



judaism beyond god

HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

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Evolution or Revolution?

“Why Be Anything? And Why Be Jewish?”

Adam Chalom

“Judaism and the Singularity”

Paul Golin

**“The Gendered Reality of Jewish
Intermarriage in America”**

Keren McGinity

“Gate Openers”

Miriam Jerris

Humanistic Judaism is a voice for Jews who value their Jewish identity and who seek an alternative to conventional Judaism.

Humanistic Judaism affirms the right of individuals to shape their own lives independent of supernatural authority.

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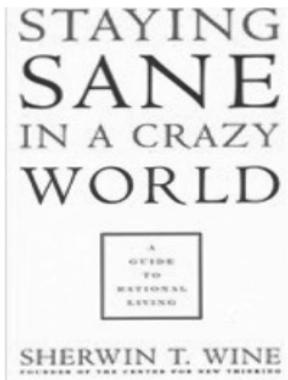
FOCUS

Over the years, the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism has held colloquia on a wide range of topics of interest to Humanistic Jews. Some of the most important questions—the ones our colloquia keep coming back to—involve Jewish identity and community. Our last three colloquia—in 2012, 2013, and 2014—have all examined some facet of questions of Jewish identity, particularly with regard to intermarriage.

In this issue of *Humanistic Judaism*, IISHJ and the Society for Humanistic Judaism share some of the best ideas from the most recent IISHJ colloquia on Jewish identity. IISHJ Dean for North America Rabbi Adam Chalom, explores a very fundamental question: why be Jewish—or anything at all? Paul Golin, Executive Director of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, asks what a technologically-dominated future with its free-flow of information and breakdown of traditional identities has to say about how we can approach Jewish identity and culture. Professor Keren McGinity of Brandeis University examines intermarriage and the ways marriages between Jews and non-Jews are affected by questions of gender, and how gender affects how Jewish identity is imparted to the children of intermarriages.

We also present a responsive piece from the SHJ's Rabbi Miriam Jerris, who addresses the practical aspects of intermarriage and Jewish identity, involving lifecycle events like marriage, birth, and death.

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HJ FORUM: Colloquium

“Why Be Anything? And Why Be Jewish?”

by Rabbi Adam Chalom

130 years ago, a new language was born. It had regular rules, no exceptions, simple grammar, and this new language could be learned in one tenth the time it takes to learn English. The inventor of Esperanto was a Polish Jewish doctor named Ludwik Zamenhof. In his words:

In Białystok the inhabitants were divided into four distinct elements: Russians, Poles, Germans and Jews; each of these spoke their own language and looked on all the others as enemies. In such a town, a sensitive nature feels more acutely than elsewhere the misery caused by language division and sees at every step that the diversity of languages is... the most influential basis for the separation of the human family into groups of enemies. I was brought up as an idealist; I was taught that all people were brothers, while outside in the street at every step I felt that there were no *people*, only Russians, Poles, Germans, Jews and so on. This was always a great torment to my infant mind...so I often said to myself that when I grew up I would certainly destroy this evil. (Zamenhof 2010)

Over the last two centuries, Jews have often been attracted to movements and ideas that promise to solve anti-Jewish hostility and the dilemma of Jewish separatism. Maybe the solution to difference and conflict is not to convert and become something else; maybe the solution to the problem of difference is to *eliminate* difference. Imagine

life before the mythical Tower of Babel, or before our evolutionary Exodus from East Africa, when all people spoke one language, were one tribe, one humanity. Recorded history has never seen a utopia, but many have been imagined.

Zamenhof himself was a complete universalist: he even refused to join an organization of Jewish Esperantists! Zamenhof did not want to be a Jew, or a Pole, or a Russian—Zamenhof wanted only to be a human being, a member of the human family, period.

Zamenhof died in 1917, but that’s not the end of his story. Ludwik Zamenhof, internationalist, is buried ... in the main Warsaw Jewish Cemetery, near the first chief rabbi of Warsaw and thousands of other Jews. As the Jewish American sociologist Horace Kallen put it in the same era (in gendered language): “Men may change their clothes, their politics, their wives, their religions, their philosophies, to a greater or lesser extent: they cannot change their grandfathers” (Kallen 1924, 114-115).

Every person lives many identities: humanity, ethnicity, family, philosophy, citizenship, gender, political persuasion, individuality. In his early life, Ludwig Zamenhof was, like every Jew, Jewish *and*—Jewish *and* from Poland *and* in the Russian Empire *and* a doctor *and* a man, and many more.

Rabbi Adam Chalom, Ph.D., dean of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism for North America, is rabbi of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in Lincolnshire, Illinois. He holds a doctorate from the University of Michigan and sits on the editorial board of this journal.

We can see this in the context of intermarriage if we take the example of a non-Jewish bride. Does she change her identity if she signs a *ketubah*? When we get married, who we are changes by addition, not subtraction: she will still be who she was before, and now she will also be part of her husband's family (no matter how crazy she thinks her new in-laws are), appearing on his family tree. Her home will be connected to his family culture, just as he will be to hers.

The reality is that who we are is not *only* a function of our individual choices. David Daniel Kaminsky can change to Danny Kaye, but we cannot change our grandfathers, the people and the culture that came before us. The memories our parents or our grandparents gave us of lighting Hanukkah candles or holding Passover Seders will be a part of us until a science fiction future when we can erase memories we don't want. I actually have no personal memory of either of my grandfathers, but I know the stories; I have the pictures that look vaguely like me and a lot like my parents. I am an heir.

Sometimes, there are limits to our choices, and not only because we cannot change our grandfathers. Sometimes others choose for us. Communism long had great appeal for Jews, because it promised to end ethnic hatred through international worker solidarity. In the United States in 1947, the International Workers Order had 15 language sections—the Yiddish language section was 40% of the membership, when Jews were only 4% of the American population! For all that internationalism, however, it wasn't that simple. Leon Trotsky was born Lev Bronstein, and he left being Jewish in his teens for international socialism. But that didn't stop anti-Semites from using Trotsky's and Marx's Jewish origins to criticize communism, or stop Joseph Stalin from using Trotsky's Jewishness to expel and murder him and to persecute Soviet Jews in the name of universalism. Supposedly the chief rabbi of Moscow said: "Trotsky makes the revolution, the Bronsteins pay the bills."

Consider the case of one Barack Obama: he has one white parent and one black parent. Could

he really CHOOSE to identify as "white," even as he himself has chosen, and society has accepted, his self-identification primarily as "black?" Under Apartheid in South Africa, there were several racial categories, including Black, White, Coloured or mixed, Malay, Chinese, Indian, and more. People were racially classified by three factors: physical appearance, social acceptance, and individual descent—and one could petition a committee to change his or her racial identity; in 1984, 518 people went from Coloured to White, two Whites became Chinese and one White became Indian ("The Story of Africa" 2017). Ridiculous, of course, but, maybe that's what we get for trying to define boundaries that separate humanity.

What about the Jewish experience? There *have* been times in Jewish history when one could not leave his or her Jewishness behind, even by assimilation or conversion—the Spanish Inquisition did not persecute self-identified Jews; it pursued the so-called "New Christians" who had been Jewish and converted, but were still suspect. And we know the racial anti-Semitism of the Nazi Holocaust, when hatred did not stop to check what one believed or which identity box one marked: one Jewish grandparent could be enough, and thus the victims could not change their grandfathers, in a tragic way. Gradually, Jews became accepted as "white" (Brodin 1998), whatever that means, but we would not have to be crazy to draw the lesson that being anything different, minority, or alien is dangerous, and that difference is itself a source of conflict.¹

There are positive reasons to identify with humanity as a whole: as Shakespeare's Shylock said, we *are* "fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer." Science, philosophy, art can all educate and inspire any human of any background. On some level, it is crazy to divide the entire world's population into "Jews" and "non-Jews": 0.2% vs. 99.8%. As a part of a small people like the Jews, it can be tempting to expand our group identity beyond 0.2%. How about the international proletariat? Pioneers of a global language? All true, and yet, even if we want it, we

do not have absolute freedom to choose who we are—we cannot choose our grandfathers, and we cannot fully determine how others see us.

Now our *individuality* rebels: “Who are they, who are you to tell me what I cannot do, whom I can and cannot be?” This rebel sees a slippery slope from group identity to group-think, group responsibility, and group limitations. How can I assert my autonomy, my individuality, if people think of me as a *label* first and as unique me second? If I am Jewish, am I implicated in anything any other Jew does? If I am part of a group, will they speak for me differently than I would have spoken for myself? Will the group expel me if I think for myself, if I challenge group consensus? Forget it, says the rebel, no groups, no labels for me. In the end, if we say that people are in charge of their own life, we had better mean it. If they choose to resign, we cannot stand in their way. But group identity is deeply rooted in the human psyche, everything from family and neighborhood to sports team, up to a cultural and philosophic community. And the benefits of being together can be worth the challenges and limitations of getting along. If we want the strength of mutual support, if we want a voice in the larger Jewish and human conversation, if we seek inspiration from both our roots and our shared commitments, then a label it may be.

Let’s look at this differently. Do you love your family? Is there *anything wrong* with loving your family? Is there anything about loving your family that makes you unable to be good and decent to the other 99.999% of humanity? We have to avoid two extremes. On one end, there is loving your family above and beyond the humanity of anyone else; we call that the Mafia: they love “the family,” and they are terrible to humanity. On the other extreme, there is loving humanity more than those who gave you life and who today give you love. The road to universal human utopia in Stalin’s Russia or Mao’s China was paved with bones and blood. Yes, you are allowed to have a family, and to love that family, and to love that family more than universal brotherhood, or at least as much.

I love my connections with Humanistic

Judaism more than ever, but I still love my family more. You *can* be part of more than one family at once—yours by birth, your partner’s by marriage, your ethnicity, even the human family. Remember the bride and the ketubah: one family does not replace the other—they exist simultaneously in you. It’s not a question of one label, of why be anything. We all are many things; some we choose, some we inherit. In Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” he wrote, “Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes.” That may be the anthem for the future of Jewish community, of Jewish identity, and individuals: each of us, and all of us together are large; we contain multitudes.

One Jewish ex-communist put it very simply:

No one lives in The Universe. There is no address that reads 175 Fairview Boulevard, The Universe. Even the Universal Postal Union could not deliver mail to such an address. You live in a country, a state, a nation. There is no history of The Universe. Universal history is the sum total of group histories (tribe, people, nationality...), seen in their interconnections. Similarly, there is no simply “human” experience that can give rise simply to “human values.” For all these thousands of years all human experience has been cast in the form of the limited group. An “internationalist,” thus, is not one who lives in an “internation” in outer space, far far out. He is an American internationalist, a Polish internationalist, A Ghanaian or an Indian internationalist. They may converge, but they converge from different points. We here may be American Jewish internationalists. But to omit the American or the Jewish is to strip the “internationalist” of vital, concrete meaning. (Schappes 1995, 267)

The irony is that the more we understand where we live, the more we accept who we are, the more we learn who our grandfathers and grandmothers were, the better we understand everyone else. *Everyone* comes from somewhere; if we drop

difference for universalism, we won't understand and appreciate the vast majority of humanity that persists in being who they are. I do not want there to be *only* Applebee's—I want Chinese take-out, and drive-through Mexican, and Vietnamese-Italian fusion cuisine.

