

## are american jews vanishing again?

*High rates of intermarriage have become an obsession with Jewish community leaders. They fear the disappearance of Jews in America. But demography is not destiny. The case of the Jews shows one way ethnic communities can control their fates.*

In 1964 *Look* magazine published an article on "The Vanishing American Jew," predicting the demise of North American Jewish communities by the end of the 20th century. *Look* magazine has vanished. The American Jewish community has not, nor is it likely to.

Preliminary results from the National Jewish Population Study of 2000-01 estimate a declining American Jewish population. Considerable skepticism has been expressed over these population estimates since it is unclear how Jews were defined, who was missed, and how the intermarried were treated. Ignoring the journalistic sensationalism of the phrase "decline and demographic erosion," the public relations release itself emphasizes that the U.S. Jewish population has been "fairly stable over a decade." And there is widespread consensus that size is the least important of the findings.

Between 5 and 6 million Americans, approximately 3 percent of the population, are Jewish and this number has

remained relatively stable over the last several decades. But about half of all Jews now marry someone who is not Jewish, making it appear that a major reduction in the Jewish population is inevitable. Indeed, high rates of intermarriage have become an obsession with Jewish communal leaders, some social scientists and many Jewish parents. American Jews have been viewed as a "model" of economic success and acceptance by the larger society, but the worry is that they may also be a model of numerical decline and disappearance through intermarriage.

This fear of decline is exaggerated. A closer look at the numbers and, more importantly, at the quality of Jewish life shows that there is no inexorable mathematics of decline. By broadening Jewish life in America, Jewish institutions and families have ensured its continuity. It is an experience from which other ethnic groups facing assimilation—such as Hispanics and Asian Americans—might gain.



Photo by April Gafni

Traditional Jewish wedding ceremony.

## the specter of assimilation

In 1994, the historian Norman Cantor reviewed the research on Jewish intermarriage and concluded that the American Jewish community was “headed for catastrophic decline... the approaching end of Jewish history.” He argued that the Jewish community was disappearing not only through assimilation and low birth rates, but also through “a runaway rate of intermarriage.... What the Holocaust began physically will in the 21st century be accomplished culturally.” The math seemed simple: “You start with 100 American Jews, you end up with 60. In one generation more than a third have disappeared and in just two generations, two out of every three will vanish.” In 1977, a Harvard study predicted that American

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Jewish and non-Jewish members of a Jewish sorority participate in a community service project for disadvantaged children.

Photo by Mark Bosler

Jews would number around 10,000 in three to four generations. With these demographic forecasts, it is no wonder that the Jewish community is alarmed.

Until the 1970s, the rates of intermarriage were low, but any intermarriage was nonetheless devastating to the community. Those who intermarried effectively repudiated their religion, families and communities. And in turn their religion, families and communities rejected them. Intermarried Jews did not raise their children as Jews, so future generations were lost to the Jewish community. Traditionally, children born of non-Jewish mothers were not considered Jewish by some in the community but this too has changed, at least among Reform and unaffiliated Jews.



Photo by Erica Wong

Mixed couple: Jewish man and non-Jewish woman.

Before the 1970s Jewish communities reported that 10 to 15 percent of their younger families were intermarried. In the 1970s, the figure approached 25 percent, and by the 1990s it had climbed to 40 to 50 percent. The Jewish press sounded the alarm, in part as a fundraising strategy (to encourage support for programs of Jewish continuity). Similarly, the *New York Times*, reporting on increases in intermarriage, noted that the “American Jewish population is steadily eroding from within.” Alan Dershowitz’s popular 1997 book entitled *The Vanishing American Jew* posed the question “Will your grandchildren be Jewish?” (The intermarriage results of the National Jewish Population Study of 2000-01 have not yet been released, but the rate is likely to remain as high as the earlier 1990 study.)

The conviction that increasing intermarriage erodes the Jewish community is primarily the view of the Orthodox denomination and of some Jews who reject the possibility of Jewish continuity within an open, pluralistic society. The Orthodox firmly oppose mixed marriages; they are, however, far outnumbered by members of the Reform denomination which has been more tolerant. The third major Jewish denomination, Conservative, stands between.



**Jewish and non-Jewish members of a Jewish fraternity socializing in front of Hillel House, a Jewish center for university students.**

Photo by April Gafni

## the question of being jewish

In America, unlike “the old country,” Jewish group membership is by and large voluntary, based on social criteria, not biological or religious-legal definitions. It is informal, not formal, group membership, but that makes it no less powerful.

