

**Jewish Identity among the Adult Children of Intermarriage:
Event Horizon or Navigable Horizon?**

Benjamin Phillips and Fern Chertok¹

*Presented at the 36th Annual Conference of the
Association for Jewish Studies
December 21, 2004
Chicago, Il.*

Thank you very much for the opportunity to present work done by my colleague, Fern Chertok and myself at the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies. We are indebted to many people present in the room today who have created the framework that underpins our analysis.

In the almost 15 years since the first reports of a 52 percent intermarriage rate, intermarriage has been at the front of the research and communal agendas, with a tremendous amount of effort devoted to understanding its causes. But to borrow a concept from physics, the field has treated intermarriage as an event horizon. An event horizon is the boundary that marks the point of no return as you approach a black hole in space. It is the point at which the gravitational pull of the black hole is so great that not even light can escape. The path by which you arrive at an event horizon has no impact on the outcome and there is only one possible result. In many ways, our approach to studying intermarriage has been premised on the metaphor of an event horizon, with the implicit assumption that the Jewish spouse's history prior to the marriage is immaterial once the marriage has taken place and that there is only one possible outcome to the event. Treating intermarriage as if it were solely a black hole for Jewish identity masks the diversity within. And an appreciation of that internal diversity is necessary if we are to understand the multiple outcomes of intermarriages.

Toward that end, I'd like to suggest that we need to broaden our focus and look beyond why people intermarry to consider what happens to the *children* of intermarriage, because they are the vessels in which Jewish identity will or will not be perpetuated. They are not an insignificant group, as more than a fifth of those raised exclusively as Jews come from intermarried families. What do they look like when they grow up? How connected and

¹ Direct all correspondence to Benjamin Phillips, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, MS014 Brandeis University, P.O. Box 549110, Waltham, MA 02454-9110 (bphillips@brandeis.edu). The authors wish to thank Sylvia Barack Fishman for permission to use research from her forthcoming paper on intermarriage (co-authored by Mr. Phillips), Lydia Willsky for developing the college study syntax, Shahar Hecht for her support on using the college study dataset, Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz and Charles Kadushin for access to their NJPS 2000-01 syntax and advice, and Dara Brzoska and Esther Lengyel for assistance with research and data entry. All errors in the presentation remain the sole responsibility of the present authors alone.

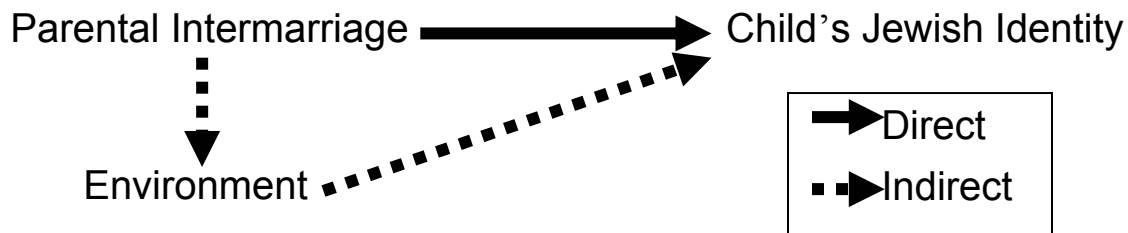
involved are they in Jewish individual and communal life? To what extent do Jewish education, home life and social networks impact on their Jewish identities as adults? It is these questions that I will take up today.

I will start by briefly describing the problems with current approaches to studying the impact of intermarriage and the Jewish upbringing of children raised in intermarried households. Then I will describe our analysis of data about two cohorts of adult children of intermarriage.

Traditionally, we have tried to capture the impact of intermarriage by looking at its effect on individual outcomes. We sort our subjects into those who come from inmarried homes and those whose parents are intermarried, and then look to see how they differ on a variety of outcome variables. However, cross-tabulations of parental intermarriage and Jewish attitudes and behavior are a misleading way of understanding the data. Let's look at why this is the case. We know, thanks to two decades of research, that people who intermarry on the whole have less Jewish capital than those who marry a Jew; they have less Jewish education, come from households with fewer Jewish practices, and have fewer Jewish friends in childhood (e.g., Keysar, Kosmin, Lerer, and Mayer 1991; Kosmin, Lerer, and Mayer 1989; Medding et al. 1992; Phillips 1997). So, even before marriage, the average intermarried Jew is already less likely to create a richly Jewish household or to support the expensive and time-consuming social and educational experiences needed to effectively raise a Jewish child than is the average in-married Jew, and *this effect would persist even if they did not intermarry*. So even before the event of intermarriage there are factors at play that can be expected to influence the outcome for children born into the home. Unlike an event horizon, the capital you bring can lead to different outcomes.