In that Warsaw Jewish cemetery, not that far from Ludwik Zamenhof, the father of Esperanto, lies Yud Lamed Peretz, a giant of early 20th century Yiddish literature. Peretz also welcomed the wider world, but he appreciated the universal from a particular perspective:

I am not proposing that we lock ourselves in a spiritual ghetto. We must leave it—but with our own soul, our own spiritual wealth. We must make exchanges. Give and take. Not beg.

Ghetto means impotence. Interchange of culture is the only hope for human growth. Man, the complete man, will be the synthesis of all the varied forms of national culture and experience.

To take yet continue to be oneself—that is the important thing. It is also difficult, especially for nations that are weak and not independent. That is why we must be more demanding with the Yiddish writer. He has something that is unique.

He should not do what others have done. Leave the ghetto, see the world—yes, but with Jewish eyes. (Peretz 1972, 27-28)

If I don't understand what it means to be MY something, how can I understand when someone else wants to be who they are? The more I connect with my own culture, the more I appreciate the distinctiveness of Korean culture or Lebanese culture—"yes, we have something like that," is a much better basis for dialogue than "why are you so different from what I want you to be?"

If people and peoples are already different, we can't deny their difference and demand they vanish. Instead, we can find a balance between what the former British chief rabbi called "The

Dignity of Difference" (Sacks 2003), and going over the deep end into chauvinism and division. The sociologist Horace Kallen's vision: not a melting pot that dissolves difference, but rather "a chorus of many voices each singing a rather different tune.... What must, what *shall* this cacophony become—a unison or a harmony?" (Kallen 2012, 159). A unison or a harmony? Everyone singing the same note, or many notes coming together to sing a fuller anthem? To my ear, harmony is richer through diversity, a more beautiful world in many colors.

If I've sold you on the possibility, even the desirability, of being *something*, we still have to answer: Why be *Jewish*? Or at least Jew-ish. As SHJ executive director Paul Golin put it at Colloquium 2012, when he still represented the Jewish Outreach Institute, previous generations were Jewish before they knew it: Jewish by birth, language, neighborhood, Jewish by immigrant and ethnic culture. They wondered how to balance being Jewish and becoming American. Today, the question has shifted: with all of my possible identities, connections, opportunities, why should being Jewish be important to me? Why should being Jewish even be on the list?

When I was graduating from college with a degree in Judaic Studies, I was offered an ownership-track position with a family business. I already had decided to be a Humanistic Rabbi, so I declined, saying something like, "I'm not that interested in sales." But what do I do as a Humanistic rabbi? Create brochures, websites, marketing, messaging, promotional offers, advertising—I'm selling all the time. I am selling something different: I'm selling our community, to some extent I'm selling myself. And selling is really the art of persuasion. *This is worth it!* You *should* bother. What I'm selling is the value TO YOU of being with us. We have a joke slogan at Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation: "We're better than *nothing*." But in reality? We're *better* than nothing, *much* better than being nothing!

We live in a new free market—a free market for ideas and inspiration. When people choose for themselves where they live, what they eat, what

they wear, and even what they believe, the old answers and selling approach won't work.

Imagine you worked for a Jewish ad agency; call it "Mad Mensch." Fifty-plus years ago, in 1964, what were the top Jewish sellers for "Why be Jewish?"

1) "Be Jewish because we made a covenant with God at Mount Sinai—when we follow the Torah, things go well; when we break the rules, we ourselves are broken until we repent."

Why was The Covenant a big seller? It provided a clear bargain: a strong incentive program with the weight of tradition and cosmic authority behind it. Why doesn't the Covenant pitch work anymore? Real life *never* worked that way; human suffering does not correspond to religiosity or to righteous behavior. To paraphrase the Yiddish poem by Jacob Glatstein, "Dead Men Don't Praise God": "at Sinai we received the Torah, and in the Holocaust we gave it back." Not to mention the fact that the only "proof" that the Torah was given at Sinai is in the Torah itself, and archaeology and historical study have undermined the event's claim to have actually happened—as powerful a story as it may be, no Sinai, no covenant, no deal.

2) Another old pitch: "Be Jewish because we are the Chosen People. Not only are we the favorite children of a cosmic Father, we created ethics, we are the most brilliant scientists, the funniest comedians, with the best families and the richest traditions. And, though you shouldn't say it too loudly, the rest of the world is somewhat lesser than we."

Why a big seller? The Chosen People appeals to our ego, it justifies self-pride, and why would you bother being anything else, or marrying anyone else, when you can be the best? The Chosen People pitch doesn't work anymore either. At a certain point in your personal development, I hope you outgrew the sense that everything revolves around you—the me-centric theory of the universe. Does it really make sense that the one god of

an entire universe of billions of stars would choose one small group of one species on one planet as the most important beings anywhere, the only ones to receive the true story of how everything came to be and what all humanity needs to do, in a language that's hard to learn and very few people speak? As history progressed, as freedom rang, we got to know our non-Jewish neighbors, and we learned that they too have wisdom and insight and humor to inform and inspire us. In some cases, they came to love us and we loved them back. Every group is wonderful in its own distinct way, but our group better than everyone else? Just too convenient and self-serving, not to mention rude; morality and reality reject it. Being Jewish can be special without being Chosen. Chosen People? No sale!

3) Here's another past winner: "Be Jewish because Hitler would have killed you."

Well, sign me up! For a generation, remembering the Holocaust and staying Jewish to deny Hitler's victory was a powerful motivation. But we have to realize that World War II ended more than seventy years ago, and the fact that our people were hated and killed in the past does not give us a positive reason to stay connected. No one is motivated to stay Jewish today because of the Chmielnicki pogroms in Ukraine in 1648.² You cannot build a healthy, vibrant, living identity exclusively on fear and trauma and anger. I sometimes define history as "What happened before you were paying attention." The *bar* and *bat mitzvah* students I'm tutoring today were *born after 9/11*. For a child born today, 9/11 might as well be Pearl Harbor—they can learn from it, but they cannot live in it or live for it. Yes, sometimes products sell out of fear, but for Jewish identity to be a positive part of our lives, we need reasons *to be Jewish*.

4) The absolute closer, the pitch that worked better than all the rest combined: "Your ancestors survived Inquisition, pogroms, persecution, migration, Holocaust and anti-Semitism, and NOW you're *giving up*? The award winner, the best, first, and last resort to keep you Jewish fifty years ago: *guilt*. Have you

no loyalty? Don't you love your grandmother? At long last, have you no sense of decency? How could *you* be the one to break the golden chain of Jewish tradition, 4000 years of pain and tears and joy and Judaism?"

You can feel the power, the pull on the heart-strings, the weight of years and expectations and emotions, the manipulation. But guilt doesn't work well in the free market—people in 1964 who refused to buy cars from the Germans or “the Japs” now have grandchildren with Toyota Priuses. Guilt has its uses, but being Jewish *because you feel guilty* means that you're living your life as someone else wants you to, taking on someone else's values and making someone else's choices. The clear truth of Jewish identity and community today is that it is far easier for people to just tune out the guilt trip and do something that makes them feel good about themselves. If you're only Jewish lest you feel guilty that you've broken the covenant, if you're only Jewish lest you feel guilty that you've abandoned the chosen people, if you're only Jewish lest you betray your grandparents and finish the work of the Holocaust, then how does your Jewishness *improve* your life, inspire you, motivate you to deepen your connection? If your only ties to being Jewish are negative and painful, then you may endure it once or twice a year like a dentist appointment, but you'll run away as soon as you can, and you may never come back.

We need new ideas. We reject the subservience to the past required by the Covenant. We reject invidious comparisons with other identities inherent in the Chosen People. We refuse to sell through fear or guilt. So why be Jewish, why stay Jewish, why become Jewish, why connect with things Jewish? The new marketing is called micro-targeting: tell me what you are already interested in, and I'll find you something similar. People who bought this book also bought these other books. In other words, your Jewish connection will be your own, as often or rarely as you use it, and however you use it. Let me share with you three reasons that are compelling to me, and that may be compelling to you as well.

First: Jewish is as Jewish does. Judaism is a rich and varied and long tradition: it has seen everything from rational philosophy to animal sacrifice to mystical exploration, hereditary kings and priests giving way to rabbis and religious law, multiple languages sharing the same alphabet, and art and creativity celebrated in one corner of the Jewish world while condemned in another. At times we are inspired by our legacy; at times we are alienated. Haredi ultra-Orthodox Jews and Secular Humanistic Jews are both Jewish—if each of us contains multitudes, so too does Judaism. There is something for everyone, every learning style, every intelligence, every aptitude and interest. This is the beauty of celebrating Judaism as a culture: no matter what you believe, there's always something for you. We can even find a defense of our own challenges to tradition from within our tradition: the Jewish tradition of integrity, exemplified by those Jews during Inquisition and Pogrom who would not say words they did not believe.

Even Jewish martyrdom has its inspirations. In the Y.L. Peretz story, “Three Gifts”, a soul ascends to heaven, but its deeds are found to be exactly in balance. It returns to find three gifts to tip the scale. The soul witnesses a man killed protecting a small bag of earth around his neck, but it was from the land of Israel to be buried with him; the soul picks up the bag. Then it sees a Jewish woman about to be dragged to hear death in a pogrom jab pins into her legs to make sure her dress will stay closed and her modesty preserved; the soul takes a bloody pin. Finally the soul witnesses a Jewish man being beaten by a gauntlet of clubs; when his yarmulke is struck off, he faces the choice of going back to get it and face more pain or to go on with his head uncovered. The man returns and is beaten to death, and the soul takes the bloody yarmulke. When these three gifts are presented to the heavenly tribunal, they exclaim, “These three gifts are absolutely beautiful. Totally worthless, but absolutely beautiful.” On one level, this martyrdom is a waste—hey died for something that wasn't true. At the same time, it shows courage and conviction and the strength of identity. “Totally worthless, but absolutely beautiful.” Jewish is as Jewish does.

Second: Be a Jew, be a mensch. The Yiddish word “mensch” means simply a person, but the best kind of person. I am NOT saying that every Jew is automatically a mensch, nor that deep study of Judaism will automatically make you a mensch: rabbis are arrested for crimes, too. I do not believe that Jews invented nor have a monopoly on ethics. Nevertheless, there *are* values articulated in Jewish culture that we celebrate: an emphasis on literacy and learning that we have broadened to include both men and women, and secularized beyond the Talmud; an ethic of community responsibility and mutual support, combined with a work ethic of individual success. Jews have often celebrated brains over brawn, a welcome respite from today’s athlete worship and sometimes violent militarism. We have found humor as an antidote to the dashed promises of faith: when life doesn’t turn out as you expect, you can laugh or cry, and we have done both. We have our failings, but that makes us human. An example: traditionally the High Holidays were not only about divine forgiveness, but also human forgiveness—not just asking for forgiveness from someone else, but being willing to offer forgiveness when a sincere apology is made. This means making yourself available to someone who has wronged you to give them the opportunity to make it right. Is that easy? Not at all. But how wonderful that our tradition explored how hard it can be to repair relationships through human atonement. Other traditions have their lessons. So too, does Judaism. Be a Jew, be a mensch.