Most American Jews continue to be Jewish by birth. But most also identify as Jews by ethnicity or community, not by narrow religious definitions such as orthodox practice or matrilineal descent. This is the new reality of Jews in the United States. Like others, Jews become increasingly religious and identify more closely with the religious community as they form families and educate their children.

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The alarm is based on a mechanical and mistaken understanding of social life. Indeed, the American Jewish community exemplifies how white ethnic groups can retain their distinctiveness instead of disappearing into the melting pot. And Jewish intermarriage shows how ethnic assimilation may gain members rather than lose them. High intermarriage rates certainly mean that many Jews are touched by intermarriage. There is hardly a Jewish household in America that has not experienced the intermarriage of a family member, a neighbor or a friend. The irony is that at the same time that more Jews are intermarrying, their marriages are increasingly accepted by relatives and Jewish institutions.

The reduction of discrimination over the last 40 years has given Jews new choices of residence, jobs and marriage. Jews now have much more contact with non-Jews than in the 1950s, noticeably as neighbors and spouses. By 1997, according to a national poll carried out by Steven Cohen, just 10 percent of American Jews reported that all or almost all of their friends were Jewish; less than half reported that most of their friends were Jewish and even fewer reported that most of their neighbors were Jewish. These numbers were a vast change from a generation earlier. They have serious implications for intermarriage.

The key indicators of an ethnic community’s strength, however, are not who marries whom, but the activities that their grandchildren engage in. A group’s continuity depends on the ethnic and religious commitments of the family. Focusing on families and the ethnic commitments of the young redirects questions about assimilation away from biology and marriage and toward economic activities, cultural obligations and how parents pass on traditions to their children. In this regard, the American Jewish community is surviving, maybe even thriving.

Therefore, the issue is not intermarriage but Jewishness in the family. How do people raise their children and connect to their extended families and the broader community that is Jewish? Questions about intermarriage and Jewish continuity need to be redirected toward these family networks.

In the past, Jewish men intermarried more than Jewish women did, but that is no longer true. Because traditionally women supervised the home, their out-marriage raised concerns. Yet Jewish women who marry out may want to reinforce the Jewishness of the home. And as the children of mixed marriages are increasingly children of Jewish mothers rather than fathers and as Jewish institutions increasingly accept intermarriage, intermarriage is not likely to have the same meaning as it did in the older context of rejection and escape. Synagogues increasingly allow non-Jewish spouses and parents to participate in various ritual family activities, announce the intermarriages of members’ children and celebrate the birth of their grandchildren. Many mixed families are welcomed in Jewish religious schools and in Jewish community centers. Only about one out of four American Jews say that they would oppose the marriage of their child to a non-Jewish person who does not plan to convert to Judaism; only one out of three Jews report that a “good” Jew must marry a Jew.



**Playground at a Jewish community center that welcomes families of mixed marriages.**

Over the last decade, as rates of intermarriage increased, so have conversion, community acceptance and the integration of intermarried couples. More children raised by intermarried parents remain Jewish in a variety of ways than ever before. A 1993 survey found that 45 percent of mixed couples raise their children as Jewish and another 25 percent raise them as Jewish and something else. Most children in intermarried Jewish households celebrate their bar or bat mitzvah

(a coming-of-age ritual), share in their family's Passover meals and observe Hanukkah. Significant proportions occasionally attend religious services (at least as often as those from families where both partners were raised as Jews).

## the math of intermarriage

It is a simple exercise to show that high rates of intermarriage can be consistent with group continuity (see sidebar, page 23). I have estimated the numbers based on available statistics to illustrate some of the popular misconceptions in understanding intermarriage rates. In this illustration, the community begins with 15 Jews-by-birth in the first generation and gains two spouses by conversion. (In reality, 20 to 25 percent of non-Jewish spouses convert in a religious ceremony; it is reasonable to suppose that another 15 percent identify themselves as Jewish without formally converting.) Even if we assume that only one of the six children from the remaining mixed marriages grows up Jewish—and research suggests the proportion is much higher, at least two of five—the result is a second generation of 15 Jews.

