

## Can the Jewish Community Encourage In-marriage AND Welcome Interfaith Families?

November 9, 2010

*Remarks at the General Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America, November 9, 2010*

The tagline on every page of InterfaithFamily.com's website states our mission: encouraging Jewish choices and a welcoming Jewish community. In the past 12 months, over 425,000 unique visitors came to our website. They come for our personal stories that tell how others like them handle holidays and life cycle events. They come for our referral service that helps over fifteen hundred couples a year find rabbis to officiate at their weddings. They come looking for our Network's listings of welcoming Jewish organizations, professionals and programs where they live -- in your communities. They are people in interfaith relationships seeking to engage with Jewish life and community.

I do this work because I know from my own personal experience, and that of many friends, and now from thousands of IFF users, that the meaning and value that living Jewishly provides does not have to be just for Jews – it can enrich the lives of their partners who are not Jewish, too.

And I do this work because I believe that engaging interfaith families is the single most important opportunity our community faces.

### **Our Response to Intermarriage is Our Greatest Challenge and Opportunity**

I don't promote intermarriage as a positive. But it is a huge reality.

- Half of Jews are intermarrying, 2/3 of new households are intermarried, half of young Jewish adults have intermarried parents.
- Who is sitting at your [seder](#) table? These are our and our friends' children, siblings, cousins.

We can take steps to engage interfaith couples; or we can ignore them and let them drift away; or we can push them away.

These choices have huge consequences. If more than half of interfaith couples raise their children as Jews, we will grow and be enriched; if less than half do, we will wither away.

### **How To Engage Interfaith Families**

Before addressing the question whether we can encourage in-marriage, I want to address the question we really should be asking: how can we most effectively engage interfaith couples in Jewish life and community.

At IFF we have learned what interfaith families want. There are two things you can do to engage them.

**First, you can make an explicit statement: "interfaith families welcome here."**

- Every [synagogue](#) and Jewish organization should have that sign on its door. Today, that means on the home page of its website -- and having a listing on IFF's Network.
- Every federation could put on its invitations what Boston's Combined Jewish Philanthropies does: "CJP welcomes those who would like to connect with the Jewish community and encourages the participation of interfaith families, couples and significant others in all its activities."

## **Second, you can make your welcome tangible.**

There are four things your community could invest in:

First: Many interfaith couples want Jewish clergy to officiate and co-officiate at their weddings. Every Jewish community could help its young couples find them. A participant at one of our focus groups said: "rejection by a rabbi stays with you. It turns you off to the synagogue and it turns you off to Judaism."

Second: New interfaith couples need discussion groups to talk about how to have religion in their lives together, like ones offered at the Washington DC JCC, and by Reform Jewish Outreach in Boston. Couples learn they are not alone, they learn from each other, and they gravitate towards Jewish choices.

Third: Many partners who aren't Jewish are interested in learning about Judaism. Many Jewish partners sadly are ill equipped to teach them. Every community should offer an introductory program like the Union for Reform Judaism's A Taste of Judaism, probably the most effective outreach program ever.

Fourth: Many interfaith couples are willing to raise their children as Jews but need help. Every community could offer programs like the Jewish Outreach Institute's Mother's Circle. Many are interested in Jewish education for their children but aren't ready to commit to a synagogue. Every community could offer a program like Stepping Stones in Denver – a Sunday school for young children from unaffiliated interfaith families, with parallel education for their parents.

I want you to leave this session thinking there are things your community can do to engage interfaith families. You have a huge opportunity to do that at not very high cost. Resources and trainings can greatly help Jewish professionals and program providers attract and work sensitively with interfaith families. If you are interested in learning more, help is available to you, from IFF and others. Contacts are listed on your handout.

## **We Need to Adapt Our Attitudes About Inter marriage**

I want to turn now and ask why communities don't express explicit welcoming messages and offer services and programs to interfaith families.

The investment we make in services and programs for interfaith families is woefully inadequate. Of \$3 billion in annual foundation and federation spending, maybe \$3 million, less than 1/10 of 1%, is spent on our community's biggest opportunity. What explains the disconnect between the magnitude of the issue and the response to it?

I believe it is because of deep-seated negative attitudes Jews and Jewish leaders have towards intermarriage.

Just a few years ago there was a cartoon in the Boston Globe. It showed a couple standing in front of two headstones, with a skeleton clawing out of one grave turning to the other and saying "Harold, do you hear this? He's marrying a shiksa!" That is tribalism. It helped us during centuries of social isolation. Those days are now over.

Some people believe intermarriage is bad because research shows lower Jewish behaviors and attitudes among intermarrieds compared to in-marrieds. Steven M. Cohen says that in-married Jews are five times more likely to raise Jewish children. Israeli leaders and media in particular consistently equate intermarriage with assimilation.

Please remember there is another approach taken by Brandeis social scientist Len Saxe that says that Jewish behaviors and attitudes are determined not by whether one's parents are in-married or intermarried, but instead by one's experiences of Jewish living, education and friendship. And that interventions can work.