Third: Be a Jewish citizen of the world. In the last few centuries, Jews have become a prototype of the globalized identity—living within and fluent in other cultures, but still distinct and separate in some ways. Jews are a world people speaking different languages, but possessing a common identity beyond that of their city or country. Sometimes that gives us an outsider’s perspective and lets us challenge conventions, like Freud’s theories on sex or Einstein’s on relativity. At all times it gives us the ability to think beyond our personal identity, since we have always had more than one. Because of this dual identity, Jews have been accused of being “rootless cosmopolitans,” citizens of the world, with no allegiance to the people among whom they lived. The more that

people circulate in a global economy, the world will need *rooted* cosmopolitans, people who have a global perspective and awareness, but still know who they are and where they come from. If you are Jewish, if you’ve become Jewish, that rootedness can find deep origins in the Jewish experience, and so too can that universal perspective.

In the end, I suspect that I am still Jewish because I am stubborn, and that is definitely a Jewish tradition. We have called ourselves a stiff-necked people: we can be a pain in the neck, or as Henny Youngman might have said, some people have a lower opinion of us. More than that the Jews have kept being stubborn, being stubborn has kept the Jews around. You do *not* get to tell me that I do not get to be Jewish. I am still here and I am still Jewish because I am going to fight for the right to be who I am, on my own terms. If you won’t accept me, if you don’t think that I am Jewish or you don’t think what I do is Judaism, that’s your problem, not mine. If I lived my life by your standards, it would not be my life. And I refuse to surrender being Jewish to you. Even the Jewish values I reject—chauvinism, anti-feminism, insularity—they are skeletons in *my* closet, knots on *my* family tree. It’s good to be passionate about things in life; why not this?

Who’s sold? Am I only selling to myself? I have to start there. Remember Sy Sperling of the Hair Club for Men: “I’m not only the president of the Hair Club for Men, I’m also a client.” I’m not only someone who’s paid to be Jewish; *I am a Jew*, and that identity provides meaning and inspiration to my life.

If the best sales pitch for “Why be anything? Why be Jewish?” I can offer is a personal testimonial, then here it is:

My first trip to Israel, in the mid-1990s, I went to visit the Western Wall, the last surviving wall of the Jerusalem Temple that was destroyed in 70 CE. On my way there, I knew there were some barriers to a positive experience. I knew that this is on a mountain that is claimed to be holy by both Jewish and Muslims, and the Dome of the Rock right over the Western Wall is a source of conflict even to this day. I knew that the site was gender segregated,

even moreso today than it was 20 years ago, men and women forced to be apart. I knew that the big beautiful plaza in front of the Wall didn't used to be there – there used to be houses that were knocked down in 1967 to create that plaza. I also knew that I had forgotten my baseball cap in my dorm room and had to wear a silly paper yarmulke that kept blowing off my head—the price of admission to the Wall. And I knew that I did not bring a piece of paper on which to write a hope for the future to place in the Wall.

I knew all that. But when I got to the front, and I touched the stones, and I felt how smooth they were. I realized those stones were smooth because generations of my people had come to this space and touched these stones with their fingers. It was electric. I didn't need the supernatural, I didn't need a revelation. It was a connection with my past, in my present.

That moment deepened my life, and it continues to—I can still feel those stones. If you feel it too, you know why it's good to be something, to be somebody, to know who you are and to live it well. We are large, we contain multitudes, in all of our contradictions and complexity. And yet it is the wisdom of America's founding motto that still applies: *e pluribus unum*, from many, one.

Notes

¹ A case in point is the story of former Virginia Senator George Allen, who identifies as Presbyterian but whose Tunisian Jewish ancestry emerged when he used an apparent racial slur at a campaign event (Kessler 2006). Upon being confronted with his mother's Jewish background, Allen responded indignantly, "How dare you cast aspersions on people because of their religion," and then held an awkward press conference the next day admitting she was Jewish while asserting, "But she made great pork chops!" If you know her family's story, and how they were persecuted as Jews during the Holocaust under German occupation, however, the fear becomes more understandable.

² Though perhaps people are motivated to remain Ukranian by the memory of the revolting peasant Bogdan Chmielnicki himself: a Ukranian Navy

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Judaism and the Singularity:

Using Futurism to Predict Possible Trajectories of Jewish Identity and Community

by Paul Golin

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What if, at the push of a button, you could have a more profound sense of the Divine presence than you have ever had before? Or study text *b'chavruta* (partnered) with Maimonides himself? Or literally stand at Sinai when Israel received the Torah, the ground shaking beneath your feet as the mountain becomes engulfed in clouds and flames as heaven touches earth? What would it mean for the Jewish community to be able to provide Jews with overwhelmingly powerful spiritual experiences, instantly?

And what if that button for profound Jewish experiences was also available to every person on the planet?

Now imagine everyone, including Jews, having access to the same kind of buttons for every other world religion as well. Actually feel the radiant warmth of Jesus' palm on your forehead, healing you. Meditate to a new spiritual plane under the Bodhi tree with Siddhārtha Gautama Buddha. And imagine having access not just to religious but to ethnic experiences as well. Fully embrace a Han Chinese sense of collective destiny. Then, engage in an intense connection with the natural world as an indigenous Amazonian tribesperson.

If you had all those buttons, would you choose just one religion or ethnicity and stick to it loyally, or would you pick and choose from various experiences? Would you do them all? Or make up something completely new? If access to any human "identity" was equal, based only on interest or need, would there be more Jews in the world than there are now or less? What would being "Jewish" even mean?

This scenario may seem like an exercise in science fiction writing, irrelevant to today's concerns. Actually, the future may be closer than you think, and the trends that will affect our future are already coming into focus and having an impact on the organized Jewish community. A fully-immersive virtual world will accelerate the trend, but already in our real world people are choosing their religion. According to the 2009 "Faith in Flux" study from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, "about half of American adults have changed religious affiliation at least once during their lives." How is the Jewish community competing, if at all, in today's reality of religion-shopping within the marketplace of ideas? And within the marketplace of spiritual experiences?

Future trends will have a dramatic impact on Jewish religious and ethnic identity in ways that are not being discussed often enough in the organized Jewish community. In part, this lack of discussion occurs because we are not engaging futurists in our planning (or planning much beyond next year). And in part it occurs because we do not have answers for those who are moving away from both Jewish religious and ethnic identity yet still call themselves "Jewish."

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EXPLORING THE JEWISH FUTURE

For a people rightly obsessed with our past, we have also become very good lately at incorporating the word “future” into our communal conversation. Various organizations and foundations have hosted conferences and gatherings around the theme of the Jewish future. Most of the conversation, however, is actually about what is missing or needed from *today’s* Jewish community, not about what we might expect 20 years from now.

That is not a criticism; it is certainly important and even essential to address the current trends affecting our organizations and individuals. When a conference exposes Jewish communal professionals to innovators with new and effective methods or programs, whether from within or outside our sector, it informs the “future” of our own work, even if that future is the improvements we make in a week or month from now.

For example, most sessions at the Jewish Outreach Institute’s Judaism2030 Conference, held in New York City in May 2011, fell into that category of making available the stars in our community who are successfully addressing current challenges, for those whose organizations’ futures rely on their ability to adapt to the present. However, it did also address the “further future” in several sessions.

By opening with a keynote from a futurist, the Judaism2030 Conference provided a vision of where society—human society, not just Jewish society—might be in 10 or 20 years. Of course future predictions are often inaccurate, even by those who make their living as “futurists,” but the purpose was to encourage conference participants to measure their organizations’ current activities and goals against what we might reasonably expect to see in the coming decades. The presenter who relied most on futurist predictions was Jewish activist Daniel Sieradski, whose fascinating and humorous presentation is available at: <http://www.slideshare.net/mobius1ski/jeuromancer-transhumanism-bioethics-the-dystopian-jewish-future>.

Although Sieradski describes a dystopian future that I hope we can avoid, I do share his

belief that technology is going to radically change humanity as we know it. We both derive our understanding of the future from the important conversations that are already happening among scientists, entrepreneurs, and other futurists that Jewish communal professionals can and should be accessing to illuminate where current trends may lead.

The Singularity is Near

America’s preeminent futurist is Ray Kurzweil; his seminal work, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*, popularized the idea of using technology to accelerate human evolution (his predictions were the cover story of *Time Magazine* in February 2011). In his book, Kurzweil defines the singularity as “a future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed. Although neither utopian nor dystopian, this epoch will transform the concepts that we rely on to give meaning to our lives, from our business models to the cycle of human life, including death itself” (Kurzweil 2005).

Kurzweil predicts that the technological singularity—the point beyond which computer intelligence (or really, merged human-computer intelligence) surpasses human intelligence and improves itself so quickly that we simply cannot predict with any accuracy what comes next—will happen in the year 2045.

The vision of medical and technological advances described in Kurzweil’s book as a way to transcend death by merging with machines—“mind uploading” our consciousness to computers so as to indefinitely extend our lives—has been derided as “the rapture of the nerds.” But Kurzweil is evangelizing and building on ideas that many of the most important people in the scientific and technology community share. They do not all agree with his timeline or the exact outcomes, but there is general consensus about where the exponential advances in genetics, robotics, nanotechnology, and artificial intelligence will lead—to what author Joel Garreau calls “radical evolution” and others call “transhumanism” (Garreau 2005).

We have all experienced how rapidly technology has changed in our own lifetimes. Five years ago, almost nobody had “smart phones.” Today, if you went to work and forgot your iPhone at home, how helpless would you feel? We are already “offloading” a segment of our brainpower to the computers in our pockets (when was the last time you memorized a phone number?). In 2013, the first mass-market wearable computer—Google glasses, in which information will appear in your field of vision as a heads-up display—will become available. If in 10 or 20 years personal-computing technology continues to shrink so much that it can be swallowed in pill form so that you will have your computer with you at all times and operate it with your thoughts, would you swallow that pill? I bet yes (especially if it has an Apple logo on it). Because each preceding generation of computer prepares us for the next, the advances feel almost seamless.

How long will it be until technology makes possible the virtual reality that can create experiences like those I describe in the beginning of this article? Whether it takes another 10, 20, or even 30 years, the Star Trek “holodeck” is coming (Silbey 2013), and many of us will live to see it.

But of course the bottom-line question remains: Is it good for the Jews?

Utopia or Dystopia?

There are really only three ways the future can turn out: amazing, disastrous, or something in between. Despite his claim of a future that is “neither utopian nor dystopian,” the singularity described by Ray Kurzweil leans heavy utopian—it is still “us” inside the computers, and we have transcended all that ails us. Futurists such as Peter Diamandis, founder of the X Prize Foundation and author with Steven Kotler (2012) of *Abundance: The Future Is Better Than You Think*, also predict good times. However, others envision a future in which we either never get a chance to make that great technological leap because of our own self-destructive tendencies, or once we make the leap the machines are so much smarter than us they have no need to keep us around any longer.

In the dystopian Jewish future imagined in Dan Sieradski’s “Jeuromancer” there is a split between ultra-Orthodox and more liberal Jews over the halachic (Jewish legal) acceptance of transcending our biology through technology. Their rejection of these advances actually leaves the ultra-Orthodox less susceptible to the eventual machine enslavement of humanity:

The choice those Jewish people who resist getting chipped [having technology implanted into their bodies] face is between being Amish, and simply allowing the future to pass us by as we sit on the sidelines, or being like the Luddites and rising up and taking action against the future. The battle over assimilation will no longer be merely about intermarriage and a loss of traditional values, but about the loss of our humanness overall, let alone the last vestiges of Jewishness.... the *ba’al teshuvot* [returners to the faith] will be those who remove their chips and rise up against the system that seeks to enslave them, living as outcasts, as Ivri [passed over], on the edges of the mainstream society (Sieradski 2011).

