

Intermarriage Statistics

David Rudolph, Ph.D.

I am fascinated by intermarrieds, not only because I am intermarried but also because intermarrieds are changing the Jewish world. Tracking this reshaping of the Jewish landscape involves keeping up with the latest demographic studies. If you are interested in the subject but have little time for the research, below is a synopsis of the kinds of historic shifts that are taking place in the North American Jewish community today.

The North American Intermarriage Rate

In 1970, the American Jewish intermarriage rate was estimated to be 13 percent. Today it hovers around 50 percent¹ – 1 out of every 2 Jews today intermarries. *There are now over 1 million intermarried couples in the United States*, in a Jewish community of 5-7 million (depending on how you define “Jewish”).

Sociological Factors

Various reasons are given for the high intermarriage rate in North America but three factors often go unmentioned because we are unwilling to turn the clock back on these areas. These factors are: (1) Women participating in all areas of society, which has led to more interaction between men and women on a daily basis and marriage partners being found through this socializing; (2) Increased acceptance and appreciation of ethnic differences; and (3) The prioritization of love and intimacy over other values when choosing a marriage partner.²

Synagogue Affiliation

Intermarrieds now make up a large percentage of the membership of mainstream synagogues. It is estimated that approximately “one third of the families who are members of Reform congregations are interfaith families.”³ Most Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative synagogues have intermarried board members – sometimes it is as high as 30-40%. For example, at Congregation Dor Hadash in

¹ “In the most recent period reported (1996-2001), that figure rose slightly to 47 percent. A similar figure was reported by the American Jewish Identity Survey (AJIS) 2001 with 51 percent ‘married to a spouse who is not of Jewish origin’ nor a convert (Mayer, Kosmin, and Keysar 2001:7)” (Arnold Dashefsky with Zachary I. Heller, *Intermarriage and Jewish Journeys*, *The National Center for Jewish Policy Studies at Hebrew College*, Newton Centre, MA, 2008).

² See Rabbi Arthur Blecher, *The New American Judaism: The Way Forward on Challenging Issues from Intermarriage to Jewish Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 170.

³ Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky with Jon P. Littman, *Making a Successful Jewish Interfaith Marriage: The Jewish Outreach Institute Guide to Opportunities, Challenges and Resources* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2003), 1.

San Diego, a Reconstructionist synagogue, 40 percent of the membership is intermarried and 25 percent of the board members are intermarried. At Tifereth Israel Synagogue in San Diego, which is Conservative, 30 percent of the membership is intermarried and 5 percent of the board members are intermarried. These days, it is not uncommon for the president of a non-Orthodox synagogue to be intermarried. Would it surprise you that many rabbis today are the children of intermarrieds and that non-denominational Jewish seminaries have already begun ordaining intermarried rabbis?⁴ We see the same trend in the Messianic Jewish community.

What of the Gentile spouses of these intermarried Jews? Many of them attend mainstream synagogues with their Jewish spouses and are full members. They are not converts but Gentile members of these synagogues. Of the one million Gentiles married to Jews, 95 percent choose not to convert to Judaism. Most of these Gentiles are from Christian backgrounds and choose not to convert because of their Christian faith or heritage. In households with a Jewish husband and a Gentile Christian wife, it is often the Christian wife who is carrying the responsibility to raise Jewish children. She is typically the one who creates a Jewish home and brings the kids to synagogue.⁵

The influx of hundreds of thousands of Gentiles from Christian backgrounds into mainstream synagogues has led to the creation of documents and resources to clarify the role of non-Jews in mainstream synagogues. In 1990, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Central Conference of American Rabbis published *Defining the Role of the Non-Jew in the Synagogue: A Resource for Congregations*. This was followed in 1993 by *A Supplemental Process Guide for Congregations: Defining the Role of the Non-Jew in the Synagogue*. And in 1998, the Reconstructionist Federation published *Boundaries and Opportunities: The Role of Non-Jews in Jewish Reconstructionist Federation Congregations*.

