

**The American Jewish Family:  
What We Know. What We Need to Know \***

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For thousands of years, Jews have been concerned with Jewish continuity, and for good reason. Jews have always made up a small portion of the world's population—sometimes more, sometimes less, but never a large fraction. The cultural impact of Jews and Judaism has been disproportionate to the numbers. But numbers matter, which is why the organized Jewish community, Jewish community organizations, commentators and Jewish parents frequently discuss the Jewish family.

This paper reviews what we know about Jewish families in contemporary America. I begin by comparing the current family situation of Jewish adults to that of all other American adults. I examine the extent to which adults live in families, their marital status, and their experience with divorce and cohabitation. I review what we know about the processes that create the Jewish family: marriage, divorce, and childbearing. I discuss attitudes toward family issues, comparing Jewish adults to others. Finally, I synthesize what we know about intermarriage. In each section I identify areas or topics about which we need to know more.

We know less about Jewish families than we might know or than we ought to know, primarily because we lack data. Much of our knowledge of American families comes from information collected by the federal government through the Decennial Census of Population, the Current Population Survey, or through other government surveys. Since the federal government, by policy, never collects information on religion, this large and important source of data can tell us nothing specifically about Jewish families—or about Catholic families, Moslem families, or Buddhist families.

Although many non-government surveys ask respondents about their religion, religiosity and religious participation, the small size of the Jewish population means that even relatively large surveys have few Jewish respondents. Often the sample of Jews is too small to support analysis. For example, a sample of 10,000 cases, quite large by social science standards, would contain only about 250 Jews. As a result, much of the research on the impact of religion on family processes compares Catholics and Protestants but does not include Jews. This lack of representation of Jews in most data sets makes the 1990 and 2001 National Jewish Population Surveys invaluable for understanding the Jews in the U.S. today.

### **Changes in American Families**

One of the most fundamental shifts in the population of the U.S. has been the move out of and away from families. The fastest growing type of household consists of an individual living alone or with non-relatives (Fields, 2001). Young adults and the aged have led the way in this transformation. At the height of the Baby Boom, most young adults lived with their parents until they married. Now, most leave home for college or a job right after high school and return only occasionally (Goldscheider, Thornton and DeMarco, 1993). At the other end of the age distribution, older adults who lost their spouses—mostly widows—used to go live with their adult children, usually their daughters. But now, thanks to Social Security, the vast majority of widows and widowers live in their own homes or apartments. These young never-marrieds and older widows and widowers are thus, not part of families. Add these to those previously-married but living alone now and you get 21% of adults living outside families (Fields, 2001, Table A2).

The other social transformations that have reshaped the typical American family include less and later marriage, more divorce, more stepfamilies, more cohabitation and more unmarried childbearing. As a result, our society has fewer married adults, fewer married two-parent families and more alternative families—and non-families—now than twenty or thirty years ago (Bumpass, 1990). Patterns of partner choice have also changed, with ascribed characteristics like race, ethnicity and religion mattering less and achieved characteristics like education mattering more to those marrying today than to their parents (Kalmijn, 1998; Lehrer, 1998).

Americans are delaying or avoiding marriage. The proportion of adults who are married has declined substantially, with modest decreases for white adults and very large decreases for black adults. In 1970, unmarried people made up 28% of the adult population. In 2000, 46% of all adults were unmarried (Fields, 2001, Table 5). White adults seem to be divorcing more readily and remarrying more slowly, than in the past. Black adults seem to be avoiding marriage even more widely (Waite, 1995). Americans are marrying at older ages than they did a generation or two ago. The median age at first marriage (the age at which half of adults have gotten married) has reached 25 for women and 27 for men, up from about 20 and 23 during the Baby Boom (Fields, 2001).

Although Americans are putting off marriage, they are not putting off mating. Men and women are forming couples at about the same ages as their parents did, but their relationships much more often start out as cohabitation rather than marriage. Almost two-thirds of young adult men and women born between 1963 and 1974 began their partnered adult lives through cohabitation rather than marriage. This

compares to only 16 percent of men and 7 percent of women born between the mid-1930s and early 1940s (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael and Michaels, 1994, Table B.5).

Cohabitation is even more prevalent among people who are divorced or separated; sixty percent of persons who remarried between 1980 and 1987 lived with someone before marriage—usually but not always the person they married. Just having been married before substantially increases the chances that a person chooses cohabitation instead of marriage for a new union (Lillard, Brien and Waite, 1995).

Changes in marriage have played a central role in increases in unmarried childbearing, which has reached historically unprecedented levels (Bachrach, 1998). In 1996 one out of three of all births and 44% of all first births occurred to women who were not married (Ventura, Martin, Curtin and Mathews, 1998). Fewer than half of these births occurred to stable cohabiting couples (Bumpass and Lu, 2001).

Some of these social transformations that have reshaped American families have hit the Jewish community head on, and some seem to have missed it entirely.

### **Today's Family**

My intent in this paper is to paint a picture of the Jewish family in comparison with the families of the rest of the American population. I use the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey to describe Jews and the General Social Survey for the five years surrounding the NJPS (1988-1992) to describe non-Jews. Because the typical family situation of men is often different from the family situation of women, especially at the oldest and youngest ages, I look separately at males and females. I begin with, the current family situation of Jews and non-Jews, and I later review what we know about key family processes, including marriage, divorce, fertility, and cohabitation.