I do not see the future so negatively. Indeed, if the future *is* dystopian, I think the Jews are better prepared for it than most. We have already come to the brink of extinction, we are continually grappling with existential threats, and many of the communal structures we have built are all about “survival.” If things go south, we are already highly organized. And in the absolute worst-case scenario, Israel has the bomb. Future attempts at Jewish extermination come with a much higher price this time around.

No, I am not worried about our performance in an end-of-days collapse of civilization. Instead I am much more interested in what happens to the Jews in a more utopian future (which also happens to be the future I prefer). I imagine there will be good and bad aspects of life for as long as there is life, but in the spirit of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), I hope we can move the needle incrementally closer to good than bad with each passing

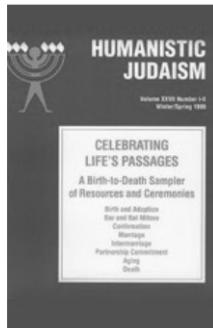
year. In his book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and Its Causes*, Steven Pinker suggests that is exactly what is happening: Human beings are becoming increasingly less murderous brutes (Pinker 2011).

We have made some progress toward improving human nature, but unlike technological change that increases exponentially, our growth as people—emotionally, ethically, spiritually, and creatively—has been linear at best. For example, today there is a greater quantity of excellent literature produced than at any time in the past, but how much of it surpasses the greatest works, such as those by Homer written almost 3,000 years ago or by Shakespeare 400 years ago? Jews are rightfully proud of our historical contributions toward the betterment of human nature, yet all the themes of emotional failing contained in our ancient literature still resonate today. We have not eradicated jealousy, anger, adultery, or greed, even as we stand on the cusp of revolutionary alterations to human physiology.

Since technology is moving at a much quicker pace than human emotional development, there certainly seems to be a place for the great compendium of ancient wisdom and ethics contained in the Jewish tradition. In a paper titled “The Immorality of Immortality,” Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, one of the few thinkers engaging the singularity from a Jewish perspective, writes the following:

We should not categorically reject these [technological] advances because many of them do and will alleviate human suffering and misery. However, we should not let scientists alone determine our technological future. Rather, we must involve theologians, philosophers, ethicists, historians, sociologists and political scientists in the conversation about technology and not be afraid of robust debate (Tirosh-Samuelson 2009).

“Judaism and the Singularity” continued on page 15



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TRENDS AND COUNTERTRENDS

For Judaism to remain relevant in a future made better by rapid technological advances, we must more effectively address existing challenges to Jewish life that will only become more pronounced as we move forward. “Challenges,” however, mean different things to different Jewish communal professionals, depending on their perspective. There are seemingly contradictory concurrent trends and countertrends. For example, Jews are becoming more religious *and* more secular. However, if seen as a “big tent,” Judaism has enough room for movement in all directions, even room for those who do not recognize the others in the tent as Jewish. Therefore, working toward seemingly opposite goals is not necessarily counterproductive; it can make us stronger through diversity, a kind of bet-hedging.

The trends I spend most of my days working on are about disengagement from organized Jewish life by a growing number of Jews. This is an issue on which much of the community is also focused. And although the programmatic responses vary widely, the general approach or “solution” is the same almost across the board—from Orthodox through Reform, JCCs through innovative start-ups: *Get more Jews doing Jewish with other Jews*. Reinforce Jewish “identity” by increasing either religious and/or ethnocultural connections, experiences, and learning.

I do not object to that approach and in fact promote it, because it works for some people. However, I have also come to recognize why it will not work for others, particularly those who frequently identify as “Just Jewish,” one of the largest and fastest growing demographic groups of our community. When framed against the expected trends of a more utopian future, it becomes even clearer why the community-wide approach to engagement does not work for them and why we need to create additional movements within the big tent.

Transcending Biology

Singularitarians seek to enhance current human physiology to allow for dramatically increased longevity and intellect (and endurance;

Kurzweil imagines oxygen-carrying nanobots in your bloodstream that allow you to sit at the bottom of a swimming pool for four hours without drowning). We have already seen the first early human-machine mergers, such as artificial hearts and brain implants for seizures. Replacement parts do not all have to be machines; scientists are currently growing organs in labs and human ears on the back of mice.

Judaism is a religion that promotes life above all else, so there is compatibility with such advances but there is also an inherent challenge: the Jewish people are overwhelmingly “biological”—that is, Jewish by birth. The organized Jewish community celebrates Jewish tribalism. We are “M.O.T.,” members of the tribe. Jewish Federations of North America’s national conference for young leadership is called “Tribefest.”

I am not suggesting that people who feel a special comfort in being a “member of the tribe” are wrong for doing so or should stop feeling that way. However, I do want to raise awareness that there are Jews who are deeply uncomfortable with the notion of Jewish tribalism. For many, “tribalism” is something that happens in the most dysfunctional parts of the world, and it is something to be overcome.

More importantly, “tribalism” sets boundaries inside which many Jews do not feel included. Today there are more intermarried than in-married households in the United States; more individuals under the age of 20 were born to just one Jewish parent than to two Jewish parents. Many children of intermarriage feel they cannot abide by the exclusivity of tribalism without cutting off half their family, which few are willing to do.

The sentiment behind tribalism is also expressed through words like “ethnicity” or, more recently, “peoplehood.” In “The Case for Jewish Peoplehood: Can We Be One,” Drs. Erica Brown and Misha Galperin offer a very thoughtful meditation on the topic, but ultimately do not provide a clear enough differentiation between peoplehood and tribalism, particularly when they repeat

the longstanding fallacy that intermarriage is synonymous with out-marriage and disappearance. They write, “Many intermarried individuals who care about Judaism understand that their personal choices—while clear to them—do not make sense on a communal level and are destructive to the peoplehood equation” (Brown and Galperin 2009).

I am an intermarried individual who cares deeply about Judaism, and although I did not intermarry to make a statement to the organized Jewish community, I believe that intermarriage is healthy for Jewish “peoplehood,” because the tribal definitions currently used are growing increasingly incompatible with the future I hope to experience. It certainly would send a powerful message to “Just Jews” like myself if a leader of a major national Jewish movement would loudly proclaim that because we are entering an age when being Jewish, particularly Jewish-by-birth, is increasingly irrelevant to being a good “citizen” of the Jewish community, intermarriage is no longer a useful measure of anything.

“Multiethnic” does not mean Jewish ethnicity dies or has to become less intense. People, particularly young people, have a remarkable ability to compartmentalize and express many simultaneous identities, and I believe future technologies will enhance, not diminish identity experiences. Jewish ethnicity was going to change anyway. Our expressions of Jewish identity are not the same as our grandparents’, so why should we hope our grandchildren’s will be exactly the same as ours?

Ubiquitous Judaism

In letting go of Jewish tribalism, the logical place to turn might be to Judaism as a religion. And indeed, important segments of our communal tent seem to have done that. Although all of the denominations have shifted over the past two decades toward greater religiosity, it is particularly interesting to note that shift among the Reform movement, which during that same time welcomed huge numbers of interfaith families. Could it be that the challenge to Jewish ethnicity inherent in welcoming non-Jews into our “peoplehood” forced the movement to ask itself what

being Jewish really means, and that the answers they found were about ritual and belief?

As thankful as I am that intermarried households seeking Jewish religion are finding an increasingly warmer welcome in many synagogue communities (Zevloff 2011), Judaism as a religion is not the answer for my segment of “Just Jews,” primarily because many of us do not believe. Of course, many Jews struggle with belief. For decades, Jews have scored the lowest among all religions or ethnicities on studies that asked about belief in God; for example, the “Jewish Distinctiveness In America” survey found only 27% of Jews agreed they “know God exists,” compared with 59% of Liberal Protestants, the next lowest scoring group (Smith 2005). Although many non-believing Jews still find meaning in synagogue participation, many more do not, yet movement leadership makes clear that God worship is a central purpose of affiliation.

So now that I have knocked down the two central pillars of Jewish American identity—ethnic and religious—what is left? Zionism? Ethical culture? Social justice? Secular engagement with sacred texts?

For me, what is left is all of it, none of it, and pieces of the ethnic and religious too. The description of Judaism that resonated most for me was from Rabbi Irwin Kula, president of CLAL: The National Jewish Center for Leadership and Learning, who spoke passionately at the 2009 Jewish Outreach Institute national conference about “Judaism as a Technology” (for a video clip, visit: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9URHliukkw>). He referenced Maimonides to claim that the only important measure about any mitzvah (commandment)—for example putting up a *mezuzah* (a prayer parchment affixed to doorframes of Jewish homes)—is not counting how many people do it, but determining what it does for the individual—and whether it helps mitigate violence and/or develop virtue. Kula also challenged the notion of peoplehood by stating that Jewish wisdom is for everyone who wants it. To me, that is the starting point.

In Ray Kurzweil's vision of a postsingularity future, the universe will "wake up" with intelligence everywhere, because having data written in subatomic particles means that even an inanimate object like a rock can be filled with information. I envision a "Ubiquitous Judaism," available everywhere for anyone who wants it. If there is a special role for Jews at all, it should be in explaining to anyone who might benefit how each piece of Jewish technology works to improve people's lives or the world. Judaism can be a part of everyone's identity (in the future, it will be anyway).

Just as we cannot see beyond the technological singularity with any certainty, I do not know where such an experiment might lead. However, I would like to bring likeminded, future-oriented "Just Jews" together to create something new that would also acknowledge the old; make it accessible for everyone; infuse it with depth of meaning; and use David Ben-Gurion's definition of a Jew as "anyone who's *meshuggeneh* [crazy] enough to say they're Jewish." Let's try to ensure that as the definition of "human" inevitably evolves, we also offer, for those who are interested, a compelling and useful Judaism for all.¹

Notes

¹ For a daily moment of awe about where we are potentially headed as a species, I encourage you to subscribe to the free e-newsletter at www.KurzweilAI.net, which provides links to new articles in mainstream media about the latest advances.

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The Gendered Reality of Jewish Intermarriage in America

by Keren R. McGinity

Although much has been said and written about Jewish intermarriage, very little scholarship has looked at change over time or gender to explain experience and identity. Tenacious negative assumptions prevail. Fortunately, some Jewish leaders are more insightful than others. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner once wrote:

We now have enough data to say categorically that there is simply no way to stop vast numbers of Jews from marrying non-Jews. Fierce rabbinic bans are risibly ineffective. Insulting forms of covert ostracism only make us look xenophobic and weak. And insisting that we are a people but with no publicly identifiable characteristics makes us look either racist or stupid. Spiritual and cultural strength is measured not by rigidity or power, but by vitality and flexibility of the response. (Kushner 2010, 65)

You may know that Rabbi Kushner held a pulpit in Sudbury, MA for nearly three decades. What you may not know is that Rabbi Kushner's grandfather eloped with a Presbyterian woman, who chose to become Jewish. Both her grandsons and her granddaughter are rabbis (63-65). Their family history illustrates the gendered reality of Jewish intermarriage in America. By taking a longitudinal approach and using gender as a primary category of analysis, I argue that a new paradigm emerges for understanding the meaning of intermarriage.

My book, *Still Jewish*, is the first history of American Jewish women who intermarried during the twentieth century (McGinity 2009).¹ Immigrant women who came to the Promised Land of religious freedom chose their own husbands rather than use the services of a matchmaker.