In a 2001 study conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University, researchers observed the extent to which Gentile spouses of intermarried couples were involved in local synagogues. As one example, the study notes:

“The small congregation we visited relies on volunteers to teach in the Hebrew school, and at this point in time several of these teachers are non-Jews. Congregants were very appreciative of the willingness of these non-Jewish

⁴ See Jeremy Gillick, “The Coming of the Intermarried Rabbi,” *New Voices: National Jewish Student Magazine* (April 23, 2009). Cited 21 May 2009. Online: <http://www.newvoices.org/community?id=0007>.

⁵ Fern Chertok, Mark Rosen, Amy Sales, et al., *Outreach Families in the Sacred Common: Congregational Responses to Interfaith Issues*, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, November 2001, 20.

members to take on the responsibility of teaching. Although they had some reservations about the appropriateness of non-Jews serving as the religious mentors, they were far more concerned about the difficulty they would have in filling all teaching roles with Jewish members. This congregation had also recently undergone a very difficult and divisive process of defining the role of non-Jewish partners in governance. In a close congregational vote, they decided to extend full voting privileges, including the right to vote on the retention and selection of the rabbi, to non-Jewish members. Those who supported the policy did so because they did not feel they could deny the honor of voting to those non-Jews who had contributed so much of their time and effort to the success of the synagogue.”⁶

Children of Inter marriage

It is estimated that “over 50 percent of the children born into Jewish families in the last decade have one set of grandparents who is not Jewish.”⁷ There are now over one million children of intermarried couples. How are they being raised? According to the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) 2000-2001, the figures are:⁸

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|-------------------|-----|
| Christian | 35% |
| Jewish (Religion) | 32% |
| Jewish + Other | 11% |
| Jewish (Secular) | 10% |
| No Religion | 8% |
| Other | 4% |

Tendencies in Inter married Households

The American Jewish Committee published a study in 2001 entitled *Jewish and Something Else: A Study of Mixed-Married Families*.⁹ It reported these findings:

Christian Activities

“...more than 80 percent of participating mixed-married families reported Christian activities of some sort... two-thirds celebrated Christmas at home. Sixteen percent also went to church, in addition to home celebrations. Another 16 percent celebrated in the homes of extended family, but not in their own homes” (6).

⁶ Chertok, et al., *Outreach Families in the Sacred Common*, 26-27.

⁷ Olitzky, *Making a Successful Jewish Interfaith Marriage*, 1.

⁸ Benjamin Phillips and Fern Chertok, “Jewish Identity among the Adult Children of Inter marriage: Event Horizon or Navigable Horizon?” Presented at the 36th Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies, Chicago, December 21, 2004, 3.

⁹ Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Jewish and Something Else: A Study of Mixed-Married Families* (William Petschek National Jewish Family Center of the American Jewish Committee, 2001).

Change Over Time

“mixed-married households that initially try to create exclusively Jewish observances often drift increasingly into Christian activities as time passes... The desire to be ‘fair’ and ‘balanced’ led many Jewish mixed-married spouses to incorporate more Christian observances into their households than they had originally intended” (8-9).

Influence of Extended Family Members

“Extended-family members exerted an important influence on children growing up in mixed-married households. Although this influence did not manifest itself primarily in religious areas, it often contributed to the closeness teenagers felt toward one or the other faith tradition. Thus, for example, according to her own report, a Jewish-raised teenager found affection for her Christian aunts made her feel closer to Christianity than to Judaism. In addition, extended-family members often enriched the religious lives of growing children by providing a place where either Jewish or Christian observances could be celebrated more intensely than in the child’s own home. Finally, as grandparents aged, religious observances previously celebrated in the home of extended family were often moved into the mixed-married households of study participants” (8-9).

Attitudes Toward Conversion

“Most non-Jewish male or female spouses in mixed marriages expressed negative attitudes toward conversion, and had negative memories about pressure to convert” (9).