*Living in Families.* Table 1 gives the percent of non-Jewish and Jewish men and women living in families, living alone and living with a non-family member such as a roommate or a cohabiting partner. Those in families could be living with a husband or wife (and, perhaps, children), with their parents, or with siblings. Notice that at younger ages—from about 18 to 35—a little over half of Jewish men are living in families. At all older ages, about three-quarters are. The mature middle years 36-55 are more family-centered for Jewish women, and the oldest age groups are less so. Note that nearly 80% of Jewish men ages 65 and older are living in families—predominantly with their wives, compared to less than half of Jewish women of these ages. The situation of Jews is fairly similar to non-Jews with Jewish men and women a little more likely to live in families at most ages than non-

Jews. But if you looked only at families, you would miss a lot of people, especially young men and old women.

**Marital Status.** Table 2 shows current marital status of Jews (Table 2A) and non-Jews (Table 2B). If we compare Jews and non-Jews, we see that Jewish men and women marry somewhat later than everyone else; note the smaller percent “currently married” at ages 18-25 among both sexes. Notice, too that Jewish women are more likely to be married at ages 26-35 than non-Jewish women, and that Jewish men are less likely to be married at those ages than non-Jewish men. Age at marriage is later for Jewish men than for Jewish women. But Jews are more likely to marry eventually than non-Jews and less likely to divorce and remain divorced. At almost every age, a smaller proportion of Jews are previously married and a smaller proportion are widowed than for non-Jews. So, marriage has played and continues to play a fundamental role in the lives of Jews—this is no surprise—and we see no evidence that marriage is any less important for recent generations. We just need to keep an eye on the choices of the young men and—to a lesser extent—young women who have not yet married.

**Living Arrangements.** Table 3 shows current living arrangements of Jews and non-Jews. Notice that, according to the NJPS data, at the prime ages of marriage and childrearing more Jews than non-Jews are married with children. But Jews clearly start their families later than others, which you can see by comparing the percentage married with children at ages 46-55, when only 18% of non-Jewish women but 40% of Jewish women are married and living with their children. So Jews are more family oriented than non-Jews, on average, but marry late (especially Jewish men) and start their families late. They also have relatively few children (Mott and Abma, 1992).

As was mentioned earlier, living with someone—cohabitation—has become quite common both for young adults and for those whose first marriage has ended. But Table 3 shows very low percentages of Jewish men and women living in a cohabiting couple, even at the ages when this is fairly common. However, Lehrer (2000) shows in recent analyses of a large national sample that Jewish women stand out for the extent to which their first unions begin with cohabitation rather than marriage. Also, Jews express relatively high levels of approval of cohabitation (Sweet and Bumpass, 1990). There seems to be an inconsistency between current cohabitation as reported in the NJPS and a history of cohabitation as reported in the National Survey of Families and Households. I suspect that while a relatively high proportion of Jewish women cohabit, they move rather quickly into marriage, so that cohabitation is more often a brief stage than a permanent state.

Clearly, it is important to know more about cohabitation as part of Jewish family structure than we do now. Cohabitation often leads to

marriage (Brien, Lillard and Waite, 1999), and much “unmarried” childbearing occurs to cohabiting couples. People who cohabit and then marry face higher chances of divorce than those who do not live together first (Lillard, Brien and Waite, 1995; Waite, 2000). Moreover, cohabiting partners are less often of the same religion than marriage partners (Schoen and Weinick, 1993). We need to know more about Jewish experience with and views toward cohabitation.

***Divorce.*** Demographers estimate that more than half of marriages will end in divorce (Martin and Bumpass, 1989). The 1990 NJPS asked respondents who were not married to their first spouse how that marriage ended. Table 4 shows that about the same proportion of Jewish and non-Jewish men report that they are now divorced or that an earlier marriage ended in divorce. But more Jewish than non-Jewish women report a divorce at some time in their lives. Given the frequency of divorce, its implications for families, and the higher rate of intermarriage in second and later marriages (Waite and Sheps Friedman, 1997) we need to know more about the processes leading to divorce in Jewish families, especially among younger Jewish men and women.

### **Family Processes**

***Marriage and Cohabitation.*** Although a sizeable literature addresses the impact of religion on the choice of a marital partner, especially on religious homogamy (Lehrer, 1998; Waite and Sheps Friedman, 1997), very little attention has been paid to the role of religion in the timing of marriage or on experience with cohabitation. The two papers that do so, both based on the National Survey of Families and Households, reach quite similar conclusions. Lehrer (2000) examines the effect of the religion in which one was raised on women’s age at first marriage, age at first union (including both marriage and cohabitation), and whether the first union was a cohabitation among those born between 1945 and 1955. She finds that Jewish women tend to marry at an intermediate rather than an early age, with about three-quarters of Jewish women marrying between the ages of 19 and 26, and 20% marrying at age 27 or older. Virtually none married at age 18 or younger. In an unpublished paper, Sweet and Bumpass (1990) examine the family behaviors and attitudes of Jews (men and women considered together), comparing them to adults in a wide range of other religions. They also find that Jewish men and women avoid early marriage and tend to marry late. Lehrer (2000) reports that Jewish women are much more likely than those raised as Fundamentalist Protestants, Mormons, Catholics or mainline Protestants to begin their first union as a cohabitation, a finding replicated by Sweet and Bumpass (1990), who show the highest rates of cohabitation are for those raised with no

religion and the next highest for Jews. Lehrer (2000) attributes the distinctive Jewish pattern of delayed marriage and the frequency of cohabitation to the high educational attainment of Jewish men and women, which tends to delay marriage, and to their liberal attitudes toward premarital sex and cohabitation. Although she repeats her analysis for women born after 1960, there were not enough Jews in the sample to permit analysis of them.