By conflating the effects of the intermarried household with the direct effect of the intermarriage, we effectively overstate the direct effect of intermarriage on the child (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Direct and Indirect Effects of Parental Intermarriage

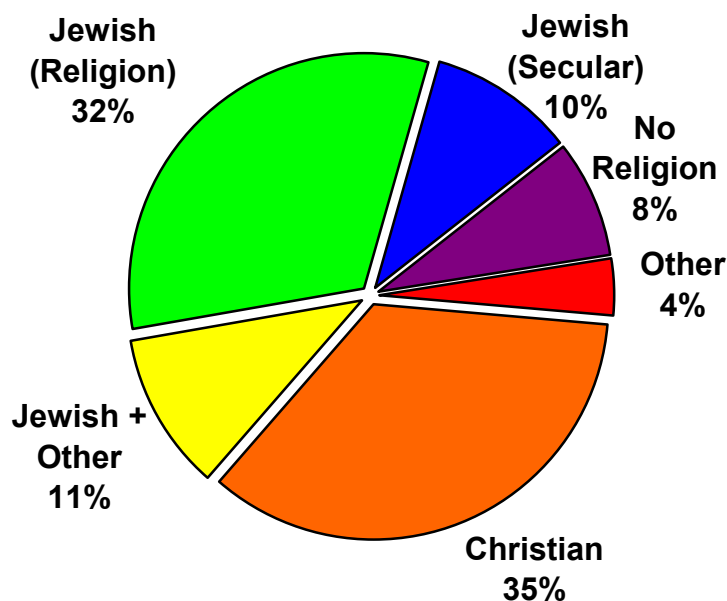


Why am I so concerned about differentiating the impact of the family environment from the direct impact of intermarriage? As researchers, this simplified analysis fails to capture the rich and textured reality we seek to understand and masks the impact of intervening or mediating variables on the outcomes. As concerned members of the Jewish community, we see the family environment as potentially amenable to intervention, while

the direct impact of a non-Jewish parent is not. That is, it may be possible to encourage Jewish education and support a richly Jewish home environment among intermarrieds raising their kids exclusively as Jews. I will return to the potential policy implications of the research later on.

To provide some context, let's look at how children of intermarriages are being raised (see Figure 2). Looking at all children of intermarriages, about 42 percent are being raised exclusively as Jews, versus 50 percent in another religion.² While I don't have to tell you about the difficulties comparing National Jewish Population Studies—in this case both the sample and the definitions are relatively comparable (Kadushin, Phillips, and Saxe forthcoming; Schulman 2003). The chart behind me may actually represent substantial *progress* from a decade ago, when Bruce Phillips (1997) found that only 18 percent of children of mixed marriages were raised exclusively as Jews (vs. 32% today), and Christianity was part of the child's upbringing in 58 percent of cases (vs. 46% today). Even given this apparent progress, the current pattern of childrearing among intermarried families represents a net loss to the Jewish community.

Figure 2.
Upbringing of Children in Intermarried Households



Source: NJPS 2000-01

Before embarking on the analysis, I'd like to briefly canvass the data and methods used in this presentation. We employed two sources of data—NJPS 2000-01 (United Jewish Communities 2003) and the Cohen Center's study of Jewish life on college campuses, which Charles discussed previously (Kadushin, Tighe, and Hecht 2004). For this topic, NJPS works pretty well and avoids most of the issues highlighted in Mark Schulman's

² If the definition of an intermarriage is based on people who are currently Jewish, 59 percent are being raised exclusively Jewish, versus 34 percent in some other faith.

(2003) report on the study for UJC. NJPS sampled all people with a Jewish parent, who were raised Jewish, or who were currently Jewish and—most importantly—asked questions about upbringing and some Jewish practices of every respondent, regardless of whether they were classified as a Jew or a Person of Jewish Background. The college study sample is narrower in terms of Jewish background and current status, as it mostly came from Hillel lists and is more highly identified than NJPS. However, its value, in this context, is that it gives us the opportunity of focusing on a younger cohort than those found in NJPS, and this cohort has grown up in a very different environment, one in which children of intermarriage are the norm, particularly in Reform congregational schools, and an environment where just about everyone has a relative who is either not Jewish or is married to someone who isn't Jewish.

But what does it mean to be Jewish? Self-identification as a Jew is an important part of the answer, but by itself it's an insufficient measure. Lots of people call themselves Jews that fall outside commonly understood definitions: Messianic Jews, people raised in another religion with a Jewish ancestor, perhaps even the famous kabbalist Madonna-slash-Esther. It also doesn't tell us much about the salience of Jewishness in people's lives. To get at that, we need to recognize that Jewishness is a multidimensional construct—Jewish attitudes and behaviors tend to form a number of clumps. Factor analyses of survey items consistently point to five dimensions that fit *a priori* understandings of Jewish life (Hartman and Hartman 1996; Hecht 2004; see Figure 3). The ritual dimension gets at daily practices of Jewish life like *kashrut* and daily prayer while ceremony, as Charles Liebman (1990) observed, embraces the annual observances at the core of the folk religion of American Jews. The other factors are the extent of and preference for a Jewish social network, belonging to Jewish organizations, and attachment to Israel, which is by far the most distantly related piece of the puzzle. I omit the ritual dimension because it is confined to a small proportion of Jews. To get at each dimension, we use simple proxy measures. These give equivalent results to scales we developed for the college study, and have the benefit of being comparable across the surveys.