Intermarried Jewish women who wed during a resurgence of public opinion in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s that reinforced traditional gender roles and (with a temporary interlude “for the duration” of World War II) encouraged American wives to embrace domesticity and leave world affairs to men (Milkman 1987; Matthews 1987). A variety of historical factors made marrying “out” more conceivable to some Jewish women, and more possible: the increasing visibility and, to some degree, acceptability of intermarriage between Catholics and Protestants between 1930 and 1960, and a new abundance of social science studies and lay and advice literature contributed to making intermarriage seem more common in American society at large. American Jewry's decreasing traditionalism and secularization were other factors. And the economic and social climate during World War II that increased Jewish women's opportunities outside the home fostered encounters with Gentile men through greater integration into non-Jewish circles in higher education, professionalized employment, and suburban living (Ware 1989; Heilman 1995). While secularism, assimilation, and social contacts made intermarriage more possible, experiences with anti-Semitism sometimes provided the motivation. The 1947 film *Gentleman's Agreement*, based on the novel by Laura Zametkin Hobson, a formerly intermarried Jewish woman, brought the issue of anti-Semitism into the public eye. Many personal recollections suggest that discrimination was a significant part of intermarried Jewish women's consciousness.

Jewish women who sought inclusion within a new fold usually chose Unitarianism over

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Catholicism or one of the strictly Protestant denominations. It is worth noting that of the (14) women who intermarried in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, one-third eventually found their way to the Unitarian Church and two-thirds continued to identify only as Jewish.² That a majority of the women did not take on their husband's religion is remarkable, given the contemporary pressure on American wives to be subordinate to their husbands, which increased during the immediate postwar years (Rosenberg 1992; May 1988). Unitarian Universalism, the no-dogma, no-creed religion, offered something unique to Jewish women who married Christians. It enabled them to locate a religious middle ground with their spouses, one that did not ask them to renounce their inherited faith and adopt another. Ann Carlton, who was born in 1933 and grew up near the Jersey Shore, commented that, "...it was very easy to become a Unitarian because I could still practice some of my Jewish things" (A. Carlton, interview with author). She was considered the "Jewish authority" at her Unitarian church, conducted the Seder for the Sunday School class, and brought in Jewish food. However, growing up with anti-Semitism caused her to resist full disclosure about the Jewish part of her identity: "I'll always *admit* that I'm Jewish if asked. But I don't come forward all the time and say that I am."

Jewish identity within intermarried women's senses of self was not solely a matter of religion or ethnicity or race, but rather a complex mix of the three. Religion could be changed, as some did when they intermarried; ethnicity and race were flexible yet tenacious. How women perceived of themselves influenced the ways in which they identified. Roughly a third of the women I interviewed who intermarried in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, ceased to identify actively as Jewish, yet maintained that being Jewish was part of their ethnic background. A small minority integrated their inherited Jewishness with their acquired non-Jewish affiliation. The majority insisted that they were and always would be Jewish by bloodline, implying that Jewishness was a racial trait as uncontrollable as one's DNA. In intermarriage, ethnic identity and religious identity were not distinct characteristics, but rather one often conditioned the other (Barron 1946).

Being "Jewish" also stuck with women, regardless of whether they intermarried or chose to identify otherwise. "Still Jewish" was a double entendre for women who did not feel Jewish, but believed that they were Jewish by descent and due to social understanding of who is a Jew. The Jewish label was socially constructed as permanent; it could not be erased by intermarriage or conversion.

The 1960s and 1970s represent a turning point in intermarriage history. Thriving political and social liberalism in American society facilitated the intermarriages of Jewish women with non-Jewish men by driving religious and racial prejudice, if not out of existence, at least much further underground. Anti-Vietnam fervor that began with a small protest in 1964 mushroomed into widespread public dispute of American policy, conscientious objection, and draft evasion. If the American people could openly denigrate the government, certainly some Jewish women (and men) could defeat their parents' wishes and marry the "other." The counterculture spirit that evolved attacked the traditional values, behavior, and personal relationships of most Americans (Unger and Unger 1998). During these socially turbulent times, when "Make Love, Not War" was a popular motto, marrying someone of a different religion became another of many ways to rebel and thwart social convention.

Involvement in intellectual circles and political activities contributed to making ideas and politics more significant than religious differences. Ellen Kolokowski was born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1943, and married for the second time in 1973. She described liberal thinking, integration between blacks and whites, the increase in divorce, and the increasing acceptability of intermarriage all contributing to how people found mates outside their own religion:

Because you were meeting people more based on your political stance, your social stance, rather than *my life* of meeting people *through* the temple and *through* the youth group activities, ... and joining Hillel, and staying in that little circle. All of a sudden, it was open! You were *going*

to rallies, you were *going* to the Arlington Street church because that's where the most radical, liberal stuff was happening. So, you weren't going there to pray; you were going there to meet the movers and shakers in the political world. (E. Kolowski, interview with author)

Once political similarities brought Jewish women and Gentile men together, religious differences were insufficient to keep them apart. Modern ecumenism—cooperation and collaboration among organized religions—likewise brought down fences separating one faith from another. Moreover, marriage was becoming increasingly secular. The expansion of higher education, the civil rights movement, the new ethnic consciousness, and the election of the first Roman Catholic president in 1960 all contributed to greater tolerance of diversity (Wertheimer 1986). The US Supreme Court decision in *Loving v. Virginia* declared miscegenation laws unconstitutional in 1967, making it legal for Jewish white women to marry black men of whatever religion (Pascoe 1991). A significant decline in anti-Semitism also increased Jewish women's prospects for finding a spouse outside Judaism (Dinnerstein 1994).³

Illustrating the dual influences of feminism, Jewish feminism in particular, and ethnic revivalism, women who intermarried in the 1960s and 1970s were considerably more adamant about their being Jewish, with few exceptions, than those who intermarried earlier in the century. Thus, although some Jewish women were comfortable marrying a Gentile, they were not comfortable being mistaken for one. This intense objection to the potential of being mistakenly identified as a non-Jew marks a significant change from some of the women who intermarried at mid-century and did not proactively identify as Jewish, admitting to being Jewish only if asked. The intensified association between a woman's name and her Jewish identity was part of the historical context of Jewish feminism, in which increasing numbers of women came forward to claim their religious and ethnic heritage (Carnay et al., 1992). Marrying a Gentile, combined with motherhood, raised most women's consciousness about both Jewish identity and Judaism.

Jewish women who intermarried between 1980 and 2000 were among an unprecedented number of Jews who married Gentiles; yet they embraced the historically gendered notion of the Jewish woman as the “maternal keeper of the domestic flame of Judaism.” Most of these Jewish women believed that it was their responsibility to instill an understanding of Jewish history and culture, if not Judaism, in their children. Having children made the intermarried Jewish women I interviewed decidedly proactive about making Jewish connections, about observance, and about Jewish education. In the 1980s and 1990s, intermarried Jewish women increasingly made sure, even more so than their predecessors who intermarried in the 1960s and 1970s, that their children received more Jewish religious and cultural education than they themselves had. Whereas some women who intermarried in the 1960s and 1970s disassociated Jewish education from Jewish identity, women who intermarried at the end of the twentieth century were considerably more committed to Jewish identification through education. Women who intermarried in the 1980s and 1990s seemed less convinced than their predecessors that their children's Jewish identity was absolute or dependent on matrilineal descent; whether their children would be Jewish depended intimately on the choices women made about Jewish education and lifestyle.⁴

My key finding regarding the history of some intermarried Jewish women dismantles assumptions about intermarriage and lack or loss of Jewish identity. By using gender as a primary category of analysis, it became evident that intermarried Jewish women actually became *more* interested in Jewishness and invested in Judaism over time, rather than less.

Although intermarried Jewish women illustrate some of American women's gains toward equality with men, such as greater education and employment opportunities, they also demonstrate the tenacity of gendered behaviors when it came to domesticity and religion. Intermarried Jewish women consistently had careers *and* more responsibility for childrearing and domestic religion than did their Gentile husbands. By voluntarily

doing all of the necessary planning and most of the physical labor involved in religious observance and cultural participation, they thereby reinforced the social expectation of women as the purveyors of Judaism that was increasingly practiced in the home, in addition to or instead of the synagogue.

So, where does that leave intermarried Jewish men? Is the upside of being an intermarried Jewish woman the downside of being an intermarried Jewish man? A current argument regarding intermarriage in America is that Jewish husbands are ambivalent about Judaism and less proactively vocal than their Gentile wives about how children will be raised.⁵ According to one sociologist, “Intermarried men who have negative feelings about Jews and Jewishness are the ‘weak link’ in contemporary American Jewish life” (Fishman and Parmer 2008, 77). The fact is that the majority of American Jews do not report that religion is “very important” to them, yet intermarried Jewish men continue to be singled out as having the least interest.⁶

Popular culture depicts at least two significant issues in contemporary American Jewish life: the declining engagement of Jewish males post-bar mitzvah and the intricate relationship between masculinity and Jewish identity. In one example, a rabbi tells a Jewish boy preparing for his bar mitzvah that the event signals his becoming a man. The boy interprets this transition in life to mean, not greater responsibility in the Jewish community, but that he will be qualified to engage in greater sexual relations. At least that is what the writers for the popular sitcom “Seinfeld” suggested to American viewers. In a subsequent scene, the bar mitzvah boy renounces his religion claiming, “As of this moment, I am no longer Jewish! I quit!” (*Seinfeld* 1997).

Popular culture likewise reinforces the gendered division of labor in the home and how some Jewish men’s interests lie outside of it. In a scene from an episode of “Sex and the City,” the bar mitzvah boy has indeed become a man, in the American sense: Harry is a successful attorney who has reached a marriageable age. He comes home from work to find a beautifully set table,

laden with kosher food. He tries to watch a baseball game on television—“It’s on mute!”—while his WASP-turned-Jew-by-choice-wife, Charlotte, lights Shabbat candles with her back to the set. She discovers what Harry is doing, and her reaction captures the gendered dichotomy: “I gave up Christ for you and you can’t give up the Mets?!” (*Sex and the City* 2003).

What do we really know about intermarried Jewish men? There are brief references to the Hollywood moguls who married non-Jewish women, a slew of fictional representations on television and the silver screen, and sociological studies illustrating a gender imbalance in religious and communal life. Even the tabloids cover interfaith romance as a hot topic, informing us that Orthodox Jew Jared Kushner married heiress Ivanka Trump, who converted to Judaism shortly before they wed (“Ivanka’s Big Day” 2009). The nuptials between Marc Mezvinsky and former First Daughter Chelsea Clinton continue to garner attention in the national media and the Jewish community, especially after the recent birth of their daughter Charlotte. Reality TV has even gotten into the interfaith act. Little has been known or said, however, about the hearts and minds of intermarried Jewish men—until now.

My book, *Marrying Out* contributes to a topic that has heretofore received sparse attention from historians and in Jewish studies by looking at the intersection between religion and gender in the post-World War II period to the present, and how that interaction has changed over time (McGinity 2014). It explores Jewish men’s experiences with intermarriage and fatherhood, incorporating Christian women’s voices in the narrative as well, so that these women of valor will finally be heard.

Three main patterns arose from my research about intermarried Jewish men. First, American Jewish men’s childhood experiences and relationships with their parents—not stereotypes about non-Jewish women—influenced the particular kinds of women they married and how their intermarried lives evolved. Although fictional portrayals, such as the 1972 film *The Heartbreak Kid* and the mythical “shiksa goddess,” would have

us believe that men actively sought out non-Jewish women for their physical attractiveness, Jewish men's expressed reasons for inter-dating and marrying non-Jewish women focused on Jewish-Christian population ratios, falling in love, and seeking partners who provided the acceptance or love some had not received during childhood. This paper focuses on the second and third patterns.

