

A Kehillah for the Future: Involving Men in Jewish Life

Proposal for the Charles R. Bronfman Visiting Chair in Jewish Communal Innovation

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Next to the fate of the State of Israel, continuity is the number one concern in the organized American Jewish community, and has been for at least the past two decades. The rising rates of intermarriage over the twentieth century in America seem, on the surface, to illustrate that total assimilation draws nearer with every passing decade: fewer and fewer Jews are marrying fellows Jews, resulting in fewer Jewish offspring. Prior to 1940, the rate of Jews married to non-Jews was estimated to be between 2 and 3.2 percent, doubling to approximately 6 percent between 1941 and 1960.¹ According to the latest national research by sociologists, the percentage of born Jews who remained Jewish before marrying non-Jews increased roughly as follows: from less than 13 percent before 1970 to 28 percent between 1970-1979; then from 38 percent between 1980-1984 to 43 percent between 1985-1995 and reaching an all-time high of 47 percent between 1996-2001.² The numbers alone suggest that concern about the future of American Jewry is highly warranted.

Scholars of Jewish continuity have overlooked the most telling aspect of the patrilineal descent issue as it relates to gender. Concerns have centered on a decline in conversion among non-Jewish spouses, resulting in less religious homogeneity within intermarried families and that children of Jewish mothers and non-Jewish fathers, formerly considered Jewish by matrilineal descent, were delegitimized if they did not “perform formal acts of identification.”³ However, if one sees that the patrilineal descent decision is a product of the widespread belief based on demographic research through the end of the 1980s that Jewish men intermarried in greater numbers than Jewish women, a new interpretation is possible.⁴ The perceived need by Reform

leadership to legitimize the children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers would not have been necessary had it been evident that Jewish men who intermarried were upholding tradition by converting their children to Judaism.⁵

Coincidentally, the “disappearance” of Jewish men from lay leadership positions in Reform congregations, with the exception of Temple President, and the difficulty of attracting them to the professional workforce in the Jewish community indicates that Jewish men became less communally involved over time.⁶ This phenomenon is not particular to the Jewish community; regarding the identification of piety and femininity that has persisted in American religion, historian Ann Braude noted that “the strong association of clergy with men and laity with women seems to have a chilling effect on the participation of male laity.”⁷ Therefore, the decision to include as Jews children of Jewish men married to Gentile women suggests that Jewish leadership understood the meaning of intermarriage, at least implicitly, in highly gendered terms. Although the decision strove to make Jewish descent egalitarian, it also created a loophole for Reform Jewish men who intermarried while the active roles of Jewish women who intermarried and raised Jewish children, discussed below, went unnoticed. It effectively reduced Jewish men’s responsibility for playing active roles in raising Jewish children, for they could now claim that their children were equally Jewish as those born to Jewish women, a childcare responsibility that was and continues to be gendered female.⁸

While much has been written about inter-religious marriage during the past quarter of a century, previous scholarship has insufficiently accounted for the passage of time and the role of gender. The vast majority of scholarly books on intermarriage are sociological. For example, the classic *Love and Tradition: Marriage Between Jews and Christians* by Egon Mayer (Schocken, 1985) and recently published *Double or Nothing: Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage* (Brandeis, 2004) by Sylvia Barack Fishman, which do not account for change over a period of

time. What little historical literature exists does not use gender as a primary category of analysis. *Beloved Strangers: Interfaith Families in Nineteenth Century America* by Anne Rose (Harvard, 2001) has some useful insights about women and religion, in general. However, until now, there have been no studies that delve deeply into Jewish men's intermarriages in twentieth century America. Although historian Paul Spickard's book *Mixed Blood: Intermarriage and Ethnic Identity in Twentieth-Century America* (Wisconsin, 1989) discusses Jews in one part of a work admirably devoted to multiple groups, it treats gender as immutable.

This project aims to make a significant contribution to a topic that has heretofore received sparse attention from historians to men and Jewish studies by looking at the intersection between religion and gender to better understand how to involve men in Jewish life and community building. I am interested to pursue answers to research questions such as: How do men feel about being Jewish, what does Judaism mean to them, and how have both changed across time? How do single men relate to the Jewish community and what obstacles do they see to greater involvement? What is the relationship between how men envision fatherhood and self-identify as Jewish? And what did intermarriage mean to and for Jewish men who married exogamously?

