. Analyzing intermarried families identified with Reform Judaism, the sociologist Sylvia Barack Fishman finds that on most measures of Jewish practice and involvement, from ritual circumcision to schooling to observance of holidays and synagogue attendance, fewer Jewish men than women seem able or willing to assume active responsibility; in other words, the role of a Jewish mother remains key.

Still, variations and exceptions aside, the generalization holds: intermarried families have considerably lower chances of raising committed Jews.<sup>2</sup> With the passage of time, moreover, we are able to see what this means in the behavior of *adult* children of intermarriage. The 2000-01 NJPS found that a mere 16 percent of such adults identified themselves as Jews by religion, with another 26 percent self-identifying as secular Jews. Almost half named their religion as Christianity; another 10 percent claimed adherence to Eastern or New Age religions. The more recent New York study yields similar findings: only 40 percent of adult children of intermarried parents name their religion as Judaism. On many other scales, too, including attitudes toward Israel and organizational involvement, adult children of intermarried parents participate in Jewish life at far lower rates than adults raised by two Jewish parents.

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<sup>2</sup> The sociologist Bruce Phillips provides a cost-benefit analysis to help explain how religious fault lines within households shape decisions like membership in and attendance at a synagogue or Jewish education:

Given that synagogue membership typically costs thousands of dollars, it should come as no surprise that intermarriage depresses synagogue membership, even among respondents for whom attending synagogue and being part of a Jewish community is central to how they are Jewish. Why would a non-Jew want to invest in someone else's religion? ... Add to this the combination of logistics and cost necessary to provide a formal Jewish education. Even the most welcoming synagogue is hard put to convince a non-Jewish spouse to make these investments.

The same considerations hold in other areas as well. Why opt to live in more expensive Jewish neighborhoods if one spouse is only marginally connected to the Jewish community? And so forth.



Finally, what about the impact of outreach efforts and other sorts of programming aimed specifically at securing the commitment of intermarried families? Already, Reform and Reconstructionist synagogues around the country proclaim their warm embrace of all kinds of families, and many Conservative synagogues are competing to be equally hospitable. Yet there is no evidence to suggest that such large investments make a significant difference. “Even in the ideal case,” concede the researchers Benjamin Phillips and Fern Chertoff, two proponents of increased outreach, “where both [in-married and intermarried] households gave their children the same level of education, observe the same rituals, have the same proportion of Jewish friends, and [the children] were raised exclusively as Jews, intermarriages are significantly less likely to produce adults who identify themselves as Jewish than are in-marriages.”

Perhaps most telling is still another datum: according to the 2000-01 NJPS, 80 percent of the offspring of intermarried Jews marry a non-Jew. We do not yet fully know the outcomes of these marriages, but as the generations pass, it is reasonable to assume an even further attenuation. Bruce Phillips, basing himself on the 2000-01 NJPS, concludes that as of the turn of this century, only 22 percent of children of intermarriage were being raised with Judaism as their religion. In a different context, he has demonstrated that the adult children of intermarriage are also driving up the numbers of the so-called “Nones”: self-identified Jews who eschew any denominational label. These “Borderland Jews,” as Steven M. Cohen has dubbed them, do not reject the Jewish component of their ancestry; it just is not very important in their lives. The majority of adult children of intermarriage now agree with the statement, “Being Jewish has very little to do with how I see myself.” Few of these peripheral Jews are likely to join Jewish organizations or support Jewish causes, with far-reaching implications for the already contracting vitality of Jewish institutional life.

And then there are the descendants of intermarried families who identify with a religion other than Judaism. The largest group, not surprisingly, are the over one million Americans of Jewish ancestry who identified themselves as Christians in the 2000 NJPS. The last time the organized American Jewish community focused on what was then called the challenge of Jewish “continuity,” a question making the rounds was “Will your grandchildren be Jewish?” At the time, the question was derided as a hysterical overreaction, but we now know the answer. In over a million cases so far, they already aren’t.

### **3. Looking Ahead**

**What, then, does the future hold?** Unfortunately, past history offers little guidance. Most Jewish communities with high levels of intermarriage have tended to be small and off the beaten track, and they have disappeared. The closest parallel to the present American situation existed in some areas of Western and Central Europe in the first decades of the 20th century. There, intermarriage rates shot up as Jews urbanized. But before the full effects could be registered, the communities themselves were destroyed in the Holocaust.