**Marital Fertility.** Jewish families tend to include relatively small numbers of children; since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, fertility of Jews has consistently been lower than that of the total white population of the U.S. Jews were early, efficient and effective users of contraception (Westoff and Ryder, 1977). This control of pregnancy combined with upward social mobility, high educational aspirations and attainment, widespread secularization, and Jews' minority status push Jewish fertility downward (DellaPergola, 1980; Mott and Abma, 1992). Trends in the fertility of Jews mirrors those of the white population of the U.S. as a whole but at a lower level. DellaPergola (1980) concludes that differences in age at marriage have little effect on fertility in a group of efficient contraceptors who desire relatively few children, since even those who marry late have ample time to achieve their goals.

Parallel to the situation with other groups, Jewish women need to have about 2.1 children, on average, to maintain the Jewish population at its current size, given mortality levels. As Mott and Abma (1992) point out, this is a very approximate number that ignores changing probabilities of intermarriage and the changing likelihood that intermarried couples will raise their children as Jews. All evidence suggests that the fertility of Jewish women now of childbearing age is too low to reach even the modest 2.1 target (Mott and Abma, 1992).

Jews stand out from other population groups in both their low fertility and their high levels of education. High educational attainment raises the "cost" of children in both wages of women foregone if they leave the labor force for some period when children are young, and in expenses for high levels of schooling for the children themselves. Enrollment in college and post-graduate schooling also delays childbearing during the years of peak fertility, and this delay turns into births foregone for some women, lowering the number of children born to the group as a whole. Mott and Abma (1992) estimate that if Jewish women had the same average educational level of women in the U.S. generally they would have virtually the same levels of fertility, so that the high levels of education for Jewish women "explain" their low fertility.

But important differences in fertility exist within the Jewish population, as casual observation suggests. Mott and Abma (1992) report, based on their analyses of the 1990 National Jewish Population

Survey, that women of childbearing age who give their denomination as "Orthodox" are much more likely to be married, much less likely to be childless, have a larger number of children already born and expect to have more children than women who identify themselves as Conservative or Reform. Women in these latter two groups are quite similar in their low fertility to date, although they expect to have substantially more children in the future. However, only women who identify themselves as Orthodox expect to have enough children to replace their generation, and, as Mott and Abma (1992) point out, the Orthodox make up a very small proportion of the Jewish population.

We need to know more about differences among Jews of different denominations in their marriage and childbearing choices. We need to know more about these differences themselves, and we need to know more about the decision making and social processes that underlie them.

**Divorce.** Jews, on average, hold quite liberal attitudes toward divorce, being more likely than any other group, including those with no religion, to approve of divorce for unhappily married parents of preschool children and more likely to disagree that marriage is for a lifetime. But, while they are accepting of divorce in theory or for others, they are no more likely than average to have ever divorced (Sweet and Bumpass, 1990).

In a very nice paper, Lehrer and Chiswick (1993) compare chances of divorce for couples who share the same religion. With the exception of Mormons and people with no religious identification, marital stability is "remarkably similar" among couples who share denomination. Couples in which both are Jewish are about as likely to divorce as couples in which both are mainline Protestant, both fundamentalist Protestant, both Catholic, or both some other religion, and less likely to divorce than those in which both have no religion. All are more likely to divorce than couples in which both are Mormon, who show the lowest divorce rates.

Couples who differ in their religious denominations face higher risks of divorce. This effect is quite sizeable, making religious compatibility an important determinant of marital stability. Lehrer and Chiswick create a measure of the similarity of the beliefs of denominations and of the mutual tolerance embodied in the doctrines of those denominations. The more tolerant a denomination, the less religious differences between spouses threaten the marriage. Couples who achieve consensus on their denomination because one of the partners converts are as stable—and in some cases more stable—than couples both raised in the same religious denomination. I shall return to this point later.

No evidence exists about differences in risks of divorce among Jewish couples for those of different Jewish denominations, although one suspects that such differences parallel those found by Mott and Abma (1992) for fertility. We need to know more about differences within the Jewish population in divorce and the processes leading to it.

### **Attitudes of Jews Toward the Family**

We looked earlier at the family structure of Jews compared to others; here we look at attitudes toward the family. Jews in America have generally been opinion leaders on many social issues. Jews believe more strongly in equality between the sexes than any other religious group. Jews hold more liberal political and social opinions than any other group except those who say they have no religion (Levey, 1996; Smith, 1992). And, historically, Jews have held more socially progressive—or at least liberal—views on the family than other Americans.

I used the General Social Survey to examine the opinions and attitudes of Jews toward their religion and toward the family. I compared the views expressed by Jewish men and women to those given by other respondents to the survey. I looked at how Jews view the modern family, what they think about women's roles, and their views of the place of children in the family. The General Social Survey is a large national survey that interviews about 1,500 adults every year, a different 1,500 people each year, to make up a repeated cross-section of the population. The GSS has been done annually, with a few exceptions, since 1972 for a total sample of about 35,000 respondents, about 800 of whom identify themselves as Jews. I compare attitudes of Jews toward family issues with attitudes of Conservative Protestants, liberal Protestants, Catholics, those who say that they have no religion and those with another religion. I take into account the education, gender, age and race of the individual. I also explained the results on the same topics of Sweet and Bumpass's (1990) analysis of the National Survey of Families and Households. Sweet and Bumpass (1990) also compared attitudes of Jews toward marriage and related issues by ranking members of religious denominations, defined in detail, on their attitudes. They identified 23 separate religious denominations, including "Jewish," but did not separate Jews by denomination. Their rankings take into account basic demographic characteristics of the individual.