The second pattern I found was men shifting from more traditional to more liberal branches of Judaism and deepening their Jewish identities in the process. The fact that a clear majority of men shifted away from the affiliation of their childhood to a different affiliation is significant. Their transitions included: from Orthodox to Conservative; Orthodox to Reform; Conservative to Reform; Conservative and Reform to secular; and one man shifted from secular to Reform. The men's narratives illustrate the fluidity of Jewish identity and the impact a single rabbi can have, negative or positive, on men's Jewish identities and affiliations.

Some Jewish men described their paths from Conservative and Orthodox childhoods to affiliation with a Reform congregation. Deciding who would officiate at an intermarriage sometimes influenced men's Jewish identity. In 1976, when Fred Stevens asked the Conservative rabbi to marry him and his Gentile bride, the rabbi refused and also told Fred he couldn't be a member. Fred described the impact of this eight-minute conversation: "That was the end of me being a Conservative Jew." Morris Aker, who wed in 1953, described his journey from Conservative to Reform Judaism: "It never would have occurred to me that I would be a Reform Jew...Reform was a strange thing to me, not fully Jewish." Interviewed a half-century after joining a Reform temple, Morris now believes that Reform Judaism is "fully Jewish" and insists, "I love being a Jew" (M. Aker, interview with author). Mark Entennman described rebelling against being brought up in an Orthodox synagogue, his marital negotiation, and his journey through fatherhood to a deeper connection to Jewish life.

I think when we had children—and really the rubber met the road then—and [my wife] said, "If you want to bring them

up Jewish you have to step up to the plate and participate." Be an active member of the religion and become involved in a congregation and be responsible for raising them.... I agreed. I thought she was right. And you know it's been an interesting journey since then because I've become very, very interested and much more comfortable with religion. (M. Entennman, interview with author)

Mark considers himself more Jewish now, after intermarrying and becoming a participating member of a Reform temple, than when he was Orthodox. His enhanced identity is based on having a better understanding of Torah, becoming more knowledgeable, being accepted in a community, and raising Jewish children.

Although many men expressed indifference about whether their wife converted, most were adamant about raising Jewish children, which is the third pattern. The more crucial issue regarding intermarriage is not how the individuals involved identified, but how their children were raised and what that would mean for the future of the Jewish people. The Pew Research Center's 2013 finding that only 20 percent of intermarried parents are raising their children as Jewish by religion confirmed the glass-half-empty mindset, while the fact that 61 percent are raising children with a Jewish identity of any sort confirmed glass-half-full thinking. The fact that the proportion of adult Jews with intermarried parents has increased is a direct reflection of the increase in the rate of intermarriage over time from less than 17 percent among Jews who married before 1970, to 58 percent among Jews who married in 2000 or later. Fortunately, Pew also affords us a new way of looking at the children of intermarriage, thanks to analysis by my Brandeis colleague, Ted Sasson. From the older to younger generation, the proportion of adult children of intermarriage identifying as Jewish steadily increased, from Baby Boomers (1946-1964) to Generation X-ers (1965-1980) to Millennials (born after 1980) (Sasson 2013).

Extant scholarship about the children of intermarriage contends more Jewish children are raised

by Jewish mothers married to Gentile fathers than Jewish fathers married to Gentile mothers, and I'm not contesting that data; however, the majority of Jewish men in my study—from those who married at midcentury to those who married in the new millennium—were adamant about their children being raised Jewish, whether or not their wives converted.⁷ Among the men who intermarried between 1953 and 1978 and had children, nine out of fourteen raised Jewish children. Two men raised children with dual religious traditions, two as Christian, and one as Humanist. Among the men who intermarried between 1980 and 1989, ten out of 11 raised Jewish children and one as “nothing.” Lastly, among men who intermarried between 1990 and 2008, eight out of 11 raised Jewish children. One man raised children as both, one as neither, and one as Christian. That more men in any grouping did not raise children as “both” or “neither” is noteworthy.

More important, however, is to look beyond the numbers to what their personal journeys can teach about Jewish transmission and identity. Although Jewish men, like most American men, may still do less of the actual childcare than do women, some Jewish men who intermarried have at least been “deciders.” Keith Soller described the conversation he had with his betrothed: “When we got married, I made the point to her that if you don't want to convert, that's up to you, but *all of our children...are gonna be Jewish*” (K. Soller, interview with author). Fred Stevens, who married an Episcopal woman in 1977 told his betrothed: “Look, if we have children, they have to be Jewish, otherwise the deal is off. I have to get married in a synagogue. You can do what you want” (F. Stevens, interview with author). The men's comments illustrate a lack of investment in whether their brides chose Judaism for themselves, combined with commitment to Jewish continuity through their children.

The American men in my sample became “more Jewish”—not along denominational lines, but according to self-definition—due to several factors, namely: personal connections with a rabbi, and Christian wives who made them “step up to the plate” after the men gave ultimatums that

their children be raised Jewish. Disaffection with organized religion prompted moves for some men from Orthodox and Conservative Judaism to Reform Judaism, which offered a Jewish nest for men who were turned off by rules and more traditional rabbis. Intermarried men also determined their own children's identities without citing the patrilineal descent decision adopted by the Reconstructionist and Reform movements in 1968 and 1983 respectively. “We see him as Jewish,” one father commented about his and his wife's view of their son (M. Entenman, interview with author). George Maze described how extended family members, however, did not consider his children Jewish, and as a result, they would not be given *aliyot* or allowed on the *bimah* at their cousin's bar mitzvah. Given that his children became b'nai mitvah and self-identify as Jewish, he contended: “they're as Jewish as the next Jew!” (G. Maze, interview with author). Intermarried men's sense of Jewish identity and continuity is from the ground up; it is *they* who declare the Jewishness of their children—not any rabbi, denomination, or movement.

Although intermarried Jewish men may help broaden the concept of continuity, traditional gender behaviors continue to influence American family life, including men's available time for parenting. There are certainly more dual-career couples today than a half-century ago, and the concept of equal parenting has begun to take root. Those Jewish men who married in the latter half of the twentieth century wanted to be different kinds of parents than their fathers were, resisting the corporate ladder to devote more time to being with their children. When Frank Smith was growing up in the 1960s, “mothers were parents and fathers worked.” He was a good high school football player, but his father only attended a couple of games. Frank was determined to spend more time with his children, to be there for them. Frank's son was a soccer player; Frank went to every game and many of the practices (F. Stevens, interview with author). While the re-emergence of what historians dub “new fatherhood” of the 1970s and 1980s helped men legitimize spending more time with their families, it unfortunately did not fully reconstruct gender relations to create

true equity in domestic or paid labor (Griswold 1993). Although some of the men were able to craft careers that allowed for flexible schedules so they could be more involved with their children's daily lives, and seemed happier as a result, the male breadwinner ethic continued to prevail. When asked how they envisioned their role as a man, a husband, a father, many men responded with the words: "to provide." Additional characteristics included "hard working," "financially successful," "family oriented," "committed to helping others," and setting a "good example." Men who intermarried in the mid 1970s and 1980s used the term "partnership" and "two-career" marriage, a change from their predecessors who intermarried in the 1950s and 1960s. However, for the majority of men in both marriage cohorts, being the provider was still their primary defining role. Even those men who strove to share equally in the domestic tasks often admitted that their wives still did more around the house while they spent more hours working outside of it.

Closer to the present, men who intermarried most recently seem the most invested in trying to balance their career pursuits with fatherhood. According to one participant who intermarried in 2003, once his son was born, his life "ended": it became centered on his role as a father and doing everything for his son and eventually his daughter, too. However much men may want to be involved in their children's lives, the social reality in which they live makes prioritizing family life a challenge. For Charles Revkin, an accomplished physician who intermarried in 1997, his wife was glad to have a Jewish family, but told him: to the extent that they're Jewish, he would have to do the work to make that happen. The rationale was not a direct outgrowth of feminist thinking, as one might think, but rather because she is not Jewish and therefore does not know how to go about it. Charles pointed out, "the only problem with that theory is that I'm at work 60 or 70 hours every week," which doesn't leave much time to ensure his children's Jewish cultural or religious education (C. Revkin, interview with author). Whether Jewish men want to cut back on their paid labor hours and increase hours with their families depends intimately on how they envision their roles as

husbands and fathers. Like the women Betty Friedan described in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, Jewish men suffer from an unnamed malady; in their case, however, it stems from competing priorities and communal disenfranchisement rather than overeducated and underutilized minds. Men are caught between wanting to be *mensch*s who make the world a better place, and the American "rules" of masculinity that encourage them to win, to get ahead, to make more money.

There is likely a relationship between the country's preoccupation with getting fathers to play with their children and what some Judaic Studies scholars report about the "disappearance" of Jewish men from communal involvement, with the exception of Temple president, and the difficulty of attracting them to the professional workforce in the Jewish community, suggesting that Jewish men became less communally involved over time" (McGinity 2009, 175). Some of the men in my study are highly involved in the Jewish community. In addition to serving on temple committees and boards of Jewish organizations, they have worked creatively to build a more inclusive Jewish community. Other men, who have focused more exclusively on career building or supporting their family, declare that they hope to be more involved when they retire. A large majority of the men expressed commitment to the ideal of social justice and related how their actions on behalf of the less fortunate are an expression of their Jewish values.

Intermarried Jewish men's struggle to shape their own sense of fatherhood is part of the larger ongoing movement in America to encourage men to become more involved parents. On Father's Day 2009, President Obama launched a national dialogue about fatherhood; in a public service announcement by the Ad Council and the Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, he stated, "Things can get busy, and sometimes we all fall short, but the smallest moments can have the biggest impact on a child's life. Take time to be a dad today" (Egolf 2009). Based on research about the ramifications of absent fathers in children's lives, whether due

to work schedules, divorce, or incarceration, the billboards and PSAs all equated manhood with involved fatherhood. The message on billboards and subsequent PSAs by the National Fatherhood Initiative was: “It takes a man to be a dad.”

Gender equality is not a women’s issue or a men’s issue: it’s a human issue. Enabling intermarried Jewish men to better integrate work and family is a feminist goal, and reaching it will benefit both sexes. The issues of men’s involvement in Jewish parenting and the Jewish community need to be looked at in their fuller contexts that include interactions with members of Jewish leadership and the ongoing American reality of men spending more hours away from their families and earning more than women for the same work. Active Jewish fathering needs to be seen as equally important as providing. Gender will persist in influencing the disproportionately low transmission rate of Jewish identity to children of intermarried Jewish men compared to intermarried Jewish women so long as “men’s work” outside the home continues to be socially valued more highly than “women’s work” inside it—and men’s identities continue to be fashioned by what they *do* rather than who they *are*.

Encouraging men of all denominational stripes to invest in raising Jewish children is about acknowledging that while American men contribute more at home than they did in years past, they still do far less than women on the domestic front. It also requires confronting the reality that intermarried Jewish men have been shortchanged in the realm of domestic Judaism, sometimes inadvertently ousted by their wives who pick up the slack, and neglected by the Jewish community that erroneously assumed they did not come back after becoming *b’nai mitzvah* because their Jewishness was unimportant to them or because women were present. “Gender equality,” in the words of sociologist Michael Kimmel on how he became a feminist, “is the only way for men to have the sorts of relationships we say we want to have—with women, with men, and with our children” (Kimmel 2008, 171). Intermarried Jewish men *can* raise Jewish children equally as effectively as Jewish women. Let us—men, women, and children—act as partners to complete the unfinished business of

the feminist and fatherhood movements to create, finally, gender equality in America.

