

News

Study of Interfaith Kids Upends Ideas of Identity

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July 8, 2005

Advocates of outreach to interfaith couples are touting a new survey that they say upends previous arguments against efforts to reach out to the children of mixed marriages.

The survey, released last week by the Jewish Outreach Institute, found that young adult children of intermarried couples maintain strong cultural ties to the Jewish community, despite low levels of religious identification.

Titled "A Flame Still Burns: The Dimensions and Determinants of Jewish Identity Among Young Adult Children of the Intermarried," the survey was based on 90 in-depth interviews with young adults, ages 22 to 30, living in Boston, Chicago or San Francisco. Although only 30% of the respondents consider themselves "Jewish" by religion, almost 70% affirmed that "being Jewish" is either "somewhat" or "very" important to them, and 78% expressed a desire to "transmit a Jewish ethnic identity to their children." More than half said they had attended a Jewish cultural event, such as a film festival, art show or book fair, in the past two years.

The respondents appeared to view antisemitism and the Holocaust as especially resonant components of their Jewish identity. More than 80% believe that "opposing antisemitism" is "somewhat" or "very" important, and over half said that keeping citizens aware of the Holocaust is "very" or "extremely" important to them. That is identical to the proportion among children of two-Jewish-parent households who said the same thing in the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey.

The new poll follows more than a decade of community soul-searching over interfaith marriage and its communal consequences, triggered by the finding in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey that about half of Jews who were wed in the previous five years married non-Jewish partners. In the wake of the 1990 study, Jewish organizations have debated whether to focus their efforts on shoring up traditional sanctions against intermarriage in order to reduce the rate of intermarriage, or to work more aggressively to welcome interfaith families into community life, in hopes of encouraging their children to remain Jewish. Advocates of the more expansive approach hailed the new study as an affirmation that the children of interfaith couples retain some foundations of Jewish identity, even though the 1990 population study found that only 28% of such children are raised exclusively in the Jewish faith.

The new data shows "that people care about their Judaism but don't have good vehicles to express it in the current institutional structure," said Gary Tobin, president of the San Francisco-based Institute for Jewish & Community Research. "There's absolutely a cause for optimism," provided the community doesn't "keep that frown on our face and our finger wagging."

Other members of the Jewish communal establishment questioned whether a Jewish identity rooted primarily in culture and history is viable over time. "Irish Americans retain some memories of Irish spunk," said Steven Bayme, director of the contemporary Jewish life department at the American Jewish Committee. Bayme is one of the most vocal proponents of community efforts to discourage interfaith marriage. Cultural identification is "very laudable," he said, "but that is hardly a prescription for sustaining long-term identification." Bayme argued that the Jewish community should make priorities of promoting marriage among Jews and the conversion of non-Jewish spouses to Judaism, and, when those approaches fail, encourage interfaith couples to raise their children exclusively as Jews.

In addition to such arguments, some observers were cautioning against relying too heavily on the new study's statistics.

Linda Sax, a member of the study's advisory board and an associate professor of education at the University of California at Los Angeles, said the small sample size and the fact that participants were not chosen at random meant that the results should not necessarily be viewed as nationally representative. "I would rather just see this portrayed as a qualitative study, but there's no harm in presenting those numbers as long as they're clear about who their sample is," Sax said.

Pearl Beck, the study's principal investigator, said that the new survey included some of the same questions that children of intermarried couples were asked in the far larger National Jewish Population Survey of 2000-2001. On those benchmarks, the results had been comparable, she said, suggesting that the new study's statistics were sound despite the small sample size.

More than 360,000 Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 grew up with one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent, according to the 2000-2001 population study.

Participants in the new study, all of whom have one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent, classified themselves as belonging to one of four categories: Jewish, half-Jewish and half something else, Christian or no religion. But the categories were fluid, as some respondents' comments made clear. One respondent, Ben, who has a Jewish father and recorded his religion as "none" in the survey, said he had "never felt that I wanted to be less Jewish — it feels familiar and comfortable. However, I don't see myself as a religious Jew. In fact, nothing about religion is going to work with my personality."

Many sociologists have noted a similar trend among all younger Jews, who have been found to be less likely than their elders to identify with Judaism in an overtly religious way.

On the whole, the Jewish Outreach Institute report found that children of intermarried parents have substantially weaker religious ties and connections to Israel than the children of two-parent Jewish households, a conclusion that echoes the results of larger surveys like the 2000-2001 population survey. Just under half the respondents in the new study attended a Passover Seder, compared with nearly 80% of the young adults with two Jewish parents who were found to attend a Seder in the 2000-2001 population survey. Only one-quarter of interviewees in the new survey said that "the existence of the State of Israel is personally very important" to them, the lowest rating among several measures of Jewish connections.

But the report also uncovered strong cultural ties that have previously been obscured by the narrower focus of earlier studies and surveys. Past studies have focused largely on the Jewish identity of the small percentage of children of intermarried couples who were raised exclusively as Jews. By concentrating on in-depth interviews, the new study allowed respondents to discuss those

aspects of Jewish identity and culture that appealed to them, including some that were frequently overlooked in other surveys. Eighty-five percent of the respondents said they "find themselves stopping to read articles relating to Jewish topics in newspapers and magazines." Nearly 40% had enrolled in a Jewish studies class in college.

The new survey found that 70% of respondents had maintained the religious persuasion (e.g., Jewish, Christian, mixed or none) of their upbringing. The single most salient factor in forming a firm Jewish identity as an adult was having had a bar or bat mitzvah: 90% of respondents who had celebrated the rite of passage currently consider themselves exclusively "Jewish" by religion, as compared with 13% of those who do not. One of the report's policy recommendations is to create opportunities for families that decide they want to go ahead with a bar or bat mitzvah late in the game, after failing to enroll the child in Hebrew school.

The majority of those interviewed did not receive formal Jewish training. Jewish knowledge was often picked up on an ad hoc basis from other individuals and from the general culture: "Almost to a person," Beck said, "they mentioned seeing 'Fiddler on the Roof' and 'Schindler's List' as key Jewish experiences from their childhoods." Many had been told by individual Jews that only those with Jewish mothers were "really" Jewish, causing alienation for some. "They were sometimes unaware that the meal eaten at Passover is called a Seder, but yet they were very cognizant of the ramifications of matrilineal descent," Beck said. "They felt significantly less Jewish if their mother was not Jewish."

Paul Golin, associate executive director of the Jewish Outreach Institute, said that effective outreach to the children of intermarried, as with anyone, was mostly about "being welcoming and making personal connections." The organization is already developing a number of programs targeting this population. Two years ago, it tested the "grandparents connect" initiative in Orlando. The program sought to tap into the Jewish knowledge and commitment of grandparents to help educate the children of their intermarried offspring. Also, an eight-month curriculum for non-Jewish mothers was tested successfully in Atlanta several years ago and will be expanded nationally in September.

The key is to find "entry points into Jewish life and broaden them," Golin said. "It would be a mistake to write these kids off. For the most part, they're not practicing another religion and they're proud of their Jewish heritage. There's still that spark."