*Attitudes toward Marriage and Cohabitation.* Jews, on average, show high levels of approval of a couple living together both if they had no interest in marriage and if they had plans to marry. In fact, Jews were the most positive toward cohabitation of all of the religious groups considered by Sweet and Bumpass (1990). At the same time, Jews are



quite positive toward marriage, expressing high levels of agreement that it is better to be married than to go through life single.

**Attitudes toward Divorce.** In the early 1970s Jews were much more likely than other adults to say that divorce should be easier to obtain than it is now. Sweet and Bumpass (1990) report that in the late 1980s Jews were the most liberal of all religious groups in attitudes toward divorce, being most likely to approve of divorce for unhappily married parents with preschool children and least likely to agree that marriage is for a lifetime.

**Attitudes toward Premarital Sex and Sexual Unfaithfulness.** Jews are more likely than members of any other religious group to accept of sexual relations between unmarried 18 year olds if they have strong affection for each other. Most Americans do not approve; most Jews also do not, but are more often neutral or mildly approving than others. Jews are also more likely than members of any other religious group to agree that occasional sexual unfaithfulness should be forgiven (Sweet and Bumpass, 1990).

Taken together, Jews' attitudes toward cohabitation, marriage, divorce and sex outside marriage suggest a strong preference for marriage, combined with a reluctance to condemn those who fail to live up to these expectations. We see much the same pattern later in Jews' attitudes toward children.

**Attitudes toward Women's Roles.** One of the most far-reaching changes over the last half century has been the revolution in women's roles. Women now make up nearly half of all workers in the economy. Their economic contributions have become essential to many families. Half a century ago, virtually all women with infants stayed at home with them. Now, almost half of new mothers are in the labor force. In 1960, 18% of married women with a child under six were in the labor force. In 1997, 64% were (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998; Waite and Nielsen, 2001).

I examined attitudes toward employment of married women at different stages in their lives, using questions on whether a married woman should work either full-time or part-time outside the home before her first child is born, when she has a preschool-aged child, after her youngest child is in school, and after all the children leave home. I combine these questions into a scale. When the higher average education and other characteristics of Jews are taken into account, I find no differences in approval of women working between Jews and those with no religion. Catholics and people in "other" religions express less approval of women's employment than either Conservative or liberal Protestants or Jews, all of whom are more accepting. (Table 5)

**Attitudes toward Gender Roles.** The move by women into paid employment has gone hand in glove with other changes in women's

roles, including a greater representation of women in higher education. How do Jews compare to others on their views of appropriate roles for men and women?

I created a scale of attitudes toward women's roles, which includes the extent to which the respondent agrees or disagrees that: a job is all right, but what most women really want is a home and family; being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay; a husband and wife should both contribute financially; and, a job is the best way for a woman to be independent. After taking education, gender, age and race, into account Jews are found to be significantly less traditional than any other religious group on women's roles, whereas Conservative Protestants and those with an "other" religion are the most traditional. So Jews seem to hold very liberal attitudes toward gender roles and moderate or moderately liberal attitudes toward women's employment, especially when the woman has children at home. (Table 6)

### **Views of Children**

Next, I examined the attitudes of members of various religious groups toward children—the conditions under which people should have children and what children mean to parents' lives. I combined the extent of agreement that: children are one of life's greatest joys; childless people lead empty lives; and, those wanting children should get married. We see a distinctive pattern of Jewish views on these topics.

After taking into account education, age, gender and race, I find that Jews and people who say that they have no religion hold the least traditional views on the place of children in people's lives; Conservative and liberal Protestants, Catholics, and those with an "other" religion all hold significantly more traditional views, being more likely than Jews or those with no religion to think that childless people lead empty lives, that those wanting children should get married, and that children are one of life's greatest joys. (Table 7)

These results contrast somewhat with those of Sweet and Bumpass (1990), who find that Jews are somewhat more negative than average about an unmarried woman having a child and that Jewish respondents show the highest level of agreement of any religious group that it is better to have children than to go through life childless.

Note that these analyses of attitudes of Jews toward the family lump all "Jews" into a single, presumably homogeneous, category. But casual observation and a few studies suggest that this practice obscures more than it illuminates; Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and "just Jewish" Jews very probably hold divergent views on family issues. We need to know more about differences within the Jewish community in attitudes toward the family.

**Intermarriage**

The vast majority of Americans, when asked, profess a belief in God (or in a "higher power"), state the denomination of their religious group in great detail, and report fairly regular religious activity, such as attendance at services or private prayer (Myers, 2000:285). Families are both the site of much religious activity and the source of much religious knowledge and training (Iannaccone, 1990). For these reasons, shared religious beliefs and activities constitute an important dimension of compatibility for spouses. As Lehrer (1998:247) points out "Within the context of marriage, religion is a complementary trait for which the mating of likes is optimal." Religion guides many choices that families make, such as religious observance, of course, but also whether and when to have children, how many to have and how to raise them, how to spend time and money, who to form friendships with, where to live, and what kind of job to take. When spouses have the same religion it is easier for them to negotiate satisfactorily about these and other issues.