A more apt analogue may be contemporary Russia, where intermarriage among Jews has been the norm for at least three generations; it is estimated that by the end of the Soviet era, seven out of ten Jewish males and six out of ten Jewish females had married non-Jews. Still, according to a recent study, a Jewish identity persists even in the absence of much Judaism and of any “thick” cultural content, consisting instead of a sense of connection to the Jewish people and especially a feeling of closeness to Israel; that sense is reinforced by common patterns of educational and professional attainment and, to a lesser extent, exclusion from Russian society.<sup>3</sup>

American Jews who are blasé about intermarriage rates may take a certain comfort in this example. But whatever may be the long-term viability of Jewish life in Russia, the sources of its cohesion have little parallel in the United States, where discrimination is not a factor and neither a particular pattern of professional achievement nor a strong identification with Israel binds descendants of the intermarried to each other or to Jewish life.

In the absence of close parallels, we can only base our projections on current trend lines. As things look now, the American Jewish group of the future will be anchored by the Orthodox and by those among the non-Orthodox willing to identify unambiguously with Judaism. Boasting higher fertility rates than other Jews, this population will insure the future viability of the American Jewish community, albeit considerably shrunken in its numbers and infrastructure. On the periphery will be the so-called borderland Jews whose interest in Jewish life will likely focus on one or another aspect of Jewish culture but will be episodic and in competition with other compelling aspects of their identities. Already, some children of intermarriage refer to themselves with sardonic self-consciousness as “Half-Jews” or “mongrel Jews” or “FrankenJews.”

Among these, the most problematic for the organized community will be a segment demanding “official” acceptance as Jews—with, however, a dual religious identity. A new book, *Being Both*,

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<sup>3</sup> Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Identities in Postcommunist Russia and Ukraine: An Uncertain Ethnicity*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

reflects a small but growing movement, encouraged by some Jewish and Christian clergy, to raise children in two different religions and then let them decide where their allegiances lie. Jews-for-Jesus and other messianic groups will undoubtedly be the beneficiaries of these efforts, and synagogues will find themselves pressed to adopt religiously syncretistic practices in order to accommodate those with hybrid identities. Needless to say, the Jewish community will not be able to rely on such dual-identity Jews for sustained support or participation.

In-between these blocs lies a sizable population of intermarried families who profess an interest in raising their children as Jews. Their chances of success, as we have seen, vary greatly, but if current patterns hold, the preponderance of their children will gravitate to the periphery, and only a minority will cast their lot with the core.

**In brief, Jewish communal leaders bet heavily** on a formula that they believed would help tip the scales in a different and better direction, and lost. But the bad news does not appear to have resulted in any rethinking of the formula. As for the proponents of outreach, far from being deterred, they have doubled down on their admonitions and even added a menacing bite to them. Why are more and more intermarried families failing to affiliate with synagogues? Because, we hear, congregations are insufficiently welcoming. Why do so many eschew participation in Jewish life and choose to live at a remove from centers of Jewish activity? Because communities are inhospitable. Implicit threats are thrown into the mix: if a synagogue rabbi declines to officiate at intermarriages, entire families will quit and find a place that welcomes them without question. If communal institutions are deemed unfriendly, donors will withhold their philanthropy pending a change in policy.

Against today's backdrop of financial hardship and declining membership rolls, such threats hit home. Outreach proponents portray themselves as generous of heart, motivated by a spirit of inclusiveness and good will; their campaigns, however, have created a rather nasty culture of intimidation and blame.

In off-the-record conversations, rabbis and organizational leaders are not shy about the pressures placed upon them to capitulate if they intend to retain their jobs, let alone meet their budgets. Reform rabbis who do not wish to bless an interfaith union are unlikely to get far in applying for desirable pulpits. In the Conservative movement, rabbis live with the knowledge that their refusal to officiate, no matter how tactfully it is explained, may result in a family's dropping its membership. For fear of alienating large donors whose children have intermarried,

heads of federations of Jewish philanthropy throw money at outreach efforts they know will yield little.

Stories abound. In one congregation, a rabbi was castigated for devoting a sermon to the impending holiday of Hanukkah without giving equal time to Christmas. On a more routine basis, the merging of two radically different holidays into Chrismukkah has become a matter of mirth and good cheer, masking the insult delivered to two great religions. Jewish educators admit they have no idea what religious ideas their students have absorbed from their parents and extended family—and don't want to know. Rather than defending Judaism's distinctive system, some Jewish clergy and synagogues have allowed themselves to act as if some of their families are fully Jewish even if one spouse is not Jewish by any criterion. They have thereby also become the bearers of an insidious message—that all this religious stuff is really not terribly important and shouldn't be allowed to distract from the really important thing, which is for everyone to play nice and get along.