Figure 3.
Measures of Jewish Identity

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Proxy</i>
Ritual	-
Ceremonial	Attend Passover seder
Social	Half or more Jewish friends
Associational	Belong to Jewish organization
Israel	Attached to Israel

All the following analyses are based on logit models. The independent variables were identified during analysis and match those used in most studies of Jewish attitudes and behaviors. In addition to the standard demographic controls, we measured Jewish religious capital by rituals observed during adolescence (ever attending synagogue and sometimes lighting shabbat candles), Jewish education, dummy variables for being raised

non- or half-Jewish, and a dummy for being raised Conservative or Orthodox. Jewish social capital was measured via Jewish friendships and dating patterns in high school. In addition, Jewish population density was calculated locality by locality from American Jewish Year Book estimates.

To illustrate the importance of the household environment, let's begin by looking at the effect of intermarriage on Jewish identity, taking nothing else into account (see Figure 4). There is no doubt that intermarriage poses significant problems to the community—while there's a very good chance that a child with two Jewish parents will identify as a Jew in adulthood, there's only about a one-in-four chance of this being true for people with intermarried parents. This gap is the product many differences in the parental household over and above having one non-Jewish parent. The children of intermarriages may not be raised as Jews, they receive less Jewish education, and grow up with much less Jewish content.

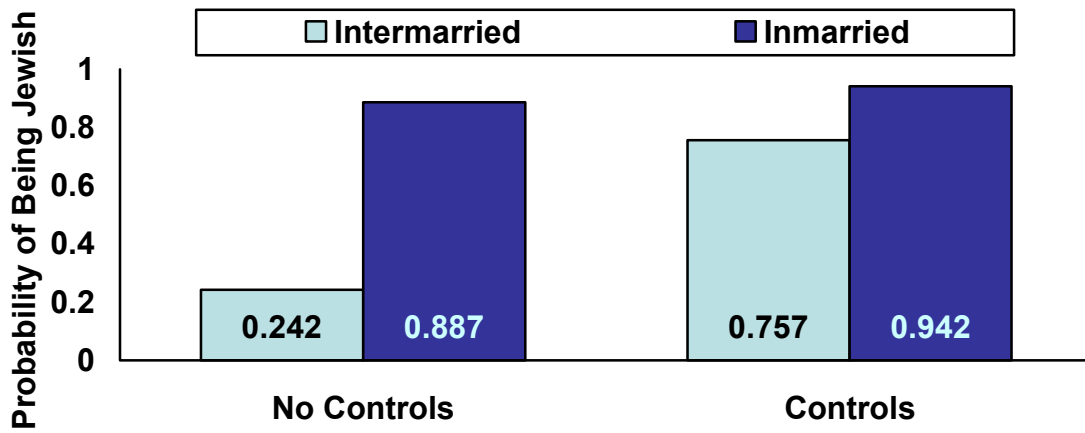
Figure 4.
Jewish Identity of Adult Children of Intermarriage by Marriage Type



Source: NJPS 2000-01

Next, we can see what the results would look like if in- and intermarried households looked alike (see Figure 5). Even in an ideal case where both households gave their children the same level of education, observed the same rituals, had the same proportion of Jewish friends, and were raised exclusively as Jews, intermarriages are significantly less likely to produce adults who identify themselves as Jewish than are inmarriages. However, a much larger portion of the gap in outcomes is due to the environment of the household—and that is something that could be influenced in a positive direction. Pedigree is not necessarily destiny.

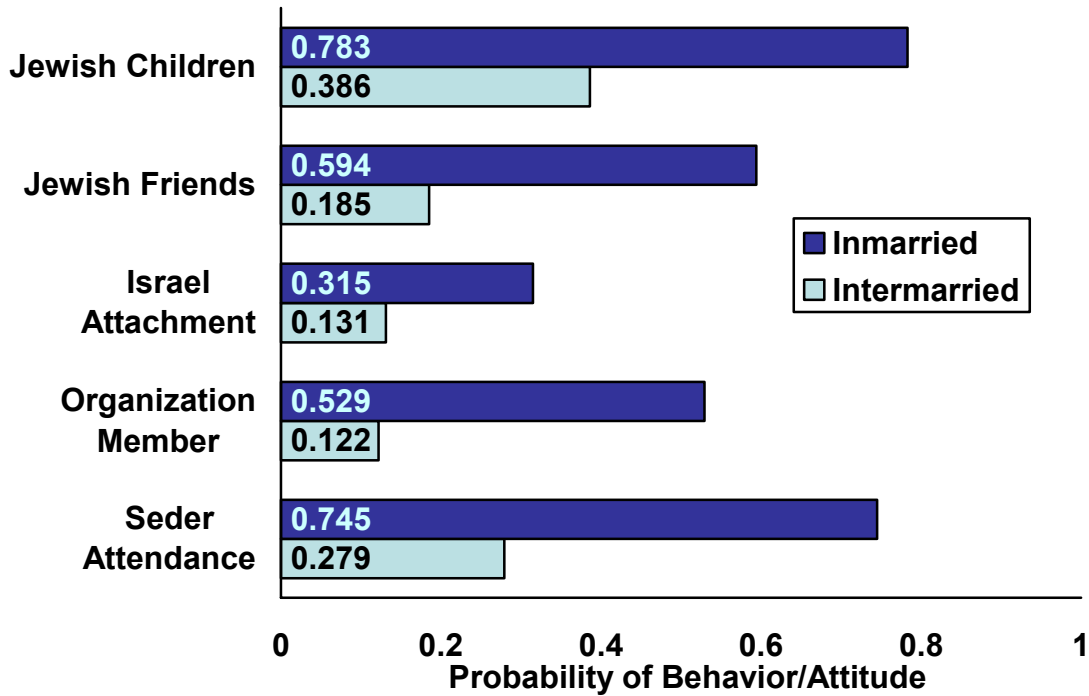
Figure 5.
Jewish Identity of Adult Children after Controls