At the same time, Americans are choosing spouses across religious lines (as well as racial and ethnic lines) much more often now than in the past (Lehrer, 1998; Sander, 1993). Perhaps as many as half of those raised as Jews who married in the last ten years chose a non-Jewish spouse (Waite and Sheps Friedman, 1997). Evidence from the 1990 National Population Survey suggests that relatively few of these spouses convert to Judaism, and that *very* few intermarried couples raise their children as Jews (Kosmin *et al*, 1990)

Lehrer (1998) argues that intermarriages come in varying shades and degrees, depending on the similarity in the beliefs of the religions of the two spouses, which she calls "religious compatibility." The idea of religious compatibility is developed in Lehrer and Chiswick (1993) who view religious groups as arrayed along an "exclusivist-ecumenical" continuum depending on how clearly the group draws its boundaries. "Exclusivist" religions sharply demarcate their members from outsiders, and strictly enforce these boundaries with strict prohibitions against out-marriage and with social contacts primarily with group members. At the other end of the continuum, "ecumenical" religious groups have membership criteria that are vague and inclusive, setting low barriers to group entry and placing relatively little importance on group boundaries. Lehrer and Chiswick (1993) argue that intermarriages involving ecumenical religions would be less problematic for the couple than those involving exclusivist religions.

***Determinants of intermarriage.*** Lehrer (1998) examines the determinants of intermarriage for "exclusivist" or fundamentalist Protestants, "ecumenical" or mainline Protestants, and Catholics. Waite and Sheps Friedman (1997) analyze intermarriage among respondents

to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey. Both studies find that the likelihood of interfaith marriage declines with increases in the availability of same-religion partners in the local area. Lehrer (1998) finds that a premarital pregnancy significantly increases the chances of religious intermarriage but only for fundamentalist Protestants; she attributes this to a marital search cut short by the pregnancy in combination with the opposition of these religious groups to abortion. For exclusivist Protestants but not others, likelihood of intermarriage increases with education, perhaps because the pool of eligible partners contains fewer co-religionists for fundamentalist Protestants at higher levels of educational attainment. Waite and Sheps Friedman (1997) also find that patterns of Jewish intermarriage changed in important ways after about 1970, as marriage choices generally became less constrained by religion. In the more recent period, advanced education raised the chances that Jews married other Jews. Prior to 1970, education makes no difference to intermarriage.

Children often receive religious instruction through attendance at parochial schools, afternoon religious schools or Sunday school. Of these, attendance at full-day programs run by religious organizations, such as Jewish day schools, offers the most hours of religious instruction, complete immersion in a religious community, and a high likelihood that most of the children's friends will share the family's religion. Waite and Sheps Friedman (1997) find that having attended a Jewish day school increases the likelihood of marrying another Jew, but only for those marrying since 1970. However, those who attended after-school religious education are as likely to intermarry as those receiving no formal religious education.

Waite and Sheps Friedman (1997) also find that respondents who identify themselves as Orthodox were substantially more likely than others to marry another Jew, but only among those married since 1970. Prior to 1970 no differences appear among denominations of Judaism in chances of intermarriage. Waite and Sheps Friedman speculate that this may reflect an evolving definition of Orthodox within the Jewish community, with increasing social distance between Orthodox and other denominations and a decreasing social distance between Reform Jews and non-Jews.

*Consequences of intermarriage.* How much does it matter whether a few, some or many of those raised as Jews, or with Jewish parents marry people who are not Jewish? It depends. First, it depends on the choices of intermarried couples to affiliate with Jewish institutions and follow many, some or no Jewish religious practices. It depends on the choices that intermarried parents make for the religious upbringing of their children and it depends on the choices those

children make as they reach adulthood. But it also matters for those marriages themselves.

As mentioned earlier, intermarried couples generally face higher chances of divorce than spouses who share the same religion. Marriages involving one Jewish and one non-Jewish spouse are more likely to end in divorce than are marriages in which both spouses are Jewish, according to findings reported by Lehrer and Chiswick (1993). But marriages in which one spouse converts to the religion of the other are more stable, on average, than marriages between spouses raised in the same religion.

Lehrer (1998) argues that intermarriage affects other choices made by the couple because it affects the likelihood that their marriage lasts. To the extent that intermarried couples recognize that they are at risk of divorce, Lehrer argues, they have incentives to make fewer investments in their marriage. Since children are the quintessential "investment" in a marriage, threat of divorce may lead intermarried couples to reduce the number of children that they have. Lehrer (1996) finds evidence of this among intermarried Catholics and Protestants (she did not examine Jews).

Women who marry outside their faith also have incentives to make more investments in their careers than do in-married women, because intermarriages are more likely to end in divorce. Lehrer (1995) finds that intermarried mainline and fundamentalist Protestant women work more for pay than women married to men of the same religion; she finds no effect of intermarriage for Catholic or unaffiliated women. Lehrer (1995) also finds sizeable differences in employment for women of different religions, suggesting strongly that religion is an important factor in women's choices about how to allocate their time between home and paid employment. The small number of Jews in the sample kept Lehrer (1995) from analyzing the behavior of Jews. She states (p. 298) "It would also be interesting to extend the analysis to include Jews and Mormons, important religious minorities that are known to have distinctive patterns of demographic and economic behavior."

We need to know more about the consequences of intermarriage for the life-choices made by spouses, families, and children.

***Unmarried Childbearing.*** While having children has become increasingly separated from marriage for many Americans, we know virtually nothing about how common unmarried childbearing is for Jews. I suspect that very few Jewish women become unmarried mothers. Given the very high educational level typical of Jewish women of childbearing age, unmarried childbearing may result primarily from artificial insemination. Single Jewish women may also adopt rather than remain childless. We need to know more about the

adoption and childbearing decision-making and choices of unmarried Jewish women.