Wan but sincere efforts to counter this trend have run into entrenched opposition. A few years ago, several Reform rabbis offered single congregants a free membership in JDate, the web-based Jewish dating service, as a means of helping them meet other single Jews. Lobbyists for the intermarried denounced the effort as an insult to Jews who have married Gentiles. (Interestingly, few protests were voiced by other congregants.) In another incident, the Jewish Agency for Israel, seeking to woo back Israeli emigrants living in the U.S., aired [Hebrew-language ads](#) highlighting the self-evident fact that intermarriage is the Achilles heel of American Jewish life. The full wrath of organized American Jewry came down upon the sponsors, who felt compelled to withdraw their message. A third example: one of the most popular tour operators of Birthright Israel trips was forced out of business because he had the temerity to speak openly to young singles about their responsibility to date and marry other Jews and produce Jewish children.

In short, it remains unacceptable to encourage Jews to marry other Jews, unacceptable to state the obvious about the downside of intermarriage, and unacceptable to invoke such a thing as a responsibility to the Jewish people. In today's environment, Jewish endogamy has become the love that dare not speak its name.

## **4. Choosing a Different Way**

**Despite the pressures to capitulate**, numerous rabbis of all denominational outlooks and leaders of Jewish organizations do continue to resist, knowing that compromising away the principles of Judaism, whatever short-term gains it may yield, will in the long run destroy the soul of American Jewry. In many cases, these leaders can rely on support from their institutions or at the very least from their core followers.

All in all, then, it is a tragic misreading of the contemporary scene to ignore the strength and dedication of what may well be a silent majority: the families who join and attend synagogues, support federation campaigns, and participate as activists in Jewish organizations—and who vocally registered their preferences in the New York City survey cited at the start of this essay. These families speak forthrightly to their children about the value of marrying Jews and of creating strongly committed Jewish homes, disdain the counsel of defeatism, and yearn for leaders who will champion instead of undermining their private efforts to inculcate an unshakable Jewish identification in their children and grandchildren.

Can Jewish leaders work together with this silent majority to overthrow the regnant approaches to intermarriage? And if so, how?

First and foremost, a more assertive approach to intermarriage would require the dignified acknowledgement by Jewish institutions that endogamous families are the Jewish ideal—the best hope for transmitting a strong identity to the next generation. Once this crucial premise is openly espoused, the next logical step is to invest heavily in intensive forms of Jewish education through the college years and in helping Jewish singles, including the “alumni” of this education, to meet each other. Our advanced technologies and the ease of contemporary travel offer unprecedented opportunities to bring American Jews together with their peers and to nurture stronger connections with the Jewish people globally.

Practically speaking, it makes sense, as the previous paragraph suggests, to focus less energy on courting already intermarried families—once an intermarriage has occurred, it is far more difficult for communal institutions to intervene—than on encouraging as many single Jews as possible to marry within the community. Birthright Israel serves as one model for such programs; many more initiatives like it are needed in the United States. Their message should be transparent: instead of being infantilized with assurances that no strings will ever be attached, younger Jews need to hear without equivocation why it is important to build Jewish families. And they must be told the truth: the American Jewish community is in a fight for its life, and the younger generation is expected to shoulder its share of responsibility.

A vigorous approach would also require confronting single Jews who are contemplating marriage to a non-Jew with some of the complications they can expect to encounter. “Every single day,” writes a rabbi, “I deal with couples who have been together two, three, four years but are only now—once they live together, [and] once they have become a part of the other’s family life—starting to talk about religion.” Such obliviousness is common, and very damaging. Allowing couples to live in a state of denial about the wrenchingly divisive and acrimonious issues that can lie in wait for them does them no favor; nor does pretending that marriage is solely a private matter with no social consequences.

As for the already intermarried, an emphasis on endogamy, contrary to the assertions of outreach advocates, need not ensue in feelings of rejection. Intermarried couples and their children are already warmly welcomed by Jewish institutions. Those who wish to learn more, to deepen their understanding and commitment, should continue to be encouraged. But the right to join comes with responsibilities—for in-married and intermarried families alike. Grudging or minimal involvement saps Jewish institutions of energy, and the failure to level with people about what is asked of them is profoundly demoralizing to all.