Source: NJPS 2000-01

This is the “before” picture of intermarriage and the four dimensions of Jewish identity, plus whether children are being raised as Jews (see Figure 6). Other than attachment to Israel—which is the most weakly related dimension of Jewishness—we can see the same pattern of vastly diminished Jewish behavior among children of intermarriage.

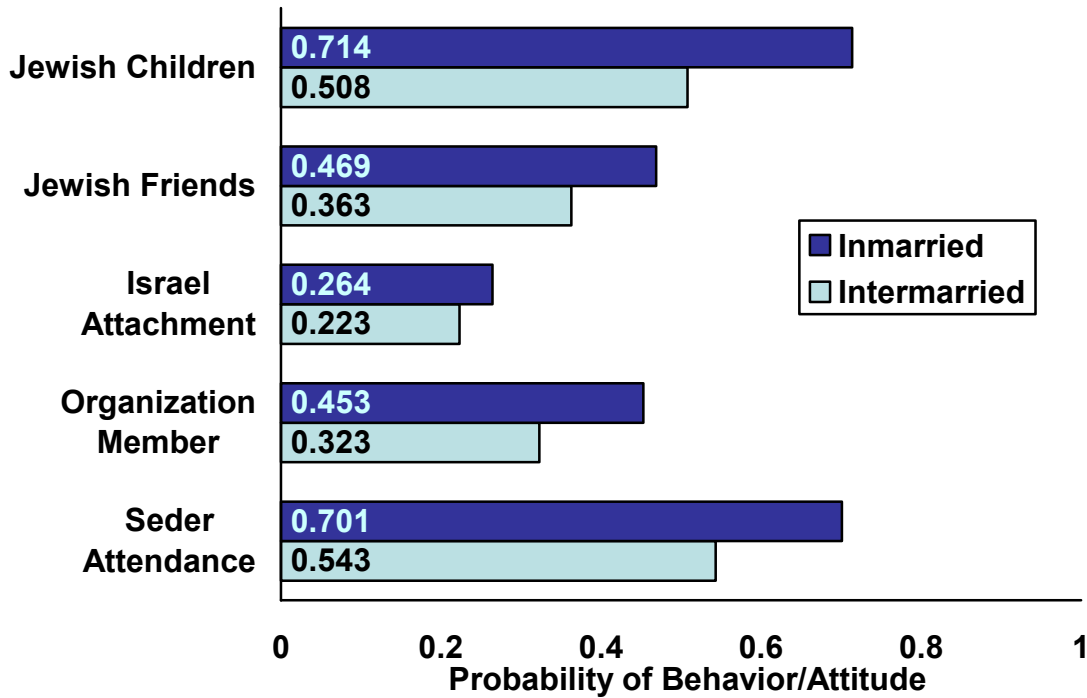
Figure 6.
Differences in Jewish Identity in NJPS before Controls



Source: NJPS 2000-01

If we make the household environment identical, much of the difference between people from in- and intermarried Jewish households is spanned (see Figure 7). As we saw for identifying as a Jew, most of the differences in outcome are not due to intermarriage alone, but are mediated by the environment that the parents create for their children, which is considerably less Jewish when one parent is not a Jew.