***Jewish Families.*** If more than half of the recent marriages of Jews involved a partner who was not raised as Jewish (Waite and Sheps Friedman, 1997), we need to know more about who intermarries and why. If a relatively small proportion of the non-Jewish spouses of Jews formally convert (Kosmin et al., 1990) we need to know more about who converts and why, and we need to know more about the religious choices of couples who remain an intermarried family. If only about a quarter of children raised in intermarried families are being raised as Jews (Kosmin *et al.*, 1990), then we need to know more about decision making about the religious education and religious identification of children raised in intermarried families.

We also need to think carefully about what constitutes a “Jewish family.” Clearly, if both spouses were raised as Jews or formally converted and the children are being raised as Jews, then this is a Jewish family. What if one spouse identifies as Jewish but was raised in another religion and never formally converted, as Kosmin *et al.* (1990) report is the case for 30% of Jews by Choice? Is this a Jewish family? What about families in which one spouse is Jewish, the other is not, but the children are being raised as Jews? What about families in which both spouses are Jewish but the children are being raised in no religion? What about families in which only one spouse is Jewish and the children are being raised in no religion? Halachic definitions would say that in the case of one Jewish and one non-Jewish spouse, it depends on whether it is the mother or father who is Jewish. If the mother is Jewish then the children are Jewish, regardless of the religious practices of the family. If the mother is not Jewish, either through birth or conversion, then the children are not Jewish, and neither, presumably, is the family.

### **Conclusions**

This paper examines the Jewish family in the United States. But not all Jews live in families, and not all Jews in families live in Jewish families. These complexities make it difficult to characterize “the Jewish family” and make any picture of the Jewish family a little fuzzy around the edges. But, at the risk of oversimplifying, it appears that Jews tend to marry later than other Americans, but also tend to lead more family-centered lives once they marry. They hold relatively liberal views on family issues, as on most social and political questions but are somewhat more conservative in their behavior than in their attitudes. As a group, Jews have quite low fertility, most probably too low to replace this generation of Jews with a new generation at least as large.

But there is a great deal that we do not know about Jewish families and about the social processes that produce them. We know almost nothing about the processes leading to childlessness, to unmarried childbearing, to adoption. We know little about the choice of Jews to cohabit and not very much about how common this alternative family type is among Jews. We know little about the social processes that lead some Jews to marry other Jews, some to marry non-Jews who convert, and some to marry non-Jews and form non-Jewish families. We know little about the decision making processes that lead most intermarried Jews to raise their children in either another religion or in no religion—but not as Jews.

However, in my view, our most profound ignorance revolves around differences within the Jewish community. We can tell from personal experience that Reform Jews lead different family lives in different types of families than Orthodox Jews, at least on average. Orthodox Jews tend to marry earlier, are more likely to marry, have children at younger ages and have more of them than Reform Jews, Conservative Jews or those who say that they are “just Jewish.” But individuals may change their denomination over their lifetimes, perhaps a number of times. We need to know much more about the social processes that produce Jewish adults and about their values, beliefs and commitments to Judaism and to Jewish families.

## NOTES

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**Table 1(a)**  
**Percent Living in Family Households, Living Alone and in Other Non-Family Households, Jews and Non-Jews**

Age	Jews									
	Males			Females						
	Families	Alone	Other	Total	N	Families	Alone	Other	Total	N
<b>18-25</b>	57.6%	16.3%	26.1%	100.0%	92	66.3%	8.4%	25.3%	100.0%	83
<b>26-35</b>	59.0%	24.8%	16.2%	100.0%	222	65.5%	16.8%	17.7%	100.0%	220
<b>36-45</b>	74.5%	18.5%	7.0%	100.0%	271	79.0%	10.5%	10.5%	100.0%	248
<b>46-55</b>	72.4%	21.3%	6.3%	100.0%	127	79.4%	15.1%	5.6%	100.0%	126
<b>56-65</b>	78.3%	16.0%	5.7%	100.0%	106	72.9%	24.8%	2.3%	100.0%	129
<b>66+</b>	78.4%	20.3%	1.4%	100.0%	148	47.5%	51.9%	0.6%	100.0%	181
<b>Totals</b>	70.1%	20.1%	9.8%	100.0%	966	68.4%	21.8%	9.8%	100.0%	987

Source: GSS, 1988-1992; NJPS 1990



**Table 1(b)**  
**Percent Living in Family Households, Living Alone and in Other Non-Family Households, Jews and Non-Jews**

Age	Non-Jews						Males			Females			N	
	Families			Other			Total			Total				
	Families	Alone	Other	Families	Alone	Other	Families	Alone	Other	Families	Alone	Other		
<b>18-25</b>	42.9%	17.0%	40.1%	61.3%	8.3%	30.4%	61.3%	8.3%	30.4%	61.3%	8.3%	30.4%	100.0%	385
<b>26-35</b>	62.9%	21.9%	15.2%	74.1%	11.1%	14.8%	74.1%	11.1%	14.8%	74.1%	11.1%	14.8%	100.0%	775
<b>36-45</b>	71.6%	21.2%	7.1%	77.0%	10.5%	12.5%	77.0%	10.5%	12.5%	77.0%	10.5%	12.5%	100.0%	647
<b>46-55</b>	76.8%	15.0%	8.3%	66.3%	20.0%	13.8%	66.3%	20.0%	13.8%	66.3%	20.0%	13.8%	100.0%	406
<b>56-65</b>	73.8%	19.6%	6.6%	57.4%	31.6%	11.0%	57.4%	31.6%	11.0%	57.4%	31.6%	11.0%	100.0%	392
<b>66+</b>	67.6%	28.4%	3.9%	32.1%	59.2%	8.7%	32.1%	59.2%	8.7%	32.1%	59.2%	8.7%	100.0%	701
<b>Totals</b>	65.7%	20.9%	13.4%	61.3%	24.4%	14.3%	61.3%	24.4%	14.3%	61.3%	24.4%	14.3%	100.0%	3,306