We don't know what surveys would show if the Jewish community behaved differently and actually extended welcoming messages and offered services and programs.

And how should we respond to lower levels of intermarried couples raising their children as Jews? Write them off – or do what we can to raise those numbers?

Some people still think that intermarriage can be prevented or reduced to insignificant levels by exposing Jews to intensive Jewish experiences. I am just as much in favor of Jewish camp and education and Israel trips and guiding young people to places and experiences where they will meet other Jews as anyone else. If fewer participants in these experiences intermarry, that is fine. But many still will. Last year's [Birthright Israel](#) studies showed that 28% of married trip participants did. The value of these experiences is not as a deterrent to intermarriage, but that they increase the participants' Jewish identity and desire to have Jewish families and children – regardless of who they marry.

### **We Need to Adapt our Messages About Intermarriage**

So what messages should we communicate about intermarriage?

Some people say we communicate welcome already. From our vantage point at [InterfaithFamily.com](#), that is very out of touch.

- People in our focus groups say they didn't feel welcomed in Jewish organizations when they heard "don't intermarry" messages, when they felt subtle pressure to convert, when the first reaction they experienced was suspicion.
- One IFF user gave me this input for today: "My husband and I have sat through too many lectures, where... the speaker eventually had to put in their two cents about

intermarriage. . . . being bad bad bad. So on one hand we're welcomed into the event, but please put up with the insults we'll be throwing your way about your marriage."

- I asked a member of my Advisory Board, a woman not Jewish who has raised Jewish children for 10 years and is active in my synagogue, to edit my remarks. She didn't know I would quote her: "Imagine yourself newly married, new to Judaism, sitting somewhere hearing a speaker describe your marriage as the greatest threat to Jewish continuity. Or imagine you are searching about intermarriage on the Internet and see the negative comments posted on many blogs. Would you feel welcome? Would you be inclined to raise your children as Jews, or would you wonder if there might be a more welcoming community for you elsewhere?"

Some people think we can effectively communicate to young Jews that they should not intermarry, they should marry other Jews. Well, we tried that, for decades, and failed miserably. In-marriage is wonderful, but it is wishful thinking to think we can make it happen by encouraging it. If anything young people today are offended by the message: they judge others as individuals, not by group characteristics. As Jack Wertheimer just reported in his new study of young Jewish leaders, the millennial generation has a non-exclusivist ideology.

Steven M. Cohen has said that in-marriage is a Jewish norm like working to better the world. Norms change. Given the huge reality of intermarriage, and new non-exclusivist attitudes, I question whether in-marriage is still a Jewish norm. Steven has criticized Jewish leaders for not explicitly promoting that norm and says they shouldn't hold back because some might be offended or insulted. There is a qualitative difference. Working for a better world is an ideal that people always fall short of; telling them they fell short does not push them away. Guiltning young people that their choice of partner violated a Jewish norm does.

It doesn't work to say we can promote the norm of in-marriage before marriage occurs, but welcome the intermarried after the fact. It doesn't work to say Reform leaders need not encourage the norm of in-marriage but federation and Conservative and Orthodox leaders should. This is like the story of the sack of feathers – what we say goes out on the wind and resonates in ways we can't control.

Promoting in-marriage doesn't stop people from intermarrying – but it risks leaving them feeling rejected and alienated from the Jewish community and its institutions. When we indicate that in-marriage is preferable, if we are not very, very careful not to demean intermarriage in any way, then we will communicate a message that you are bad if you marry out, and your partner is second-class.

And when that happens it's not just interfaith couples who are pushed away from Judaism – their parents and Jewish relatives are, too.

### **Taking a New Approach**

We need to fundamentally change our attitude towards intermarriage. We need to embrace the potential for positive Jewish outcomes, and stop talking about intermarriage as bad.

- At IFF we hear all the time what one user suggested I say today: "Because of my interfaith marriage, I believe I live a more Jewish life.... I have educated myself and my children about Jewish practice to a far greater extent than I would have otherwise."
- And the flip side is, that any rabbi of a Reform synagogue will tell you that some of the most active, most involved congregants who take on primary responsibility for their family's Jewish life -- are the parents who are not Jewish.

Our children's partners do not have to be Jewish themselves to support our children and our grandchildren being Jews and living Jewishly. That's the lesson I've learned at [InterfaithFamily.com](http://InterfaithFamily.com).

So when we talk to our young people about marriage, we should not promote in-marriage, we should promote engagement in Jewish life, with a supportive partner, whether or not that partner is a Jew.

Most Jews would say they want their children to marry Jews. But what we really want, is for our grandchildren to be Jewish. We will collectively have a better chance of having more Jewish grandchildren if the community's message to our young people is this: living Jewishly has been a great source of meaning and value to us; we hope you will want it for yourself and your family and children; if you do we hope you will choose a partner who will support your family's Jewish engagement; you, your partner and children will always be welcome, will always be part of our family, and we will always support the Jewish choices you decide to make.

A community that is not that welcoming is not a community that young people want to be part of. When we talk to them we have to have that in mind.