Gender

“Jewish women married to non-Jewish men were far more likely to maintain religious and social ties to the Jewish community, to raise their children as Jews, and to incorporate Jewish activities into their homes than were Jewish men married to non-Jewish women” (7)

Jewish-Catholic Relationships

A disproportionate number of Jews tend to fall in love with Catholics. For example, in the Washington, D.C. area, 50 percent of the Jews who intermarry marry Catholics, even though Catholics make up only 23 percent of the region’s population. This trend has been observed in other regions as well.¹⁰

Changing Jewish Attitudes Toward Intermarriage

According to the 2007 *American Jewish Year Book*, “well over half the sample—56 percent—disagreed with the statement, ‘It would pain me if my child married a

¹⁰ Blecher, *The New American Judaism*, 171.

Gentile,' and were either positive or neutral toward such a prospect. Only 39 percent agreed that 'it would pain me,' and 5 percent were not sure. Seventy-nine percent of the respondents thought rabbis should officiate at mixed marriages and 50 percent said they should do so even if Gentile clergy was also involved. In reaction to the statement, 'The best response to intermarriage is to encourage the Gentile to convert,' 68 percent disagreed, 25 percent agreed, and 7 percent were not sure. Most telling was the response to the statement, 'It is racist to oppose intermarriage.' Exactly half of the sample agreed."¹¹

Voicing Embrace of Jewish-Christian Families

There are emerging voices in the Jewish community calling for synagogues to welcome Jews with Jewish-Christian identities. Rabbi Arthur Blecher, an ordained Conservative rabbi who leads a Jewish Humanist Congregation, writes in his book *The New American Judaism*:

"All the denominations have responded to the perceived threat of intermarriage by setting up programs to encourage intermarried couples to raise their children as Jews. Although this makes sense, it is a narrow approach: There is no reason that partial Jews and mixed households cannot serve as conduits for the transmission of Jewish identity to future generations. Secular Jewish organizations and most independent congregations accept partial Jews and mixed families. If *all* congregations were willing to include partial Jews, a greater number of Americans of Jewish ancestry would then be affiliated with Judaism. A greater number could be encouraged to lead Jewish lives, support Jewish causes and raise their children as Jews.

While Judaism is clear that any Jew who becomes a Christian is outside the Jewish fold, the same is not true in Christianity. Since both Protestants and Catholics define themselves by faith, not ethnicity, Jews who formally accept Christianity are permitted to retain their Jewish identity. Some Christians believe that their faith completes, rather than replaces, Judaism. The Jewish community disagrees with Christianity on this point, but there is no reason to view engagement with Christianity as the end of the story for Jewish identity. It is important to keep in mind the fact that even Jews who join Christian denominations continue to think of themselves as Jewish in some way or other. Therefore, Judaism will always have a potential influence—however small—on their lives. The Jewish community may be able to bring them back into the fold by adopting a less rejecting attitude...

Regarding the children being raised as partial Jews, it would be quite logical for rabbinic authorities to state that no minor child of a Jew can be considered a Christian under any circumstance, since religious vows of underage Jews are not binding. This policy is consistent with Jewish law. Invoking it now would normalize

¹¹ Marianne R. Sanua, "AJC and Intermarriage: The Complexities of Jewish Continuity, 1960-2006," in *American Jewish Yearbook 2007* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2007), 29.

dual-identity Jewish children and increase the possibility that they will be members of the household of Israel in the future.

But what happens when these Jewish-Christian children grow up? Currently American Judaism employs a coercive response regarding Jews and Christian faith: This is not what Jews believe; if you believe this, you are no longer a Jew. As more and more children of intermarriage become adults with Jewish-Christian identities, this approach will weaken Judaism's influence in many American households. American Judaism might consider a persuasive response: You are a Jew, and this is not what Jews believe. A persuasive approach is just as firm as a coercive approach, but it promotes more active engagement with the individual, which is exactly what the Jewish community wants."¹²

¹² Blecher, *The New American Judaism*, 186-87.