Source: GSS, 1988-1992; NJPS 1990

**Table 2(a)**  
**Current Marital Status by Age and Gender, Jews**

Age	Males					Females						
	Never Married	Married	Previously Married	Widowed	Total	N	Never Married	Married	Previously Married	Widowed	Total	N
<b>18-25</b>	97.8%	1.1%	1.1%	0.0%	100.0%	92	77.1%	22.9%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	83
<b>26-35</b>	43.0%	51.6%	5.4%	0.0%	100.0%	221	26.9%	61.6%	10.5%	0.9%	100.0%	219
<b>36-45</b>	15.9%	71.1%	12.2%	0.7%	100.0%	270	12.9%	73.4%	12.5%	1.2%	100.0%	248
<b>46-55</b>	8.7%	72.4%	16.5%	2.4%	100.0%	127	6.3%	70.6%	13.5%	9.5%	100.0%	126
<b>56-65</b>	7.5%	74.5%	15.1%	2.8%	100.0%	106	2.3%	67.4%	11.6%	18.6%	100.0%	129
<b>66+</b>	4.7%	75.7%	4.7%	14.9%	100.0%	148	1.7%	43.1%	6.1%	49.2%	100.0%	181
<b>Totals</b>	26.3%	61.2%	9.3%	3.1%	100.0%	964	17.1%	59.8%	9.8%	13.2%	100.0%	986

Source: National Jewish Population Survey, 1990

**Table 2(b)**  
**Current Marital Status by Age and Gender, Non-Jews 1988-92**

Age	Males					Females					N	
	Never Married	Married	Previously Married	Widowed	Total	Never Married	Married	Previously Married	Widowed	Total		
<b>18-25</b>	79.1%	19.0%	1.6%	0.3%	100%	61.8%	31.7%	6.5%	0.0%	100%	364	385
<b>26-35</b>	31.9%	56.2%	11.6%	0.4%	100%	24.1%	55.2%	19.9%	0.8%	100%	571	775
<b>36-45</b>	11.4%	67.7%	20.5%	0.3%	100%	9.4%	59.4%	29.4%	1.9%	100%	589	647
<b>46-55</b>	8.0%	76.8%	14.6%	0.6%	100%	5.7%	59.1%	24.1%	11.1%	100%	314	406
<b>56-65</b>	5.2%	74.2%	14.4%	6.3%	100%	2.0%	56.6%	18.4%	23.0%	100%	271	392
<b>66+</b>	7.9%	68.7%	6.3%	17.1%	100%	5.1%	31.3%	6.9%	56.7%	100%	380	700
<b>Totals</b>	24.3	59.9%	12.1%	3.6%	100%	16.7%	48.9%	17.8%	16.6%	100%	2,489	3,305

Source: General Social Survey 1988-1992

**Table 3(a)**  
**Current Living Arrangement by Age and Gender**  
**Jewish Males 1990**

Age	Jewish Males							Total	N
	Married, No Kids	Married, Kids	Single Parent	Cohab Couple	Single Adult	Other			
						Relatives	Roommate		
<b>18-25</b>	1.1%	0.0%	0.0%	1.1%	16.3%	56.5%	25.0%	100.0%	92
<b>26-35</b>	15.8%	35.1%	0.0%	2.3%	24.8%	8.1%	14.0%	100.0%	222
<b>36-45</b>	9.2%	61.6%	0.7%	1.5%	18.5%	3.0%	5.5%	100.0%	271
<b>46-55</b>	20.5%	47.2%	3.1%	3.1%	21.3%	1.6%	3.1%	100.0%	127
<b>56-65</b>	58.5%	15.1%	1.9%	2.8%	16.0%	2.8%	2.8%	100.0%	106
<b>66+</b>	67.6%	6.1%	2.7%	0.0%	20.3%	2.0%	1.4%	100.0%	148
<b>Totals</b>	25.8%	34.2%	1.2%	1.8%	20.1%	8.9%	8.1%	100.0%	966

Source: National Jewish Population Survey, 1990s

**Table 3(b)**  
**Current Living Arrangement by Age and Gender**  
**Jewish Females 1990**

Age	Jewish Females							Total	N
	Married, No Kids	Married, Kids	Single Parent	Cohab Couple	Single Adult	Other			
						Relatives	Roomate		
<b>18-25</b>	13.3%	9.6%	0.0%	4.8%	8.4%	43.4%	20.5%	100.0%	83
<b>26-35</b>	17.3%	42.7%	0.9%	5.5%	16.8%	4.5%	12.3%	100.0%	220
<b>36-45</b>	14.1%	59.3%	2.8%	1.6%	10.5%	2.8%	8.9%	100.0%	248
<b>46-55</b>	31.0%	39.7%	8.7%	1.6%	15.1%	0.0%	4.0%	100.0%	126
<b>56-65</b>	58.9%	8.5%	4.7%	0.8%	24.8%	0.8%	1.6%	100.0%	129
<b>66+</b>	37.0%	5.0%	5.0%	0.0%	51.9%	0.6%	0.6%	100.0%	181
<b>Totals</b>	27.0%	32.3%	3.5%	2.3%	21.8%	5.6%	7.5%	100.0%	987