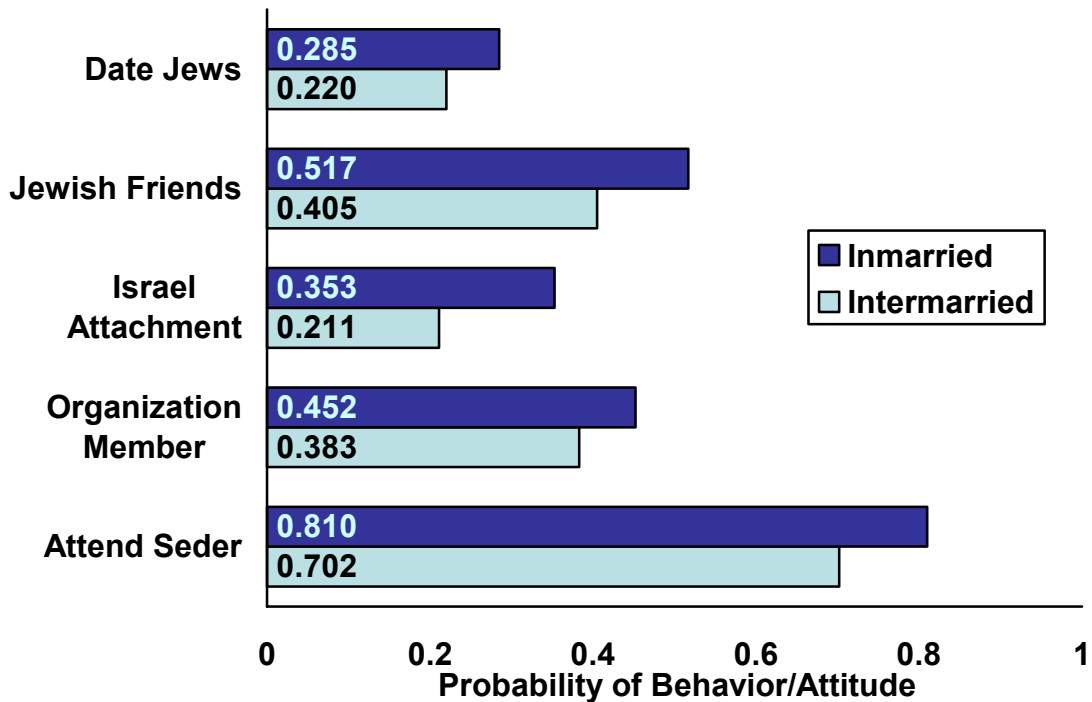
*Figure 7.
Differences in Jewish Identity in College after Controls*



Source: NJPS 2000-01

Looking at data from the college study, the same pattern holds true: the environment in which a person grows up plays a much greater role than simple heredity (see Figure 8). While any comparison between the surveys must remain extremely tentative, there is no evidence to suggest that the direct effect of intermarriage is attenuated in recent cohorts.

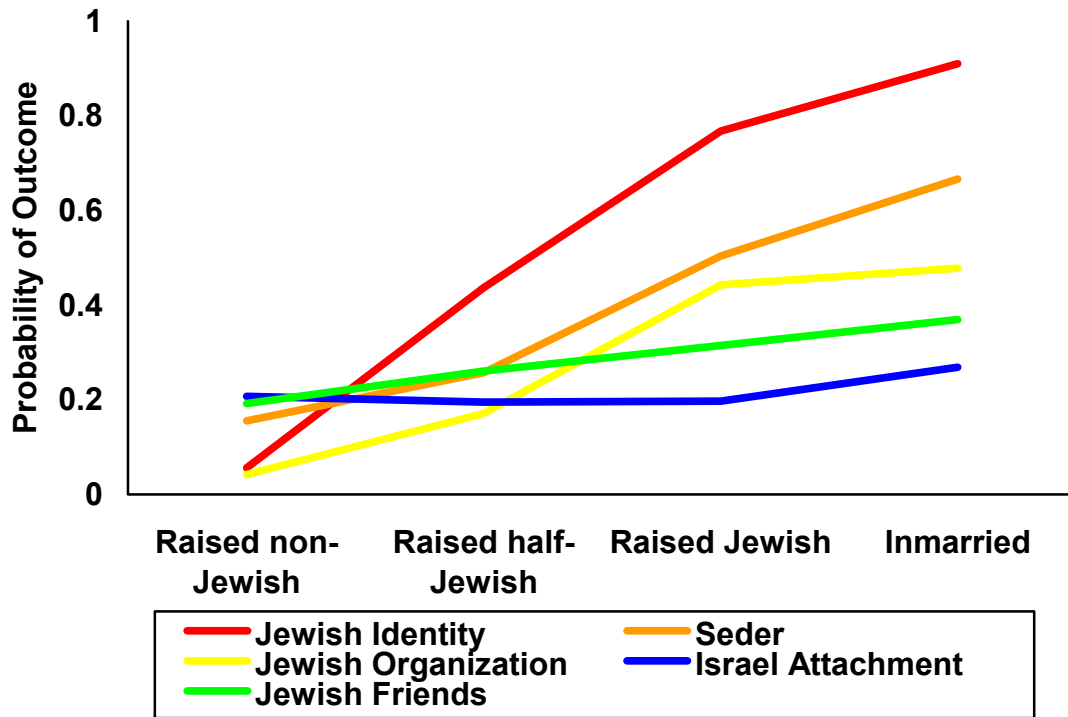
Figure 8.
Differences in Jewish Identity in College after Controls



Source: CMJS College Survey

I am not trying to claim that an intermarriage has anything like the power of a marriage between two Jews to produce the next generation of the Jewish community. We know this is not so. So, what factors in the environment have the greatest impact on children? The single most important choice is how the parents raise their child. On this chart, we see the impact of different kinds of upbringing on being Jewish (see Figure 9). Starting from the left hand side, the first group consists of children of intermarriage who were not raised as Jews, then those raised half-Jewish, people with intermarried parents who were raised exclusively as Jews, and finally children of inmarriages. Each line shows the probability of a given outcome. Not being raised as a Jew or being raised half-Jewish are event horizons in actuality. Children with a non-Jewish parent who are raised exclusively as Jews are quite different. They are definitely less likely to be active Jews, but are in no way a “lost cause”.

