

## Hear O Israel – Listening to our Interfaith Students by Evie Levy Rotstein

I recently looked at the class roster for the 4th grade and recognized the obvious diversity of the student body -- simply by the colorful array of family names. Interspersed between stereotypical Jewish names such as Cohen, Greenberg, Silverstein, and Katz were the less expected names, including Doyle, Donovan, McCauley, McBlain, Ferrara, Favarro, Somoza, and Spano. The number of children with the more common Jewish names has decreased to the extent that we can no longer ignore the shifting terrain of our religious schools.

I have been working as the religious school principal in a Reform Temple for twenty-five years and have noticed a steady increase in the number of students who come from interfaith families. In general, these children blend into the fabric of the classroom, offering their personal experiences of home ritual and holiday celebration when the conversation arises. Our school curriculum does not necessarily include a study unit that deals with the concerns of interfaith families, nor does it provide the opportunity for students to explore specific issues of identity and affiliation. Like many other congregations, we indeed offer interfaith focus groups, facilitated by the Rabbi or a social worker, and occasionally have sponsored a "December Dilemma" discussion. The Jewish community must continue to expand upon these programs, to service the children from interfaith families and to acknowledge their presence in our schools.

One of the questions I have asked myself, as a practitioner, is whether the children from interfaith families view their Jewish education through a different lens than those students from an endogamous family. Do these students, in fact, have an alternate set of questions to ask about Judaism? How does the supplemental congregational school deal with the issues of Jewish identity for interfaith students? What aspects of these students' lives influence them to identify as Jews and what effect does their Jewish education have in the identity-formation process? How can we as Jewish educators address the specific needs of this population?

### Numbers, Identity, and Commitment

According to the 1993 Survey on Mixed Marriage,<sup>1</sup> only a small percentage of interfaith<sup>2</sup> families chose to provide a Jewish education for their children and to join a religious institution. The survey findings indicated that 18% of the children of intermarriages were raised exclusively as Jews, 33% of children were raised as Christian, and 25% were raised as both Jewish and Christian.<sup>3</sup> The subject of intermarriage certainly evokes considerable response in the Jewish community, because it arouses basic fears about group survival. There are two clear aspects of concern. The first is the sheer matter of numbers. How many children of interfaith families will remain Jewish? The second consideration is one of identity and commitment. What will be the quality of the affiliation of the interfaith family?

Since the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey reported significant findings that the rate of intermarriage continues to increase, some segments of the Jewish community have decided to invest a great deal of time and money to explore programs that will strengthen the ties of the intermarried family to Judaism and the Jewish community. As we begin to examine the new 2000 population study, we realize that issues of Jewish continuity and outreach have been at the forefront of the federation agenda for the last ten years. There has been extensive community discussion to decide how much time and effort should be devoted to nursing the

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extensive community discussion to decide how much time and effort should be devoted to pursuing the education of interfaith families. Policy makers are concerned about what the objectives of these programs should be and how we might evaluate their effectiveness.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, the question of how to appropriate funding for the interfaith population is a rather controversial issue. There are political implications for community federations, private Jewish educational foundations, and the denominational branches of Judaism. The Reform Movement has embraced the concept of outreach to interfaith families and developed many programs and educational materials to support the endeavor. One example is the UAHC – CCAR Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach, which has published a curriculum entitled *First Steps* (1997), in addition to an annual "Idea Book" (2000) of programs for outreach. They have also developed national and regional outreach staff positions to encourage and facilitate the inclusion of interfaith families into the fabric of Jewish life. Both the Conservative and Orthodox branches of American Jewry have been less willing to embrace outreach efforts.<sup>5</sup>

### The Potential for Jewish Continuity

Though the number of interfaith families who raise their children exclusively Jewish is rather low, many children from a dual religion household are, in fact, being exposed to Judaism. Sociologist Egon Mayer clearly states, "Those who ignore the potential for Jewish continuity amongst the descendants of the intermarried, given the magnitude of their numbers, are also condemning hope in the American Jewish future."<sup>6</sup> We as Jewish educators must confront this issue and provide the opportunity for the children of interfaith families to explore their unique experience in the context of their Jewish education.

It is interesting to note that virtually all the research has identified parents as the most important source of religious influence.<sup>7</sup> Parker and Gaier report that parent's level of religious participation accounted for more than 60% of the variance in religious beliefs and practices of their high school-aged children.<sup>8</sup> The question we need to consider is how much influence do the Jewish and the non-Jewish parent have on the Jewish identity of their children. In a society that encourages religious pluralism and the acceptance of the individual's personal and religious beliefs, how do the interfaith children find meaning in their connection to the religions of both their parents? What are the messages that parents are giving to their children in terms of the role of Judaism in their lives? In what ways can the Jewish educational experience provide a positive influence for the children of interfaith families?