My book, *Still Jewish: A History of Women and Intermarriage in America* (NYU Press, forthcoming), makes evident my commitment to Jewish Studies research that emphasizes social and cultural questions. This study is an historical investigation of intermarriage and gender, and how the meaning of both was socially constructed and depicted culturally. This qualitative research project unearths the meaning of interfaith marriage to women who were Jewish at the time they married non-Jewish men, as well as its representation across the twentieth century, by looking at the changing relationship between the sexes. It argues that, in contrast to the public opinion that intermarriage leads individuals to become "lost" to the Jewish community, women became increasingly interested in and committed to perpetuating Judaism over time. As their

personal narratives illustrate, intermarried Jewish women beginning in the 1960s and increasingly in the following decades initiated what I call a Jewish-feminist *modus vivendi* in which they were both the gatekeepers and the door-openers to Jewish life for their families.

That Jewish women often were more religious than their husbands reflected the national picture of gender and religion in American society. According to ARIS 2001, adult women were more likely than men to describe their outlook as “religious” (42 percent of women compared to 31 percent of men).⁹ National survey research on prayer and health concerns by Anne McCaffrey of Harvard Medical School found that American women prayed more than men did.¹⁰ Based on these findings, one can suppose that non-Jewish women who intermarried likewise tended to be more religious than the men they married, and there is some evidence that supports this premise. A Jewish man married to a Unitarian woman who converted to Judaism and wanted to be a rabbi was quoted in *Newsweek* as saying that he and his wife perpetually negotiated the level of their family’s religious observance: “Her faith is a resolute force, my secularism is a marshmallowy object.”¹¹ In the same article, a Catholic wife strong-armed her Jewish husband into becoming a “better Jew,” insisting after their 1992 wedding that he relearn what he had forgotten from Hebrew School.¹² Furthermore, the 1995 finding in a survey of interfaith families that women, both Jewish and non-Jewish, were more interested in Jewish outreach programs reinforces the idea that women who intermarried were more open to making religious connections than their male partners.¹³ Based on ARIS, it is likely that women of other religions and ethnicities shared Jewish women’s experiences of marrying men who had drastically less religious zeal. When I asked an acquaintance, a devout Catholic of Irish descent, what her husband’s religious affiliation was, she responded: “He’s an engineer.”¹⁴ Although purely anecdotal evidence, the remark suggests that Jewish women’s marriages to less-religious men were not unusual.

There is a void when it comes to a historical analysis of Jewish men who intermarried. True, there are brief references to the Hollywood moguls who married non-Jewish women and sociological studies, such as Sylvia Barack Fishman’s work. But what did intermarriage mean for “ordinary” Jewish men who married “out” across time? How did intermarriage influence their ethno-religious identities and what roles did Jewish men play in shaping their families’ spiritual lives? Using gender as a category of analysis is critically important to advancing knowledge about intermarriage in America. The fact that the majority of households that voluntarily participated in a multi-year longitudinal study of intermarriage conducted by researchers at the Center for Judaic Studies and Contemporary Jewish Life at the University of Connecticut included Jewish females rather than males is significant.¹⁵ Researchers must ask, what is it about the relationship between the sexes and Jewish identity that encourages more Jewish women to participate and more men to abstain? And, how does this gender imbalance influence the study’s findings? Lastly, what might the organized Jewish communities do to make participation in communal life more attractive to single men—who spend untold hours cruising JDate and other internet dating sites—so that they feel “at home” *before* they wed?

The intended audiences for this project are academics, communal professionals, policy makers, and religious leaders. The key communal issue that this project addresses is, ultimately, Jewish continuity. If more Jewish men marry Jewish women, and if those men who do marry non-Jews actively raise Jewish children, Jewish continuity will be more assured than presently. The potential impact for this work is on a large scale, guided as it is by a new vision for Jewish gender. By studying how men relate to Judaism, family, and community, this project seeks to understand how to better harness men’s desires for leadership, power, and meaning in ways that will ultimately benefit the American Jewish family and contribute to a *kehillah* for the future.

¹ Julius Drachsler calculated that 1.17 percent of New York City Jews (immigrants, second, and third generation) intermarried in the years 1908 through 1912. Although it is probable that some marriages went undetected due to name changes, the number of immigrant Jewesses who intermarried prior to 1930 was still likely small. *Democracy and Assimilation: The Blending of Immigrant Heritages in America* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1920), 122, 123, 128, 130, 143, 250 and Table F; Fred Massarik, et al. *National Jewish Population Study: Inter-marriage, Facts for Planning* (New York: Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, 1971), 10. These figures indicate the percentages of Jewish persons who intermarried by time period.