Figure 9.
Impact of Inter-marriage and Being Raised Jewish



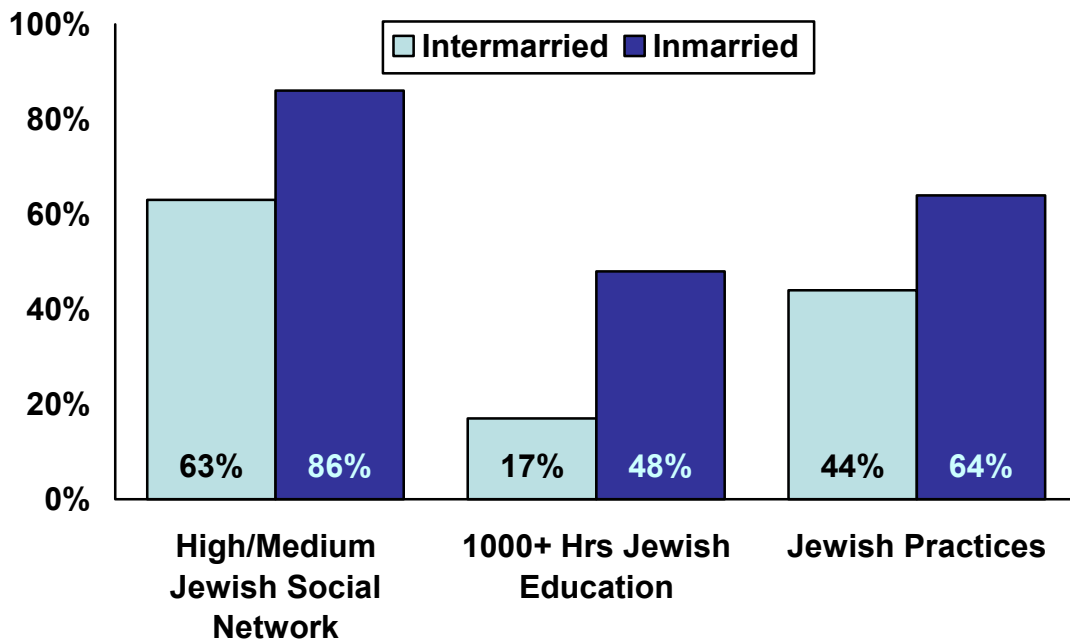
Source: NJPS 2000-01

What other factors have a major impact? (See Figure 10 for differences in socialization between in- and intermarried families.) After the way in which a person was raised, the extent to which a person was surrounded by Jewish friends has the next greatest impact on what they will become. It is vitally important that any Jewish child have a peer group that shares her or his beliefs and practices and reinforces the sense of shared destiny and identity. Without this, even children with two Jewish parents are at a major disadvantage. Where does this peer group come from? We do not have data that address it, but in a time when Jews are ever more thinly spread across the suburban sprawl, a Jewish peer group can only come from a rich set of social opportunities—youth groups, sports teams, summer camps (Sales and Saxe 2004), and Jewish day schools (Cohen 1995). To the extent that these institutions screen out children from intermarriages who are being raised as Jews—whether by policy or attitude—they reinforce intermarriage as a black hole for Jewish identity from which no return is possible. And as we have seen, a sizable proportion of intermarried children are being raised as Jews, their numbers are growing, and the community ignores them at its peril.

Next, education plays a major role, too—not just as a place to make Jewish friends—but a haven of Jewish space and time to enact Jewish identity that many homes do not afford, as well as a means to overcome the barriers of knowledge and competency that bar easy participation in communal life. The data from NJPS suggest that there is an increasing

return on investment—every additional hour of Jewish schooling gives more than the one that came before. The level of Jewish education at which significant benefits begin to accrue is beyond that which can be attained in Hebrew school. Day schools are vital for any Jewish child, particularly one with a non-Jewish parent. I say this in full knowledge that this is “too Jewish” for many parents, intermarried or not, but the consistent finding is that supplementary school—no matter how well organized and intense—is no substitute.

Figure 10.
Jewish Upbringing of Adults with Intermarried Parents
Respondents Raised Exclusively as Jews



Source: NJPS 2000-01

Our research also suggests that the main benefits of being raised Orthodox or Conservative come from the home environments they instill, rather than from ideology. If this is correct, it emphasizes that it is the environment that is most important, not the ideological underpinnings. Basic Jewish practices—sometimes attending services and sometimes lighting Shabbat candles were also associated with moderate increases in the level of Jewish activity later in life.

