

Engaging the Intermarried

By Edmund Case and Kathy Kahn

There is extraordinary news from Boston's 2005 Jewish Community Study: 60% of its children in intermarried households are being raised as Jews, compared to the national rate of 33%. The significance of the 60% figure cannot be overstated. First, it should end the debate over the effectiveness of outreach. Second, every local Jewish community can duplicate Boston's pioneering approach to intermarriage — at a cost of just 1% of the community's annual spending.

Ever since the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey revealed that roughly half of Jews were marrying non-Jews, leading voices in the Jewish community have decried the threat of intermarriage. The real threat though was never from Jews marrying non-Jews; it was from those couples remaining distant from the Jewish community, failing to make Jewish choices in their lives and not raising their children as Jews. If only one-third of these families are raising Jewish children, as the 2001-02 NJPS found to be the case, there is a quantitative loss to the Jewish community.

If, however, more than half of interfaith families raise their children as Jews, our community will grow in size, to say nothing of being qualitatively enriched by enthusiastic new members. Indeed, Boston's Jewish community — which the study estimated has an intermarriage rate of 37% — has seen dramatic growth not in spite of intermarriage but *because of* the high proportion of children from such marriages being raised as Jews. What was once a threat has now become an opportunity.

Efforts to welcome and include interfaith families originated in 1978 with the Reform movement's then-revolutionary outreach program. Critics have pointed to the 33% rate of children from intermarried families being raised as Jews as evidence that outreach does not work. Steven M. Cohen, the noted sociologist of American Jewry, said last year that outreach has produced "at best, small and fleeting results." Cohen went on to say, "One could argue that more expanded and more energetic efforts in

this direction will eventually produce the desired outcome, but the available evidence, in my view, fails to support such a claim." The results of the Boston study suggest that his pessimism was mistaken.

Boston's results follow San Francisco's 2004 Jewish Community Study, which showed, in the one other community that has a robust, well-organized, relatively well-funded collection of outreach programs, interfaith families raising their chil-

Boston's federation has achieved dramatic results by spending just 1% of its allocations on outreach.

dren as Jews in higher numbers than the national rate. The available evidence now supports the conclusion that expanded and energetic efforts to engage interfaith families in Jewish life do in fact work.

What is so promising about this news is that Boston's outreach efforts are not rocket science. For a relatively small investment, they could easily be replicated in every local Jewish community.

First and foremost, Boston's Jewish community has worked hard to develop and express genuinely welcoming attitudes to the intermarried. In its 1998 strategic plan, Combined Jewish Philanthropies, the Boston community federation, made outreach to interfaith families a priority: "To fulfill the Biblical imperative to welcome the stranger and newcomer, we must reinforce and increase our efforts to be open and welcoming to interfaith families, to help and support them in the hope that they will find meaning in Jewish life, choose to create Jewish families, participate in Jewish communal activities and support Jewish institutions." CJP's president, Barry Shrage, is famous for expressing a vision of Jewish life "as high

as Sinai, with low barriers to entry." Since 1998, every invitation to a CJP program has stated: "CJP welcomes those who would like to connect with the Jewish community and encourage the participation of interfaith families, couples and significant others in all its activities."

The community has put its money where its mouth is. CJP has a dedicated line item in its budget expressly for "Services to the Intermarried." CJP's funding for this area — just over \$300,000 for the current year — is the highest in the country, yet it represents just 1% of CJP's total annual allocations. Nationally, even as the Jewish community federations spend \$800 million a year and Jewish family foundations spend \$2.5 billion a year; the amount spent on programs of outreach to interfaith families is below \$3 million — only one-tenth of 1%. By spending just 1% of its allocations — a relatively small investment by any measure — CJP has achieved dramatic results.

Significantly, CJP directly supports the outreach programming of the religious movements. Almost half of CJP's funding goes to the local Reform movement, enabling it to conduct a wide array of programs aimed at unaffiliated couples and families. Because of CJP's funding, Boston has the only Conservative movement outreach professional in the country.

CJP also funds outreach programs at Boston's Jewish Family & Children's Service and the area's Jewish community centers. All told, local couples and families can find discussion groups, programs for families with young children, short-term educational programs like the very successful Taste of Judaism classes, developed by the Reform movement but also taught in Conservative and Reconstructionist synagogues, and longer courses that can lead to conversion. Each of the funded programs devotes a significant portion of its funding to marketing, including advertising in secular media, generating stories in local media and, most important, using the Internet, including on InterfaithFamily.com's

Connections In Your Area system.

While a few of the programs take place in public spaces, the focus is on programming at core Jewish institutions. The success of such programs shows that interfaith families do not shy away from synagogues and community centers when such institutions are welcoming to them.

CJP also convenes meetings of local outreach professionals, facilitating collaboration. And, for the past decade, the Reform movement's local outreach director has led a collaborative Outreach Training Institute aimed at generating sensitivity among Jewish professionals and lay leaders.

These efforts have yielded measurable results. In 2002 CJP surveyed participants to evaluate the outreach programs it funded. The study concluded that the outreach efforts reached a group that otherwise had little contact with the Jewish community. Participants rated the quality and helpfulness of the programs very highly, and there were very positive outcomes in terms of increased involvement in Jewish life (39%), movement toward synagogue membership (28%), movement toward conversion (20%) and intention to raise children as Jews (68%).

Every community could emulate these outreach efforts, which need not be supported solely by federations but could be supplemented by other philanthropic sources, such as foundations (as happens significantly in San Francisco) and individual donors. Successful outreach requires more than just money. But if the Jewish community on national and local levels allocated 1% of its funding toward outreach to interfaith families, we now know that we could see 60% of them — or even more — making Jewish choices, enlarging and enriching our community.

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