The goals of Jewish education include the development of Jewish identity by creating a strong attachment to our tradition and heritage and a commitment to a vibrant Jewish future, while building a foundation of cultural and religious literacy. How do these goals coincide with the goals of our interfaith families? Do we take enough time to explore some of the questions that our interfaith families might ask, in the attempt to better understand their expectations and objectives? In a report published by Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, researchers discovered that school administrators and rabbis "are often unaware of what is happening at home, especially for those congregants who are marginally involved in synagogue life."<sup>9</sup> They conclude that frequently valuable communication is lost due to oversight and lack of attention.

### The Complexity of Interfaith Family Dynamics

In an important study in 2000, Sylvia Barack Fishman conducted research entitled the Listening to Learn Project, in which she describes a diverse range of mixed-married households from many geographical areas. She provided a comprehensive analysis of the attitudes and behaviors of mixed-married families and the implications for the future of the American Jewish community. The data that were collected included interviews with 254 couples from eight different Jewish communities across the United States. In her report “Jewish and Something Else: A Study of Mixed Married Families”, she highlights the complexity of interfaith family dynamics and its impact on ethno-religious identity construction. Fishman describes the families as having “negotiated and renegotiated the religious character of their household.”<sup>10</sup> She demonstrates that a majority of interfaith households have constructed dual religious identities and are often heavily influenced by Christian culture.<sup>11</sup> Finally, Fishman’s contribution to this research domain is her detailed description of the fluid, dynamic, and ambivalent boundaries in which interfaith married families view their religious and ethnic identity. Similarly, in her book *Jewish Life and American Culture*, she further discusses the merging of boundaries of American Jews as a process of coalescence. “These value systems coalesce or merge, and the resulting merged messages or texts are perceived not as being American and Jewish values side by side, but as being a unified text, which is identified as authoritative Judaism.”<sup>12</sup> This increase in permeable boundaries creates many challenges for the children of interfaith families in terms of defining their specific Jewish social involvement and educational experience.

The continuity and vitality of the Jewish community rests largely on how effectively it deals with interfaith families. When parents decide to provide a Jewish education for their children, we must not assume that all has been accomplished. Questions and conflicting concerns continue to emerge, as the child from an interfaith home tries to understand the varying influences that shape his or her experience. There are many examples of the student whose Jewish mother insists on Shabbat service attendance, while the non-Jewish father wants to go skiing. Or, perhaps the non-Jewish mother insists on fulfilling the school attendance requirement, while the Jewish father offers tickets to the basketball game.

These conflict-driven scenarios are quite prevalent in our congregational schools and we too often neglect to consider the students’ need for exploration and discussion. Perhaps we are afraid of encroaching on personal family decisions or perhaps we do not want to be sanctimonious in style. Whatever the case may be, the children of interfaith families deserve to be heard and it behooves Jewish educators to listen.

#### Endnotes:

1. Bruce Phillips, a professor of Jewish communal service at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles and a senior fellow of the Wilstein Institute, published a 1993 Survey on Mixed Marriage.
2. Interfaith marriage is defined as marriage to a non-Jew who has not converted.
3. Phillips, B. A. (1997). *Re-examining intermarriage: Trends, textures and strategies*. Boston, MA, and Los Angeles, CA: American Jewish Committee and Wilstein Institute of Jewish Studies, 1997, p.49. See also: Phillips, B.A. “Intermarriage and Jewish Education: Is There a Connection? *Journal of Jewish Education*, 66 (1), Spring/Summer 2000, 54-66.
4. Wertheimer, C., C.S. Liebman, and S. M. Cohen, (1996, January). “How to Save American Jews.” *Commentary*. January 1996, 101 (1). pp. 47-51.
5. Schoenberg, E. S. “Intermarriage and Conservative Judaism: An approach for the 1990’s.”

*Conservative Judaism*, 43 (1), 1990.

6. Mayer, E. *Children of Inter-marriage: A Study in Patterns of Identification and Family Life*. New York: The American Jewish Committee, 1983, p. 78.
  7. Ozorak, E. W. "Social and Cognitive Influences on the Development of Religious Beliefs and Commitment in Adolescence. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 28 (4), 1989, pp. 448-463.
  8. Parker, M. and E.L. Gaier, "Religion, Religious Beliefs, and Religious Practices Among Conservative Jewish Adolescents. *Adolescence*, xv (58), 1980, pp. 361-374.
  9. Chertok, M. A., M. Rosen, A. Sales, and L. Saxe, *Outreach Families in the Sacred Common: Congregational Responses to Interfaith Issues*. Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 2001.
  10. Fishman, S.B. *Jewish and Something Else: A Study of Mixed-married Families*. New York: The American Jewish Committee, 2000, p. 19.
  11. Ibid, p. 5. .
  12. Fishman, S.B.. *Jewish Life and American Culture*. New York: SUNY Press, 2000, p. 10.
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