What are the implications of this research? By failing to control for the environment in which intermarried children are raised, the outcomes of intermarriage truly appear to be an event horizon for Jewish identity, a place from which no recovery is possible. Were this uniformly true, American Jewry would be in even direr straits than it is now. But this is not the case—intermarried households are diverse, and those raising their children exclusively as Jews are far from a lost cause. There is a world of difference between the path chosen by Harvey Cox, author of *Common Prayers: Faith, Family, and a Christian's*

Journey Through the Jewish Year, an ordained member of the Harvard Divinity School faculty, and his Jewish wife, who chose to raise their children exclusively as Jews, and the authors of *Raising Your Jewish-Christian Child* (Gruzen et al. 2001), who advocate raising children in both heritages. While it is difficult to walk the tightrope between praising non-Jews who make Cox's commitment and endorsing intermarriage, the Jewish community must recognize and support their efforts. Tarring all intermarriages with the same brush will make the event horizon a self-fulfilling prophecy.

From a policy perspective, I would like to raise a novel argument. It is a strange fact that human collectivities are often more prescient than their individual members. To borrow an example cited in *The Wisdom of Crowds*, a social psychologist—who else?—asked 56 people to estimate the number of jellybeans in a jar; the mean estimate was only 2.5 percent off the actual figure, closer than the estimates of all but one individual (Surowiecki 2004). Similarly, financial markets are often very accurate predictors of future events. The collective wisdom of the Jewish community in supporting both outreach and prophylaxis may be closer to the ideal mix than emphasizing either component. Prophylactic programs, like day school and teen Israel experiences (Saxe et al. 2002), make sense for several reasons. Not only do these programs have the potential to decrease the rate of intermarriage, but they also increase the Jewish capital of Jewish spouses who choose to intermarry and this in turn will positively impact on the Jewish tenor of the home. It also helps children of intermarriage who are being raised as Jews. Outreach makes sense because much of the effect of intermarriage is mediated through environmental factors which may be amenable to change and as a way into the Jewish community for people with Jewish ancestry. Families that commit to raising their children as Jews will contribute substantial numbers to the Jewish population over the next decades, and it is in the best interest of the community to encourage them to make this commitment seriously and unambiguously.

References

- Cohen, Steven M. 1995. The impact of varieties of Jewish education upon Jewish identity: an inter-generational perspective. *Contemporary Jewry* 16:68-96.
- Gruzen, Lee F., Lavey Derby, Joel A. Gibson, and Sheila Gordon. 2001. *Raising your Jewish/Christian child: How interfaith parents can give their child the best of both heritages*. 2nd ed. Newmarket Press.
- Hartman, Moshe and Harriet Hartman. 1996. *Gender equality and American Jews*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Hecht, Shahar. 2004. Factor analysis of college survey data. Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Waltham, MA. Unpublished manuscript.
- Kadushin, Charles, Elizabeth Tighe, and Shahar Hecht. 2004. Being Jewish on college campuses. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies, December 29, Chicago.

- Keysar, Ariela, Barry A. Kosmin, Nava Lerer, and Egon Mayer. 1991. Exogamy in first marriages and remarriages: An analysis of mate selection in first and second marriages among American Jews in the 1990s, and its theoretical implications. *Contemporary Jewry* 12:45-66.
- Kosmin, Barry A., Nava Lerer, and Egon Mayer. 1989. *Intermarriage, divorce, and remarriage among American Jews, 1982-87*. New York: North American Jewish Data Bank.
- Liebman, Charles S. 1990. Ritual, ceremony and the reconstruction of Judaism in the United States. Pp. 272-83 in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. 6, edited by E. Mendelsohn. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Medding, Peter Y., Gary A. Tobin, Sylvia Barack Fishman, and Mordechai Rimor. 1992. Jewish identity in conversionary and mixed marriages. Pp. 3-76 in *American Jewish Year Book*, vol. 92, edited by D. Singer. New York: American Jewish Committee.
- Phillips, Bruce. 1997. *Re-examining intermarriage: Trends, textures and strategies*. Boston, MA, Los Angeles, CA, and New York: Susan and David Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies and American Jewish Committee.
- Sales, Amy L. and Len Saxe. 2004. *"How goodly are thy tents": Summer camps as Jewish socializing experiences*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press.
- Saxe, Leonard, et al. 2002. *A mega-experiment in Jewish education: The impact of birthright israel*. Waltham, MA: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies.
- Schulman, Mark A. 2003. *National Jewish population survey 2000-2001: study review memo*. Waltham, MA: North American Jewish Data Bank.
- Surowiecki, James. 2004. *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many are Smarter than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies, and Nations*. Doubleday.
- United Jewish Communities. 2003a. *National Jewish population survey 2000-01* [MRDF]. New York: United Jewish Communities [producer]. Waltham, MA: North American Jewish Data Bank [distributor].