Notes

¹ See Fogell (1997) for a contemporary discussion of the experiences of ten Canadian Jewish women who married non-Jews that is primarily descriptive. The only previous scholarship by a historian focused on Jewish-Gentile intermarriage treats gender (and race) as an immutable category of analysis. See Spickard (1989, 161-231). For an earlier history, see Rose (2001).

² Since participation in this research was on a self-selected basis, a woman who converted to Christianity may have chosen not to participate and therefore have been inadvertently excluded.

³ Dinnerstein commented, “In human terms, the best indication of the decline of American anti-semitism is the number of intermarriages that have occurred between Jews and Gentiles” (1994, 241).

⁴ My study suggests that the argument by Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen that “because today’s Jews believe that Jewish identity is inalienable, i.e., that they will always remain Jewish no matter what choices they make” does not extend to intermarried Jewish women’s perceptions about the Jewish identity of their offspring (2000, 185).

⁵ According to sociologists Sylvia Barack Fishman and Daniel Parmer, “Jewish men, [in contrast to Jewish women], tend to be reactive in inter-dating and intermarriage, not talking about the religion of the household or of the eventual children until children are born or ready for religious school” (2008, 4).

⁶ “[W]ithin intermarried families, affiliated Jewish intermarried mothers (32%) were twice as likely as affiliated intermarried Jewish fathers (15%) to say religion is “very important.” Among the unaffiliated intermarried population, the ratio is even sharper, with only 9% of Jewish fathers compared to 27% of Jewish mothers (Fishman and Parmer 2008, 41).

⁷ Moreover, scholars continue to emphasize that

intermarried Jewish women raise Jewish children and attend synagogue services more frequently than do intermarried Jewish men (Fishman and Parmer 2006).

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Gate Openers:

Reaching Out to the Next Generations of Children from Intermarriage

by Rabbi Miriam Jerris

Hello, rabbi?"

"Yes, speaking."

"Hi, my name is Josh Cohen and I'm getting married next October, but my fiancée is not Jewish."

"Mazel tov, Josh. I'm so happy for you." DEAD SILENCE on the other end of the phone.

"Josh?"

"Yes, rabbi, I'm here."

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, rabbi, I am, but you are the third (fourth, fifth) phone call I've made, and you are the first one to congratulate me."

For more than thirty years, I have been championing the rights of individuals to choose their life-partner based on the quality of their relationship. The measure I use when considering whether I will involve myself in a couple's wedding ceremony is the couple's love and their desire to have a Jewish presence at their ceremony, rather than any label that might be ascribed to them as a consequence of birth and ancestry. I honor their right to choose their life partner freely and, as a rabbi, I choose to celebrate with them.

When you ask a young couple in love to decide between Judaism and the person they love most in the world, there is no contest. How could there be? In addition, turning young Jews away because they live in a free and open society and have fallen in love with someone not Jewish is not a way to create a positive connection to Judaism or the Jewish community. Thus, Secular Humanistic rabbis and ceremonialists prefer to hold the gates to the Jewish community open, rather than slam them shut. Our welcoming and acceptance is often significantly appreciated, and has helped assure that countless numbers of Jewish kids feel that they have access to their Jewish identity, regardless of their partners' cultural or religious backgrounds.

A lifetime of involvement with a family often flows from our acceptance and willingness to welcome Jews who are intermarrying.

This is why I choose to be a "gate opener," and not a "gate keeper." A most profound example of this "gate-opening" stance is that the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism is one of three rabbinical programs that expressly opens admissions to Jews married to or in committed relationships with a non-Jewish partner. This doesn't come without controversy. Many Jewish community leaders have asked me, "What kind of a model are you providing to the Jewish community if you are married to someone who is not a Jew by birth or choice?" My answer: I am modeling that you can retain your Jewish identity and remain a significant part of the Jewish community, marry the person you love, and not expect that they change their identity to fit into your world. I am proud to be part of a movement that supports my message.

Once, at a Michigan Board of Rabbis meeting, one of the younger rabbis said to me, "Miriam, you'll marry anyone won't you?" My response? "My goal is to keep the gates open to all Jews who want access, however limited, to their Jewish identity and community, rather than slam them shut in their face" (Jerris 2017).

We do this, first, by broadening the definition of who is a Jew. Our movement has long subscribed to the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Judaism's 1988 declaration: "A Jew is a person of Jewish descent or any person who declares himself or herself to be a Jew and who

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identifies with the history, ethical values, culture, civilization, community, and fate of the Jewish people” (“Who is a Jew?” 2017).

The intermarriage rate has been nearly 50% for more than three decades, and there are now thousands of children born from these marriages. Secular Humanistic Judaism recognizes the need many of these children feel to explore their Jewish identities. In 2012, the Colloquium of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism addressed the issue with “‘Half Jewish?’ The Heirs of Intermarriage.” Addressing multiple identities is not a popular approach to the issue of intermarriage in the North American Jewish community today. But Secular Humanistic Judaism has never been as much about popularity as it has been about grappling with the realities of modern Jewish life and meeting the needs of real people. And that means recognizing and addressing the needs of individuals with multiple identities.

At the 2012 Colloquium, Paul Golin, then Assistant Executive Director of the Jewish Outreach Institute (“JOI”) and now Executive Director of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, described eloquently what he calls “intermarriage math.” If you begin with four Jews and 50% of them intermarry, then two of the four Jews will marry one another, while the other two Jews marry someone from a different background. The two Jews who intermarry will create one household each, while the other two create each create their own household. This results in three households, doubling the number of intermarried families compared to in-married households. The upshot? Intermarriage is increasing the Jewish population. Given the birth rate among most Jews, intermarriage may be the best option for increasing the number of Jewish households today. If the Jewish community is open, welcoming, creative, and willing to consider a different kind of Judaism for the future, it can potentially draw a majority of those families into the Jewish community.

And make no mistake: many of these families want a Jewish identity. In a 2011 JOI study of young adults who are the products of intermarriage, more than 70% of the respondents to the

survey said that “being Jewish” is “somewhat” or “very” important to them, while 65% of them said that they want to pass on “Jewish ethnic identity to their kids” (Jacobs 2012). And I have seen this phenomenon personally: I once facilitated a Shabbat meeting in a college town; four young people arrived. All of them were the products of Jewish/Christian intermarriage, none had a Jewish upbringing, and all were curious about their Jewish identities as young adults.

What we heard in a variety of different ways over the weekend of the 2012 Colloquium was that the greater threat to the Jewish people is not intermarriage, but the superficiality of Judaism today. The Jewish communal challenge is not to stop intermarriage—it is to create Jewish options that will engage and excite Jewish youth and young adults enough to learn more about Jewish history and Judaism, and then have meaningful, relevant Jewish experiences. Those involved in the Jewish community must discover how best to meet the needs of the second and third generation of children of intermarriage. Golin summarized his colloquium presentation:

During my presentation, I tried to convey what we at JOI have heard from young-adult children of intermarriage. But we as a community have much more listening and learning to do. It would benefit many other movements, organizations, and communities to replicate the kind of conversation hosted by the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, to find ways to better engage and serve a population that is essential to the future of American Jewry, and which is already the majority of Jews under age 25.

Secular Humanistic Judaism provides a clear conceptual framework that is not often heard from other Jewish sources, and that can provide a Jewish framework for the children of intermarriage. This is because we recognize and embrace the existence of intercultural and interfaith households. Our *Guide to Humanistic Judaism* states, “An interfaith marriage consists of one Jewish partner and one non-Jewish partner, either or both of whom

are attached to their theistic traditions... An intercultural marriage consists of one Jewish partner and one non-Jewish partner, who share a similar world view but who enjoy and participate in the cultural aspects of their differing backgrounds” (36). Most of the couples and families with whom I’ve worked and celebrated over almost thirty years have been intercultural, even if they did not know or understand the terminology. (And most do not—it’s simply how they live their lives.)

Because we embrace interfaith and intercultural families, clergy within Secular Humanistic Judaism will generally co-officiate with other clergy in interfaith and intercultural ceremonies of many types. There are three guidelines that I recommend following: that the ceremony blend the symbols and cultures of both partners, that the ceremony be equally shared between both officiants, and that any theistic language used by the other officiant be language common to both traditions. We will also officiate in a church or chapel, although typically not in a full religious service of another faith. All of this recognizes that ceremony sends a message. My mantra is “make sure it’s the message you want to send.”

I have had very successful experiences with clergy from different religious and denominational backgrounds. The blending and sharing of the ceremony are primary for me. Blending ceremonies requires flexibility and a willingness to deviate from traditional formats. I will not co-officiate if the ceremony is not shared equally. Being a “token” does not create dignity for the Jewish family or me. Without equal participation, the message to the Jewish partner, their families, and their guests is “you/your culture/religion/background is not as important or valued as mine.” And an equally shared ceremony is a model for the possibilities for the couple’s future.

I have found that clergy who are wedded to a set liturgy are not good candidates for co-officiating. Even so, I’ve been surprised by the number of Christian clergy who are willing to participate in a ceremony without mentioning or praying to Jesus, and I am grateful to them for their openness.

After all, praying to Jesus is central to Christianity. I will not involve myself in a ceremony that would require me to say something contrary to my philosophy, and it would also be difficult for me not to say some things central to my philosophy.

This has worked out in surprising ways. Many years ago, I received a call from the father of a Jewish woman who had converted to Catholicism and was getting married in a Catholic Church to a Catholic man. He asked if I would co-officiate the wedding. My initial reaction was a negative one. It seemed absurd to me. Yet the more we spoke and I listened to what he was saying to me, the more I understood his pain and how my involvement would alleviate some of it. And the priest had already agreed to the basic guidelines before I spoke to him.

In another initial discussion with a Jewish and Christian couple about ten years ago, the groom, who was Christian, told me that he wouldn’t feel married appropriately without mentioning his belief in Jesus as his savior. Interestingly, he was willing to entirely omit prayers to Jesus specifically—but he wanted his faith mentioned at his wedding ceremony. I asked him if I could be the one who mentioned his faith in my remarks. What I said during the ceremony, in part, was, “From the richness of their diverse backgrounds, Michele and Jim have come together and formed deep personal values. Michele appreciates the family traditions and customs of Judaism and Jim embraces the unconditional love of Jesus and the fellowship of Christianity.”

The ways in which I have responded to both the reality of the modern world and the needs of Jewish couples and families is emblematic of the approach that Secular Humanistic Judaism has brought to understanding the issues of the heirs of intermarriage.

“How are you going to raise the children?” That’s the hue and cry of almost every potential grandparent of intermarrying or intermarried children. Intermarried couples are typically presented with (or present themselves with) choosing from three alternatives when deciding on how to

raised their family. Will it be one or the other, both, or neither? Will they be “half-Jewish”?

