

# CONTACT

SPRING 2005/NISAN 5765 VOLUME 7 NUMBER 3

THE JOURNAL OF JEWISH LIFE NETWORK/STEINHARDT FOUNDATION



**The Changing Nature  
of the Jewish Family**



STEINHARDT FOUNDATION

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Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational, religious and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life.

*Photographs in this issue appear courtesy of contributors and Photos.com.*

## The Changing Nature of the Jewish Family

To many people, the phrase “traditional Jewish family” calls to mind a husband and wife and at least three children, possibly seven. It might summon inherited memories of the shtetl, or images of a father and mother surrounded by their parents and children at the Seder table — three generations, reproducing mightily and wrapped in a web of mutual support.

Times have changed. The Jewish family today encompasses a wide variety of textures and forms. Decades of high intermarriage have diversified the customs and complexions of the family. High divorce rates, meanwhile, have altered the very definition of what is “normal.” Whereas single-parent households were once a rare exception, they now account for an increasing proportion of American Jewish families. Some in the community have interpreted the changing family in strident and judgmental terms: it is a sign of rampant assimilation, loss of tradition or moral permissiveness. But such scolding does nothing to respond to the new realities and to the changing needs of Jews today.

If the family has changed, then old methods of relating to the family need to change as well. How can the community better respect, understand and meet the needs of single parents? In what ways can the community be more inclusive towards families that include adopted children? How can the community offer support to couples who are struggling with infertility? This issue of CONTACT features articles from a wide gamut of opinion on the state of the contemporary Jewish family. Although the perspectives are diverse, they share a commitment to strengthening Jewish life in families that are as multihued as contemporary America itself.

Eli Valley

**CORRECTION:** In the Winter 2005 issue of CONTACT, the article “Engaging the Intellect: Jewish Studies on the College Campus,” by Amy Sales and Leonard Saxe, should have noted that the research was commissioned and supported by the AVI CHAI Foundation, with the collaboration of Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation.





# Single, Jewish, Mother

by RABBI LAURA GOLD

**I**t's three o'clock in the morning and the baby is crying again. She will not sleep again until 6 a.m. (and then only for two hours). I have been assailed by the same bad cold she has, and I have a twelve-hour workday ahead of me. So, even though it feels deeply tender to hold my baby throughout the night, I would really like to nudge my husband awake and inform him that it's his turn to sit up rocking with her. The only problem is that there is no sleeping husband next to me.

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*Rabbi Laura Gold, Ph.D. has been in practice as a clinical psychologist for seventeen years and was ordained as a Conservative rabbi in 2003. While she finds both of her lines of work enormously gratifying, the arrival of her daughter Raphaëla has been the greatest joy of her life.*

There wasn't one last night and there won't be one tomorrow night. I am a single mother, profoundly blessed and very, very tired.

This is not the life I had envisioned while growing up. I thought I would get married in my twenties, move to the suburbs, raise four children (I planned on two boys and two girls) and work part-time once they were in school while my husband served as primary breadwinner. We would be financially comfortable enough to send the children to day school and summer camp. What I never imagined was that by my mid-forties, I would be an unmarried (not-yet-married?) rabbi, psychologist and mother of a seventeen-month-old daughter. Yet here I am.

According to the 2000-01 National

Jewish Population Survey, there are 2.9 million Jewish households in America, and children reside in 754,000 or 26 percent of them, in most cases with two adults. Three percent of all Jewish households (or 87,000 out of 2.9 million) are composed of a single adult with one or more children, suggesting that 11.5 percent of Jewish households with children are single-parent households. Although a precise breakdown is difficult to ascertain, it seems safe to assume that single, Jewish parents are, to a great extent, divorced and to a lesser extent widowed or never-married. With single motherhood now viewed by many unpartnered women as a viable option, the numbers in this last group are likely to increase. Out of simple pragmatism, if not common decency, the community needs to

recognize and address the special needs of single-parent families.

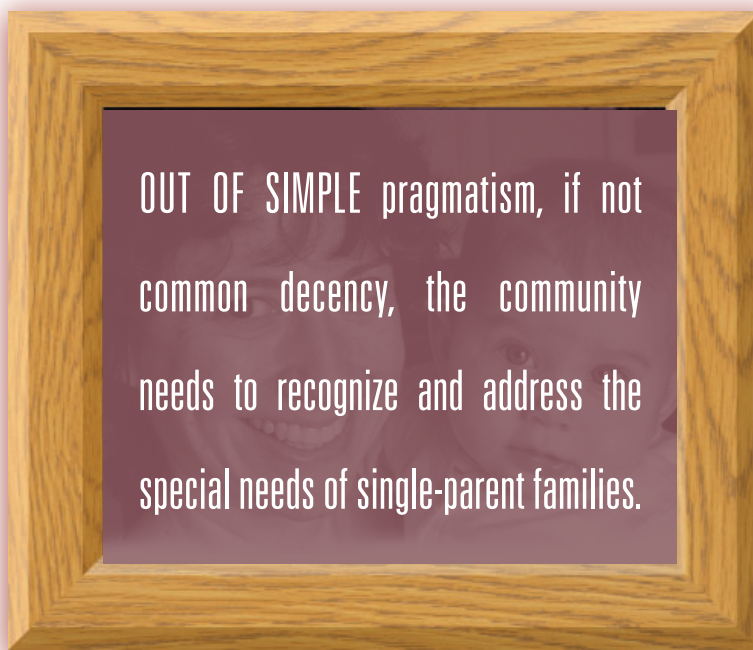
First and foremost, Jewish institutions should ensure that they welcome single-parents and their children with as much enthusiasm, warmth and respect as they would a two-parent family. The arrival of a baby to a single mother should be announced and celebrated with as much joy as the arrival of any other baby. Be mindful of language that may be exclusive (“Moms, tell your husbands it’s their turn to bring the kids on Sunday morning so you can sleep in”). Suggest ways that people in your community can help out the single parents in their midst (“This Sunday’s program might provide a good opportunity for some of you to offer to bring the children of a single mom or dad you know, so they can have a little time to themselves”). Organize gatherings of single parents with and without their children — with babysitting provided. And don’t forget about the involved non-custodial parent. If your synagogue is having a father-child program (or any program that is likely to attract more fathers than mothers) and there are single moms in your congregation, ask them if their children have fathers who might like to participate, even if the fathers are not members of the *shul*. This can be an important way for the synagogue to meet children’s needs by fostering their relationships with their fathers.

