

# Lasting Marriages: Jewish Style

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*In 1980-81 a study of 129 lasting marriages in Metropolitan Toronto, Canada included 40 Jewish couples. The highlights of the findings related to Jewish lasting marriages are presented, and some comparisons to the non-Jewish marriages are made.*

## Introduction

During the past six years, there have been an increasing amount of articles related to Jewish one-parent families in the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*.<sup>1</sup> The breakdown of the Jewish family has become a popular topic in our Jewish communities.<sup>2</sup> What we have not done is to examine what is happening to those Jewish families whose marriages are lasting and who appear to continue to live a meaningful family life despite the tremendous pressures in the 1980s.

### *Lasting Marriages: A Canadian Study*

This study was completed by the authors and a group of nine social work students at

the Faculty of Social Work.\*

During the month of November 1980, we advertised in a local newspaper for volunteers. A lasting marriage was defined as a first marriage, which had lasted at least 15 years and contained at least one child. Two types of questionnaires were developed. A check-list which husbands and wives were asked to fill out separately, and a five-question open-ended questionnaire which was also filled out separately. Due to geographical limitations in Metropolitan Toronto, nearly one-half of our questionnaires were mailed, and one-half of our sample had personal interviews. A total of 129 couples were included in our study of whom 40 couples were Jewish.

## Description of the Sample

The eighty Jewish respondents ranged in age from thirty-three to sixty-seven years with an average age of forty-six years. Seventy-six percent (n=61) of this group had at least some university education and fifty-three percent (n=42) of the total Jewish sample had completed university.

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<sup>1</sup> Saul Hofstein, "Perspectives on the Jewish Single-Parent Family," Vol. 54, No. 3 (1978); Judith Lang, "Divorce and the Jewish Woman: A Family Agency Approach," Vol. 54, No. 3 (1978); Samuel Lerner, "Services to the Child in the Single Parent Family," Vol. 55, No. 4 (1979); Gerda L. Schulman, "The Single Parent Family," Vol. 51, No. 4 (1975); Rona Small and Paul Goldhamer, "The Professional Role Within a Self Help Model: A 'Widow to Widow Project,'" Vol. 56, No. 2 (1979-80); Ruth Stark, "The Fatherless Boys Project of the Jewish Board of Guardians: Some Therapeutic Implications," Vol. 53, No. 2 (1976); Jerry Wolkoff and Diane Applebaum, "The Jewish Community Center: A Group for Adolescents from One-Parent Families," Vol. 53, No. 2 (1976).

<sup>2</sup> American Jewish Committee, *Sustaining the Jewish Family: A Task Force Report on Jewish Family Policy*, New York, 1979.

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\* The following students were involved in this study: Sharon Dove, Janet Heinrichs, Pamela Kopstein, Nita Levine, Betty Lou Lynn, Elaine Solway, Judy Spiegel, Lauren Wainwright, Sydney Woollcombe. They received their Masters of Social Work degree in June 1981.

Using an occupational class scale\*\* it was found that of the sixty-two Jewish persons reported working, forty-three were in occupations comprising the upper third of this scale. These occupations were: 1) managerial and administrative; 2) professional; and 3) own their own business. The largest group was in the professional category—one third (n=21) of those working.

All forty couples had been married for at least fifteen years with the largest group (16 couples) having been married between 21-26 years. The number of children of these families ranged from one to five with the average being approximately three children.

If one were to extract an "average Jewish couple" from this population the couple would tend to be in their mid-forties, married for twenty-four years with three children. Both persons would have a university education with the husband working in a professional or top management position, and the wife working part time in either a clerical or administrative position.

**Findings—Checklist Questionnaire**

A three part questionnaire was developed as the main research instrument for this study. The first part asked for certain socio-demographic information on each respondent. The second and third parts of the questionnaire were in the form of a checklist with Part II listing fifteen areas where couples may agree or disagree in their marriage, and Part III listing seventy-one variables which the respondent would rank in terms of importance for a lasting marriage. The questionnaire was adminis-

\*\* This scale was developed by a Canadian sociologist, Bernard R. Blishen, and is used to determine the class distribution of occupational groups in the Canadian social structure. The scale is based upon the average income and the average number of years of schooling associated with each occupation. See Bernard R. Blishen, "The Construction and Use of an Occupational Class Scale," *Canadian Society: Sociological Perspectives*, Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada Ltd., 1961 pp. 477-485.

tered to husband and wife separately.