**Appendix A:
Regression Models**

Odds Ratios from the Logistic Regression of Measures of Jewish Identity on Selected Variables

NJPS Data Survey Logit Regression

Independent Variables	Jewish	Seder	Orgs	Israel	Friends	Children
Parents intermarried	0.192**	0.508**	0.576**	0.799	0.645**	0.412**
Female	1.060	1.435**	1.110	1.000	1.273*	1.520*
Age squared	1.000	1.000**	1.000	1.000+	1.000**	1.000**
Two migrant parents	1.605*	0.798+	1.379**	2.102**	1.477**	1.644+
Highest degree	1.143*	1.142**	1.071+	1.021	1.087*	1.204*
Raised non-Jewish	0.028**	0.242**	0.146**	0.667*	0.482**	-
Raised half Jewish	0.273**	0.358**	0.314**	0.984	0.609+	0.306**
Raised Orthodox or Conserv.	1.066	1.523**	1.636**	1.158	1.247+	1.475+
Jewish education hours^2	1.000	1.000**	1.000**	1.000**	1.000**	1.000+
High HS Jewish social network	2.817**	2.834**	2.345**	1.904**	9.333**	3.013*
Med. HS Jewish social network	1.370+	1.495**	1.590**	1.261+	3.167**	1.689*
Jewish practices	1.034	1.596**	1.263*	1.095	1.023	0.951
Current Jewish pop. density	1.154**	1.102**	0.996	0.977	1.134**	1.121*
Current Jewish pop. density^2	0.995**	0.997**	1	1.001	0.997**	0.996+
Log Pseudo-Likelihood	-1274572	-2143465	-2211807	-2208412	-2238515	-471398
D.F.	14	14	14	14	14	13
Pseudo R ²	.551	.289	.254	.116	.266	.222
Observations	4,672	4,672	4,672	4,672	4,672	1,075

+ $p > .1$ * $p > .05$ ** $p > .01$

College Study Data Logit Regression

Independent Variables	Seder	Orgs	Israel	Friends	Dates
Parents intermarried	0.551**	0.752+	0.492**	0.637**	0.709+
Female	1.850**	1.268*	1.364**	1.093	1.270*
Raised half-Jewish	1.292	0.775	0.572	1.02	0.649
Raised Orthodox or Conserv.	3.528**	2.183**	1.612**	1.482**	1.368*
Jewish education hours	1.021**	1.001	0.999	1.002	1.005
Jewish education hours^2	1.000*	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
High HS social network	2.828**	2.150**	2.763**	6.569**	5.907**
Medium HS social network	1.516**	1.237+	1.319*	2.628**	2.094**
Jewish practices	2.557**	2.380**	2.131**	1.143	1.237+
College Jewish Pop. Density	1.018**	0.990+	1.004	1.052**	1.024**
Log Likelihood	-866.48	-1089.95	-1013.17	-1037.58	-944.043
D.F.	10	10	10	10	10
Pseudo R ²	.172	.108	.169	.158	.128
Observations	1,778	1,778	1,768	1,778	1,778

+ $p > .1$ * $p > .05$ ** $p > .01$

**Appendix B:
Variables Used**

Dependent Variables

Jewish	Respondent is either exclusively Jewish by religion or has no religion and considers self Jewish (NJPS)
Seder	Respondent attended a seder in the year preceding the interview
Orgs	Household belongs to one or more Jewish organizations (NJPS) Respondent reports spending one or more hours week with Jewish club (college)
Israel	Respondent is somewhat/very attached to Israel (NJPS) Respondent feels caring for Israel very important for own Jewish identity (college)
Friends	Half or more respondents closest friends Jewish (both)
Children	Respondent raising child Jewish (NJPS)
Dates	Most or all respondent's dates Jewish (college)

*Independent Variables**

Age squared	Modeled increasing return on age for certain variables
Two migrant parents	No significant difference between outcomes for first and second generation once other variables controlled
Raised Orthodox or Conservative	No significant difference between outcomes for raised Orthodox or Conservative once controls introduced
Jewish education hours	Follows Himmelfarb's 1977 estimates of hours per year for different types of Jewish education
Square of hours of Jewish education	Quadratic term better modeled plateauing of impact of Jewish education in college data while squared term better modeled increasing return on investment in NJPS data
High HS Jewish social network	Social network index based on friends/dates in college—dummy corresponds to most/all friends/dates Jewish
Medium HS Jewish social network	Dummy corresponds to some/half friends/dates Jewish
Jewish practices	Dummy for ever attend synagogue and family ever lit shabbat candles when 11 or 12 (NJPS) or high school (college)
Current Jewish population density	Calculated using 2001 AJYB and 2000 Census data at reporting level for states with Jewish populations > 20,000—quadratic term models decreasing return on density (negative returns modeled to occur at greater densities present in the United States)
College Jewish population density	Calculated using Hillel and college estimates for undergraduate enrollment

* Only variables that are not self-explanatory are included