Source: National Jewish Population Survey, 1990s

**Table 3(c)**  
**Current Living Arrangement by Age and Gender**  
**Non-Jewish Males 1988-1992**

Age	Non-Jewish Males							N
	Married, No Kids	Married, Kids	Single Parent	Cohab Couple	Single Adult	Other	Total	
<b>18-25</b>	23.7%	18.7%	1.1%	9.8%	17.3%	29.3%	100.0%	358
<b>26-35</b>	17.3%	44.2%	1.8%	7.2%	22.0%	7.6%	100.0%	568
<b>36-45</b>	11.9%	55.9%	4.1%	3.1%	21.3%	3.7%	100.0%	587
<b>46-55</b>	40.3%	35.8%	1.6%	1.9%	15.2%	5.2%	100.0%	310
<b>56-65</b>	64.6%	8.5%	0.7%	3.3%	19.6%	3.3%	100.0%	271
<b>66+</b>	65.8%	1.6%	0.3%	0.0%	28.4%	3.9%	100.0%	380
<b>Totals</b>	32.5%	31.8%	1.9%	4.4%	21.0%	8.5%	100%	2,474

Source: General Social Survey, 1988-1992s

**Table 3(d)**  
**Current Living Arrangement by Age and Gender**  
**Non-Jewish Females 1988-1992**

Age	Non-Jewish Females						Total	N
	Married, No Kids	Married, Kids	Single Parent	Cohab Couple	Single Adult	Other		
<b>18-25</b>	20.7%	28.8%	12.3%	12.6%	8.4%	17.3%	100.0%	382
<b>26-35</b>	12.3%	44.2%	17.7%	7.6%	11.1%	7.1%	100.0%	774
<b>36-45</b>	15.4%	42.9%	19.1%	7.5%	10.6%	4.5%	100.0%	643
<b>46-55</b>	42.2%	18.0%	6.2%	5.9%	20.0%	7.7%	100.0%	405
<b>56-65</b>	53.6%	2.3%	1.8%	1.8%	31.8%	8.7%	100.0%	390
<b>66+</b>	30.6%	1.0%	0.6%	1.4%	59.3%	7.1%	100.0%	700
<b>Totals</b>	26.3%	24.8%	10.4%	6.0%	24.5%	8.0%	100%	3,294

Source: General Social Survey, 1988-1992

**Table 4(a)**  
**Percent Currently Divorced, Divorced and Remarried, and Ever Divorced by Age and Gender, Jews and Non-Jews, 1990**

Age	Males							
	Jews			Non-Jews				
	Currently Divorced	Divorced & Remarried	Ever Divorced	N	Currently Divorced	Divorced & Remarried	Ever Divorced	N
<b>18-25</b>	1.1%	0.0%	1.1%	92	1.6%	0.0%	1.6%	364
<b>26-35</b>	5.4%	0.9%	6.3%	221	11.6%	10.2%	21.7%	571
<b>36-45</b>	12.2%	17.8%	30.0%	270	20.5%	18.5%	39.0%	589
<b>46-55</b>	16.5%	26.8%	43.3%	127	14.6%	22.9%	37.6%	314
<b>56-65</b>	15.1%	14.2%	29.2%	106	14.4%	19.2%	33.6%	271
<b>66+</b>	4.8%	13.7%	18.5%	146	6.3%	11.1%	17.4%	380
<b>Totals</b>	9.4%	12.4%	21.7%	962	12.1%	13.4%	25.5%	2,489

Source: National Jewish Population Survey, 1990 and General Social Survey, 1988-1992



**Table 4(b)**  
**Percent Currently Divorced, Divorced and Remarried, and Ever Divorced by Age and Gender, Jews and Non-Jews, 1990**

Age	Females							
	Jews			Non-Jews				
	Currently Divorced	Divorced & Remarried	Ever Divorced	N	Currently Divorced	Divorced & Remarried	Ever Divorced	N
<b>18-25</b>	0.0%	9.6%	9.6%	83	6.5%	2.1%	9.0%	385
<b>26-35</b>	10.5%	36.1%	46.6%	219	19.9%	10.2%	30.1%	775
<b>36-45</b>	12.5%	43.5%	56.0%	248	29.4%	16.7%	46.1%	647
<b>46-55</b>	13.5%	54.8%	68.3%	126	24.1%	17.0%	41.1%	406
<b>56-65</b>	11.6%	44.2%	55.8%	129	18.4%	14.5%	32.9%	392
<b>66+</b>	6.1%	53.6%	59.7%	181	7.9%	15.9%	23.8%	609
<b>Totals</b>	9.8%	42.4%	52.2%	986	18.3%	13.0%	31.3%	3,214

**Table 5**  
**Attitudes toward the Importance of Children in**  
**People's Lives, by Religious Denomination**

Variable	B	SE	t	Significance
Constant	9.034	.164	55.058	.000
Conservative Protestant	.267	.084	3.194	.001
Liberal Protestant	.404	.103	3.928	.000
Catholic	.285	.088	3.220	.001
Jewish	.050	.253	.199	.842
Other	.344	.183	1.886	.059
Female	-.148	.065	-2.271	.023
Age	.027	.002	14.145	.000
Education	-.198	.031	-6.326	.000
White / Non-White	.180	.089	2.036	.042
Year 1988	.557	.065	8.560	.000

N		4948
R-squared		.079

Source: General Social Survey, 1988 & 1994

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