The lessons to be learned from this exercise are two-fold: High intermarriage rates may result in stable numbers when some spouses convert or informally identify themselves as



**Staff member and children playing with cucumber slices at a popular Jewish summer day camp.**

*Photo by Alyssa Wagner*





Photo by Leslie Kemp

**Four girls who attended or worked at the same Jewish summer camp. One has two Jewish parents, two have one Jewish parent, and one has none.**

Jewish. More importantly, numerical stability with intermarriage occurs when children are raised as Jews. Intermarriage is not the question; the Jewishness of homes is.

The astounding fact is that most American Jews living in a voluntary and open society choose to be Jewish rather than something else. Most Jewish families want their children and grandchildren to be Jewish, at least in some ways.

## raising jewish children

Formal conversions to Judaism or identification with the Jewish community are paths to raising Jewish children. Many people who were not born Jewish and have not undergone formal conversions identify themselves as Jews, and are identified as Jews by their families, friends and the Jewish community. They participate in family, communal and organizational activities that are primarily Jewish. Also, non-conversion at the time of marriage does not foreclose conversion to Judaism at a later point in time; Jewish identification and practices can expand over the life course. A 1998 New York

study found that intermarried couples were about three times more likely to find Judaism more important over time than less important. Jewish identity, as well as association with Jewish institutions, increases as families make choices about the education of their children and their own life style. Growing up in a Jewish household and taking part in Jewish communal activities encourages children to be Jewish and thus encourages continuity.

What does Jewishness of the home mean? It is not limited to religious practices or ritual observances, even where both spouses are born Jewish. Rather, being enmeshed in family, friendship and community networks is the key. Institutions such as Jewish community centers, schools, day care programs and camps organize such networks. Many young Jews form ties with one another at college and professional schools. Such networks help provide the content of Jewish identity and are the sources of changing cultural values.

Even with respect to religion, the majority of intermarried Jewish couples, including those without religious conversion, identify with a synagogue, occasionally attend religious services, and perform seasonal rituals, such as holding Passover seders and lighting Hanukah candles, at only slightly lower levels than do Jewish-born couples.

A study of eight different Jewish communities in the major metropolitan areas of the United States found that 40 percent of the mixed married couples—compared to 50 percent of the Jewish-born couples—attend synagogue services at least a few times a year (primarily on holidays). More than half attend

a Passover seder and over 60 percent contribute to Jewish charities. While less active than families where both spouses were born Jewish, these levels of engagement, even without conversion, indicate important formal and informal commitment to Jewishness in America.

Thus, intermarriage and disengagement from the Jewish community are no longer synonymous. Because those who intermarry are often no less attached to the Jewish community and no less Jewish in their behavior and commitments than those who marry Jews, increasing rates of intermarriage by themselves are poor indicators of the weakening quality of Jewish life. Intermarriage is no longer the ultimate step toward total assimilation. In most intermarriages, the Jewish partner remains attached to the Jewish community. Unlike in the past, the non-Jewish partner often becomes attached to the Jewish community, as do many of the children of the intermarried, through family, friends, neighborhood and Jewish organizational ties. Many of their friends are Jewish, many support Israel and many identify themselves as Jews. And some proportion of spouses and their children convert to Judaism, becoming formally Jewish under the direction of religious leaders and their institutions.

Therefore, whether or not intermarriage should be treated as a sign of communal erosion depends on the Jewish commitments of the intermarried and the eventual commitments of their children. Much depends as well on how the formal religious and secular institutional structure accepts and nourishes linkages between those born Jewish and those Jewish by their identification, commitment and religious conversions. When rabbis, synagogues, Jewish community centers, summer camps and day care providers welcome mixed married couples, the chance that the family will create a Jewish home (including raising the children as Jews) increases.

### the future of american jews and others

Most Jews have long-term roots in America and have over many years developed life styles and institutions that enrich their ethnic and religious expressions. Their Judaism and their Jewishness are expressed in diverse and changing ways that challenge simple assumptions about the total assimilation of ethnic white minorities. Although Jews have assimilated and become secular in some ways, their communities have become more cohesive and viable in other ways; Jewish communities

## intermarriage and group continuity

If half of Jews by birth marry someone who is not Jewish, and two of the five non-Jewish spouses convert, and each couple has two children and only one of the six children from mixed marriages grows up Jewish....