We cannot properly respond to these questions without listening to what the heirs of intermarriage say for themselves. What are the now-adult children with their own children saying about Jewish identity and the “half-Jewish” label? Danielle Pafunda in her essay, “Myself, A Half-Jew Among the Lilies” comments on the half-Jewish label:

So I find this term half-Jewish has misled us all in its suggestion that I know my own proportions. If half of me is Jewish, and half of me is not, we come to the first sticking point: which half? Or, more specifically, which parts belong to the Jewish half?...

But really, this is a problem of essentialism. Do all Jews have certain traits in common? And then, what is [it?] to worry without nagging, to defend without the persecution...And, while I can examine the Jewish stereotypes, can examine the homeplaces and families of my Jewish friends, I can never isolate the gesture that certifies my Jew-ish-ness....

And what of the half that is not Jewish? I’m as hard-pressed to construct the subject not-Jewish self as I am to construct the half-Jewish self.

The other suggestion inherent in the term half, the one from which I recoil most fiercely is that I am, anyone is, merely half-mother and half-father. (99-100)

Susan Katz Miller, in her blog, describes her feelings about the term “half-Jewish.”

The term “half Jewish” elicits strong reactions. From a Jewish institutional perspective, either you are a Jew, or you’re not. From my perspective, I resent being fractionated. I am a whole Jew, by my own definition. But equally important, to me, is that I contain an interfaith multitude. As a child of intermarriage,

I avoid identifying myself as “half Jewish” because I resent the idea that this identity label makes reference only to my Jewish parent, as if my Christian parent did not count or exist. For me, the “half-Jew” label signals a discourse dominated by the panic over Jewish continuity and authenticity. Defining me solely by the extent of my Jewishness ignores my lived and deeply felt experience as the child of two parents, two cultures, two extended families. (Miller 2012)

Pafunda and Miller are both responding to the myth that you have to choose one—one cultural tradition or one religious identity—or the children will be confused. Yet almost three decades ago, Judith Petsonk and Jim Remsen in *The Intermarriage Handbook* (1988) said something quite different:

“Whether you raise your child in one religion, two religions or no religion has little or no impact on her mental health...”

But a crucial factor must be present. *Both parents must agree with and stand behind the religious pattern you have chosen for your home...*

In other words, the vital factor in whether your children are happy or unhappy, troubled or secure, is whether the two of you are in harmony. (177)

Choosing “one” is complex. And when you choose one, what exactly does it mean? I counseled one Jewish/Catholic couple who had decided to have a Jewish home and raise their children Jewish. They were expecting a baby so the question was no longer quite so theoretical. They came to me after their Reform rabbi had told them that they had to inform the Catholic grandparents that there could be no Christmas presents and no presents at all wrapped in Christmas wrapping paper. The Catholic grandparents were demolished. Really, we are going to devastate our potential children’s grandparents over wrapping paper? We are probably aware that the emotional hurt was not solely related to wrapping paper. It was more probably based on the feeling that with the choice their child

had made, they were being excommunicated from the family circle and not allowed to share who they were with their grandchildren. In choosing “one,” is it necessary to completely exclude the religion or culture of the other parent, thereby alienating and straining the relationship with the grandparents?

In the early 1990’s I facilitated a monthly intermarriage group for the couples whose weddings I officiated. Most of the couples in the group had decided to raise their children Jewish. What none of us expected was the intensity of the loss that the not born-Jewish parent might feel when realizing and reflecting on not sharing their childhood cultural or religious experiences with their own children. This is one of the challenges that comes from choosing “one.”

What about raising the children “neither”? I regularly hear talk of raising the children as “neither” and letting them choose a religious or cultural identity for themselves when they are old enough. But deciding to raise the children neither does not necessarily mean “nothing,” and I have never figured out what “nothing” looks like.

How does one go about raising children “neither?” One way would be to pick something new or neutral, something that neither parent was raised in, possibly Unitarian Universalism or Ethical Culture. Another way would be to totally deny the background of one of the parents. This is less likely to occur today, but a generation or two before ours, many Jews denied their identity altogether and raised their children in secular culture, their children discovering their Jewish heritage as adults. Each person I have met who has discovered their Jewish identity as an adult has wanted to explore what being Jewish could mean to them. Since “nothing” often leads to a secular upbringing, I receive many emails from individuals from all over the world inquiring about conversion to Humanistic Judaism because they’ve just discovered that someone was Jewish in their family, yet they have long abandoned a belief in a personal god.

Instead of one, half, or neither, many couples decide to raise their children as “both.” “Both” is

another one of those categories that is not clear until you deconstruct it. What does “both” mean? Does it mean raising children in both religions? Do you alternate which weeks you go to religious school at the Church and which weeks you go to Temple? Do you formally educate your children religiously at all? Do you choose just to celebrate holidays with each of your families and not worry about the rest of it? Some decisions that are made when you are young and both sets of parents and maybe even grandparents are living turn out to be unworkable when the grandparents and parents die.

Here is an example that illustrates some of these difficulties: A couple came to see me for counseling. They had been dating for some years and were not yet engaged. She was a Conservative Jew and he was an observant Chaldean Catholic. They thought they had figured everything out, but they were beginning to realize that there were still some significant decisions they had to make before they were ready to commit to a life together. They started by sharing their love for each other and their respect for each other’s families and backgrounds. They had decided to raise the children “both.”

I asked the obvious and annoying question, “What do you mean by both?” He started by speaking very confidently. “Both” to him meant going to Church every week (she, as the mother, would take them), baptism, first communion, and confirmation in the Catholic Church. Because Judaism is a “family” religion, they would celebrate all the Jewish holidays with her family. He asserted that her family didn’t really attend synagogue except once a year on Yom Kippur, so they could easily give that up.

The Jewish partner was astounded on a number of levels—not the least of which was that he expected her, as a Jewish mother, to make sure the children got a good Catholic education. More significant to me, though, was that she was very surprised. Her understanding of “both” was quite different from his: she expected to give up the formal Jewish education, and expected that he would give up the formal Catholic education.

They would do “both” in their home and with their families.

Responding to the problem of “both,” Secular Humanistic Jews often propose a primary and secondary identity. This idea originated with Rabbi Sherwin Wine, but many of us have been speaking about writing about this concept for several decades. I wrote the following after the 2004 SHJ Conference:

An intermarried family may choose one partner’s religion or culture as its primary identity; the other partner’s identity can be included as a secondary identity. If a family chooses to educate the children formally in one religion, then that becomes the primary identity. The secondary identity is expressed through family events and home traditions. If the family chooses Judaism as the primary identity, the secondary identity may be expressed by celebrating Christmas with grandparents or even by having a tree at home. (Jerris 2004)

A primary identity is often the identity in which formal education is elected. The secondary identity most often refers to celebrating with family, or including symbols from the secondary identity in the home. This primary and secondary identity model is effective in both intercultural and interfaith families. If the couple is an interfaith family, it is advisable to choose a primary religious identity for the child. The secondary identity can then easily be a cultural identity. This model also works for intercultural couples. The parents may choose a primary cultural identity with the other identity being secondary. When parents want to raise children in both identities, this procedure works best with an intercultural family.

Even after marrying, spouses make these kinds of decisions; my experiences with couples after their children are born shows that their needs are as complex and individual as they were prior to the wedding. “Can we have a *brit milah* and a baby naming together?” “We are going to have the baby baptized? Will you come to the baptism

and do the baby naming at the same time, and co-officiate like at the wedding?” “We are doing a baptism at the church and a baby naming following at our home. Will you participate?” “We don’t want to circumcise, but we want to do a baby naming. Will our son still be Jewish?”

I have found that it oftentimes is not as important to respond to the actual question as it is to get the back story. What are they trying to accomplish? How does the couple feel about the different ceremonies they are asking about, and how do their parents feel? Once I can sort out the various values, beliefs and social needs, it is easier to provide guidance.

Even with good guidance, there are limits. I was asked to participate in a combined *brit milah* and baby naming. The *brit milah* was the Jewish ceremony, while the baby naming ceremony became the more secular portion of the event. They did the circumcision first. The baby was upset; the mother was upset. And I was upset, because the mother wasn’t able to enjoy the baby naming—the part of the ceremony that recognized her and her family.

After that experience, I decided not to participate in a joint *brit milah* and baby naming again. In Secular Humanistic Judaism, we have one ceremony for both genders—the baby naming or *brit shalom*. As a Humanist, the covenant aspect is not something I affirm because it treats the genders differently and unequally, and because I believe that surgery and ceremony do not mix well; thus I have chosen not to participate in any more combined *brit milah* and baby naming or *brit shalom*.

One of the most creative ceremonies in which I did participate—twice, once for each of the couple’s children—was a different approach to a baby naming and circumcision ceremony. The father, who is Jewish, was a urology resident. The couple had decided to circumcise their sons on the 8th day. However, the ceremony and the surgery were very separate. We first created a beautiful ceremony that affirmed the mother’s pagan spirituality; during it, we named the child

in Hebrew. After the ceremony, the baby, his father, and the urology attending physician went into a separate room, created a sterile environment, used anesthetic, and privately circumcised the child.

Even when a ceremony appears to be predominantly Christian, there are still ways to affirm Jewish identity. When I was asked to do a Hebrew baby naming at the baptismal font and to co-officiate “just like the wedding,” I had to explain to the parents that one could not remove Jesus from the baptism because Christ was central to the baptism. It wasn’t simply the Christian version of giving a Jewish baby a Hebrew name: it was pledging to raise the child in the church through Christ. Nevertheless, I have on a few occasions agreed to do this kind of ceremony after speaking to both the couple and their Jewish family members. Especially for those of us who insist that we say only words we believe, the baptism is not a neutral ceremony. But ultimately, I only insist on believing the things that I say. I also don’t want to alienate or insult the other family, which is why I typically insist on the Christian officiant using language common to both traditions. These kinds of baby naming/baptism ceremonies are beautiful and touching, because everyone is fully informed as to what they would be experiencing.

Of course death, too, is a very vulnerable time for families from mixed religious and cultural identities, and its complexity for these families can go unappreciated. Many Jewish cemeteries will only bury those Jews who meet the orthodox definition of who a Jew is. For those Jews who are intermarried and choose to be buried with their non-Jewish spouses, having a rabbi participate in the funeral often brings great comfort to the family. A few years ago, I received a call from the sister-in-law of a man who had married a Catholic woman and raised six Catholic children. His children felt that he should be buried as a Jew, but they wondered if their Catholic mother’s ashes could be put in their father’s casket. Before stating Jewish law, I stopped myself and suggested that they ask the Jewish funeral home. The funeral home agreed to do it and I certainly wasn’t going to object. Some flexibility can go a long way to support families and

their religious and cultural commitments during these difficult times.

The last almost three decades have seen dramatic changes in the rate of intermarriage and in the needs of the families as a result of those marriages. And the children being raised in these families are having experiences like few others in past generations. The examples I provided illustrate the diversity of needs and requests that came my way since I began this work. Standing by the open gates of the Jewish community with a smile on my face and warmth in my heart is the only way I can imagine expressing my rabbinate. The 2012 Colloquium of the International Institute of Secular Humanistic Judaism demonstrated this commitment and the willingness of the Secular Humanistic Jewish movement to keep the Jewish communal gates as well as our hearts and minds open to the heirs of intermarriage.

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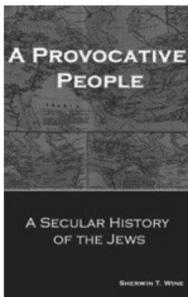
This article was written in 2012 as follow-up to Rabbi Jerris’ participation in the Colloquium and is being published here for the first time.

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