² If one applies a definition of “born Jews,” a category that includes non-Jews who had at least one Jewish parent and were raised in a non-Jewish religion, the intermarriage rate among those married in 1985-1990 was 52 percent, 53 percent in 1991-1995, and 54 percent in 1996-2000. Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz, et al. *The National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01: Strength, Challenge and Diversity in the American Jewish Population* (New York: United Jewish Communities, 2003), 16-17.

³ Edward S. Shapiro, *A Time for Healing: American Jewry since World War II* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 241; Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Double or Nothing: Jewish Family and Mixed Marriage* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 128.

⁴ For sources that reiterate the higher percentage of Jewish men that intermarried than Jewish women, see for example, U.O. Schmelz and Sergio DellaPergola, “The Demographic Consequences of U.S. Jewish Population Trends,” *American Jewish Yearbook* 83 (New York and Philadelphia: The American Jewish Committee and the Jewish Publication Society: 1983): 161; And Mayer, *Love and Tradition*, 266.

⁵ Though not specific to children, two sources regarding conversion to Judaism as a historically gendered, mentioned in chapter 3, with more women converting to Judaism than men, are worth mentioning. The 1990 NJPS supports the idea there is a bias toward more females being “Jews by choice,” who have converted to Judaism or who self-identify as Jews: in the age bracket 30-50 years old, two thirds of the Jews by choice are women. Kosmin et al, *Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey*, 8. For a personal look at eleven Jewish-Gentile couples through the eyes of a woman with Jewish roots, raised as a Christian, who married a Jew and became a Jew-by-choice, see Gabrielle Glaser, *Strangers to the Tribe: Portraits of Interfaith Marriage* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997).

⁶ Rabbi Keith Stern, “A Taste of Heneini,” 20 May 2004, Temple Beth Avodah, Newton MA. See also *Power and Parity: Women on the Boards of Major American Jewish Organizations* by Dr. Bethamie Horowitz, Dr. Pearl Beck, and Dr. Charles Kadustein (Mayan: 1997), which found that among the 41 “co-ed” organizations studied, only five had female presidents; and *Recruiting and Retaining a Professional Work Force for the Jewish Community* by Shaul Kelner, Michael Rabkin, Leonard Saxe, and Carl Sheingold (Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies and the Fisher-Bernstein Institute for Leadership Development in Jewish Philanthropy, Brandeis University: February 2004): “Paradoxically, in spite of the inequities [e.g., barriers to advancement and salary gaps] women face, the field disproportionately relies upon female labor, and finds it hard to attract men” (7-8).

⁷ Ann Braude, “Women’s History *Is* American Religious History,” in *Retelling U.S. Religious History* edited by Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997), 103.

⁸ In her work on interfaith families, Jane Kaplan found that many times a Christian woman married a Jewish man who was “not very active in Judaism” and “[t]he Christian woman was often actually the catalyst for the family to lead a more Jewish life.” This illustrates how Christian intermarried women were saddled with the responsibility of raising Jewish children. Jane Kaplan, *Interfaith Families: Personal Stories of Jewish-Christian Inter-marriage* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2004), xiv.

⁹ Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar, *American Religious Identification Survey*, 20, exhibit 4 “Outlook of U.S. Adult Men & Women: Religious and Secular.”

¹⁰ William J. Cromie, “One-third of Americans pray for their health,” *Harvard University Gazette*, 13 May 2004; cover story.

¹¹ David Brooks, “Living Room Crusaders,” *Newsweek* 130, no. 24, 15 December 1997, 55.

¹² Jerry Adler, “A Matter of Faith,” *Newsweek* 130, no. 24, 15 December 1997, 52.

¹³ Egon Mayer and Ron Miller, *The 1995 Survey of Interfaith Families* (New York: Jewish Outreach Institute, 1995), 4. Mayer and Miller found that, “Jewish respondents with non-Jewish spouses are generally more apt (40%) to be interested in learning about Jewish outreach programs than non-Jewish respondents (28%) with Jewish spouses. Women are somewhat more interested in learning about Jewish

outreach programs than are men. Non-Jewish women are about twice as likely to be interested in learning about Jewish outreach programs than non-Jewish men (the sex associated differential is much smaller among Jewish men and women). Interest among the intermarried with children rises to nearly 45%.”

¹⁴ Thanks to Nancy Seward for granting permission to include her comment.

¹⁵ Arnold Dashefsky, “Living Mixed Traditions: Jewish Connections and Inter-marriage in the United States,” (paper presented at the Double or Nothing? Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage conference sponsored by the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute and the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Waltham, MA, 26 April 2004).