**a) Areas of High and Low Agreement within the Jewish Sample**

The forty Jewish couples were subdivided into husband and wife groups. Responses to the eighty-six checklist items on the questionnaire were then examined to see if there were items where both sexes either agreed or disagreed significantly.

Cross tabulations were carried out on all items with respect to the sex of the respondents. Of the eighty-six items it was found that there was significant disagreement between these two groups on eight of them.

Areas where significant differences\*\*\* existed between the husband and wife groups were: that wives tended to think that individual friends and the ability to confront and work out problems were more important in helping a marriage to last than did husbands; whereas the husband group tended to think that common activities between husband and wife were more important in helping a marriage to last than did the wife group.

Areas where both husband and wife groups had perfect agreement in terms of rating their importance to a lasting marriage are illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Areas of Perfect Agreement Between Husband and Wife Groups**

Item	Mean Rating (max. = 4.0)
1. Trusting each other	3.99
2. Loving each other	3.98
3. Honesty in communication	3.96
4. Give and take in marriage	3.95

\*\*\*It should be noted that both husband and wife groups rated these three items as important in helping a marriage to last. However, the differences in the ratings were significant at the .05 level.

5. Ability to solve problems together	3.91
6. Fidelity in marriage	3.90
7. Willingness to make sacrifices	3.85
8. Friendship	3.83

**b) Comparison of Jewish and non-Jewish Sample Groups**

Cross tabulations were carried out to see if there were any significant differences between the ratings that the Jewish sample gave to the items on the questionnaire and those given by the non-Jewish sample.

**Areas of Disagreement within Marriage**

It was found that there were two areas where Jewish couples tended to have more disagreement between themselves (i.e., husband and wife tended to have disagreements over these items in their marriage) than did the non-Jewish couples. Jewish couples more frequently disagreed over what constituted conventionality (correct or proper behaviour) and the proper division of and responsibility for household tasks.

In terms of rating the importance of specified qualities to their own marriage it was found that there were eleven areas where the ratings by the Jewish sample differed significantly ( $p < .05$ ) from those of the non-Jewish sample. Interestingly enough, each of these eleven areas were rated higher in terms of importance in helping a marriage to last by the Jewish sample. In other words, there was not a single item from the eighty-six that the non-Jewish sample thought was more important to a lasting marriage than the Jewish sample. The eleven areas which the Jewish sample rated higher were:

- 1) sharing negative feelings and emotions;
- 2) recognizing own need in marriage;
- 3) similar religious background;
- 4) similar ethnic (cultural) background;

- 5) common interests;
- 6) common activities;
- 7) freedom from financial worries;
- 8) confiding innermost feelings to each other;
- 9) loving each other;
- 10) sexual satisfaction;
- 11) sharing religious values.

All in all, in terms of socio-economic status the Jewish sample tended to be an upper middle-class group, highly educated and relatively free from financial worry. The responses to the checklist questionnaire indicate that this group places much more emphasis on the importance of homogeneity (common interests, activities, similar religious and ethnic background) to a lasting marriage than does the non-Jewish sample. The second area which the Jewish sample tended to place more importance on to a lasting marriage was intimacy between the couple (confiding, loving, sharing negative feelings and sexual satisfaction).

**The Open-Ended Questions—Findings**

The first question was “what are the three most important factors that contribute to a lasting marriage?”

Both Jewish men and women indicated that love, respect, and trust were the most important factors.

The second question asked “What were your expectations of marriage at the time you were married, and how do these compare with your expectations today?” Both men and women headed “traditional expectations” at the top of the list, but this changed to more “shared responsibilities” and “independence” of expectations today.

To the third question, “How do you and your partner resolve conflict in your marriage,” over half of our subjects mentioned discussion, and a third pointed out that they used a combination of approaches such as first arguing, then discussion, followed by resolution or agreement.

The fourth question dealt with the "satisfactions" and "dissatisfactions" of a lasting marriage. The three major satisfactions for our Jewish men were friendship and companionship, shared interests and goals, and building something together such as home life and family. For the women the major satisfactions were friendship, personal growth, and a supportive partner. In the dissatisfied category, only a few men (8 percent) mentioned "not sexually satisfied," and "money problems," while the women felt the same way and included the husband's workload (all under 10 percent of the women).

To the last question, "What advice would you give to a couple about to be married today," the three most important points mentioned by both men and women were "Communication," "Respect," and "Commitment." "Working at your marriage," came fourth for both men and women.

In conclusion, it is important for studies of Jewish family life in North America that we do not focus only on the break-up of Jewish families but attempt to continue to examine those Jewish families who last, and who seem to be enjoying family life in the 1980s.