What might Jewish leaders say to intermarried families and especially to couples contemplating intermarriage? The question was asked and answered publicly by Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the former president of the Reform movement’s congregational body:

[B]y making non-Jews feel comfortable and accepted in our congregations, we have sent the message that we do not care if they convert. But . . . the synagogue is not a neutral institution. It is committed to building a vibrant religious life for the Jewish people. . . . And, by the way: most non-Jews who are part of synagogue life *expect* that we will ask them to convert. They come from a background where asking for this kind of commitment is natural and normal, and they are more than a little perplexed when we fail to do so.

In her own recent study of intermarriage trends in American society at large, Naomi Schaefer Riley, citing the success of the Church of the Latter Day Saints in converting “Gentile” spouses of Mormons, urges a similarly self-assured approach by the Jewish community.

One resource that could be tapped in such an effort already exists in synagogues and other institutions: namely, families in which the Gentile spouse has converted to Judaism. An exemplary account is at hand in a book that also offers a dramatic counterpoint to *Being Both*, the polemic for dual identity discussed earlier. In *Doublelife: One Family, Two Faiths, and a*

*Journey of Hope*, Harold and Gayle Redlingshafer Berman—she a former choir leader in church and he a minimally involved Jew—movingly recount their path toward an observant Jewish life. Imagine placing this book in the home of every intermarried family—or imagine sending the Bermans and twenty other such families around the country to tell their stories. Mormons would not shrink from such an experiment; why should Jews?

To be sure, some will in any case not see their way to conversion. But this need not deter a proud Jewish community from speaking openly to *all* of its members, in-married and intermarried alike, about the imperative to build a home with an unambiguous commitment to Judaism. Mixed messages introduce cognitive dissonance. By contrast, asking more from in-married families reinforces the credibility of the message when delivered to the intermarried.

Not least, an alternative approach to intermarriage would shift the onus of responsibility from institutions back to families. All the compromises made by synagogues and other Jewish institutions are likely to yield little more than contempt as long as families are permitted to shirk their primary responsibility for the Jewish identity of their children. That identity is formed through attachments nurtured within family settings: engagement with Jewish rituals, trips to Jewish sites, investments in Jewish education, and the communication of family lore.

**This overall outline** for a more assertive approach to intermarriage can be augmented through the creative thinking of Jewish leaders committed to making their own journey from timidity to self-assurance. As with so many battles, the first casualty in contending with intermarriage has been the truth. It is past time not only to rebut the falsehoods and expose the failed promises but to proclaim that, for the sake of the American Jewish future, it matters greatly who stands under the marriage canopy. The blurring of religious boundaries in order to achieve peace in the home may lower tensions in the short term, but demonstrably sows confusion in children and huge losses of adherents in the longer term. The Jewish community and its leaders are not the cause of the disaffection of the intermarried; but neither need they handcuff themselves in order to placate activists who use the power of the purse to intimidate, or defeatists who counsel capitulation.

Here is how two writers, one a Reform rabbi and the other a former executive with a federation of Jewish philanthropy, describe the standard approach taken till now:

Sure, when an intermarried family or an assimilated Jew comes along, we open our doors. We smile at them. We tell them how grateful we are that they've come. We tell the non-Jewish spouse how delighted we are that she drives the children to Hebrew school. But we don't talk about commitment. We don't talk about working hard to serve a higher purpose. *We don't actually ask anything of them.*[emphasis added]

“In truth,” these two writers add, mordantly, “what we're doing isn't warm and welcoming at all.”

Exactly so. The intermarriage taboo crumbled in part because individual Jews came to realize they would pay no price for exogamy in the form either of familial or communal disapproval or of pressure on the non-Jewish spouse to convert. Jewish leaders who regard Judaism as a religious system with its own integrity, who seek to transform the lives of Jews rather than acquiescing in their every whim, should cease to countenance practices that blur religious differences in order to appeal to the lowest common denominator. While extending a hand of true welcome to those who wish to join the Jewish people, such leaders need also to remind them that with joining come responsibilities. Who knows how many would find such a message refreshing, inspiring, life-altering—and just what they've been looking for? ■

### **About the Author**

Jack Wertheimer, professor of American Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, is the editor of *The New Jewish Leaders: Reshaping the American Jewish Landscape*, based on a project he recently directed, and is currently completing three projects on aspects of Jewish day-school education. His essays on Jewish life in the United States appear regularly in *Commentary*.

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