First Generation	Second Generation
1. Jew**Jew .....	Two Jews
2. Jew**Jew .....	Two Jews
3. Jew**Jew .....	Two Jews
4. Jew**Jew .....	Two Jews
5. Jew**Jew .....	Two Jews
6. Jew**Non-Jew Converted .....	Two Jews
7. Jew**Non-Jew Converted .....	Two Jews
8. Jew**Non-Jew (Not Converted) .....	One Jew and One Non-Jew
9. Jew**Non-Jew (Not Converted) .....	Two Non-Jews
10. Jew**Non-Jew (Not Converted) .....	Two Non-Jews

Number of Original Jews = 15

Number of 2nd Gen. Jews = 15

In the first generation half the couples are both Jewish by birth; 50 percent of the couples involve one partner who is not born Jewish. Of the 15 Jews in the first generation, 10 are married to born Jews. There are 15 born Jews and two conversions to Judaism, hence a gain of two Jews in the first generation. There are an estimated 15 Jewish children in the second generation. This number of Jews is the same number as the number born Jewish in the first generation.



Photo by Leslie Kemp

**Photograph by a non-Jewish father of his Jewish wife and their daughter lighting a menorah.**

remain distinctive within American society. Jews have developed new expressions of Judaism in a secular context and of ethnic Jewishness in a diverse, pluralist society. These expressions include organizations pursuing justice and charity, showing concern for the poor and the disenfranchised, as well as those promoting Jewish culture, art, dance and music. Commitment to Israel and to the memory of the Holocaust powerfully expresses Jewishness. Even swimming together in Jewish community centers symbolizes new values and paths to Jewish involvement. Indeed, how could a community be disintegrating whose multiple and powerful institutions continuously remind its members that it is eroding?

The astounding fact is that most American Jews living in a voluntary and open society choose to be Jewish rather than something else. Most Jewish families want their children and grandchildren to be Jewish, at least in some ways. Instead of asking whether the great grandchildren of Eastern European Jewish immigrants to America are assimilating or whether they are surviving as a community (they are doing both), we should try to understand what sustains ethnic and religious continuity in the absence of overt discrimination and economic disadvantage and in the face of pressures that erase distinctiveness. Communal institutions and social and family networks are the core elements sustaining ethnic continuity. It is a sign of ethnic vitality when these institutions construct new forms of Jewish cultural uniqueness that redefine collective identity. Communal acceptance may be responsible for transforming the negative consequences of intermarriage for group continuity into positive ones.

Seeing intermarriage as a potential source of strength has implications for other minorities in America as they become

incorporated into America's pluralism. Rates of intermarriage among ethnic and religious groups have increased and have been viewed by some as diluting cultural identities. Certainly, changes in ethnic and religious communities can be expected in the future. But a careful examination of the Jewish experience suggests that high rates of intermarriage can reinforce ethnic distinctiveness and ethnic culture when family and institutions incorporate the intermarried into their community. Whether changes in the community are seen as part of its vanishing or its transformation depends on how the community constructs its institutions and values. Issues of ethnic assimilation and the loss of ethnic identity may begin—but do not end—with calculating rates of intermarriage. ■

## recommended resources

Cantor, Norman. *The Sacred Chain: The History of the Jews*. New York: Harper/Collins, 1994. Against the broad sweep of Jewish history, Cantor projects the end of the American Jewish community and suggests some radical interventions.

Cohen, Steven M., and Arnold M. Eisen. *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. A thoughtful analysis of survey data and qualitative interviews focusing on the content of Jewishness and Judaism.

DellaPergola, Sergio, Uzi Rebhun, and Mark Tolts. "Prospecting the Jewish Future: Population Projections 2000-2080." *American Jewish Yearbook 2000*. New York: American Jewish Committee, pp. 103-46. The best explication of potential population decline.

Dershowitz, Alan. *The Vanishing American Jew: In Search of Jewish Identity for the Next Century*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1997. A popular misreading of the evidence presented in engaging reflections misses important communal developments.

Farber, Roberta Rosenberg, and Chaim Waxman. *Jews in America: A Contemporary Reader*. Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1999. One of the best collections of articles on the American Jewish community. Several focus on intermarriage and issues of the quality of Jewish life.

Heilman, Samuel. *Portrait of American Jews: The Last Half of the 20th Century*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995. Reviews both anthropological and statistical studies. The best book on the sociology of American Jews.

Tobin, Gary. *Opening the Gates: How Proactive Conversion can Revitalize the Jewish Community*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999. Written by a social scientist who has conducted many community surveys; suggests policies to incorporate the intermarried.