A single person raising a child on a single income often is faced with an enormously challenging financial situation, and actively engaging with Jewish life is a costly enterprise. As the NJPS notes, “those with low income are less likely than others to be members of synagogues, Jewish community centers and other Jewish organizations.” In addition, Jewish summer camp, Jewish day school, bris and baby-naming celebrations, bar and bat mitzvah celebrations, keeping kosher, making festive Shabbat and holiday meals, travel to Israel and other aspects of living Jewishly are expensive.

In the case of the single-parent fam-

ily, the balance of career and parenthood is especially complicated and expensive. The single mother doesn’t have the luxury to focus on either supporting the family or child-rearing; she must attend to both in equal measure. The more the mother works, the less time she has to spend with her child and the more she must pay for childcare. But working fewer hours (or, as may be the case, fewer jobs) can seriously impede making ends meet, much less being able to afford to participate in Jewish communal life.

Anything that Jewish institutions can do to ease the financial burden for single parents can make a significant difference



in their participation in Jewish communal life. Offering sliding scale membership dues and tuitions based on income is one way to help, and making it comfortable for single parents to ask for scholarships and fee reductions is another. It should never be presumed that in instances of divorce (or single-motherhood with an actively involved father), two parents in the picture means two incomes contributing equally to the raising of the child. Indeed, when it comes to divorce, it is well documented that generally the man’s economic comfort increases and the woman’s decreases. By offering sliding scale membership dues and tuitions, institutions can convey how much they value having single-parent families in their community.

Money isn’t the only notable source of stress for the single parent. The single

parent struggles with the limitations of time like no two-parent family does. Imagine how it feels when all the childcare, in addition to normal household maintenance, falls on the shoulders of one adult. There is no other adult with whom the single parent can equitably divide these tasks. One of the greatest gifts the community can give the single parent is time, especially by spending time with the child while the mother takes care of other duties or even takes care of herself.

The best way for me to illustrate how individual members of a Jewish community can make a significant difference in the life of a single parent is by relating my own experience. I am exceedingly fortunate to belong to a synagogue that has been unstintingly supportive in countless ways. Friends have gone out of their way to send referrals for my psychotherapy practice as well as to recommend me for rabbinic jobs. One member of my *minyan* has come over almost every Shabbat afternoon since my baby was born to spend an hour or two with her, freeing me to read the paper or take a much needed nap. Friends brought meals over the first few weeks after the baby was born and contributed both food and paper goods

for the baby-naming reception. Even people in my *shul* who are not close friends seem to keep me in mind in helpful ways. On those occasions when I make it to *shul*, I feel extremely grateful for the bevy of people — children, teens and adults — who vie for a chance to play with my baby, giving me an opportunity to *daven* or to socialize at *kiddush* unencumbered.

By now, my baby and I have recovered from our respective colds, and she is hard at work on her furniture-climbing skills. As for me, I continue to learn how to navigate the path of single motherhood, and my stride sometimes feels as clumsy as my daughter’s first steps were. I look to the Jewish community to provide the occasional steadying hand, some encouraging smiles, and a sense of a larger, loving home. 🌸



An illustration of several hands of different colors (yellow, blue, and purple) reaching out and holding each other in a supportive grip. The hands are rendered in a stippled, textured style. The title text is overlaid on the upper right portion of the image.

# Meeting the Needs of Jewish Adoptive Families

by **KATHY BRODSKY** and **DINA ROSENFELD**

**R**esearch shows that 15 percent of couples in the general population of childbearing age have faced infertility. Within the Jewish community, infertility rates are believed to be higher than among other populations. This may be due to several factors, including later marriage, the pursuit of advanced education and professional careers by women and extensive use of birth control for long periods of time, all of which serve to delay the start of childbearing. While infertility is painful for anyone, Jewish families often feel additional pressure to have children because of the commandment in Genesis to “be fruitful and multiply” and a strong desire to repopulate the community after the Holocaust. Even attending services where the struggles of our matriarchs are highlighted can be stressful for those yearning to be parents or grandparents.

When it becomes apparent that a biological child may not be forthcoming, many singles and couples begin to consider adoption. The adoption of a child is an exciting and life-affirming event. Recent estimates approach 120,000 domestic and 20,000 international adoptions annually in the United States. A 1997 survey conducted by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute found that “every 6 out of 10 Americans have had a personal experience with adoption, meaning they themselves, a family member, or a close friend was adopted, had adopted a child or had placed a child for adoption.” According to the National Jewish Population Survey, nearly 3 percent of all Jewish children under age eighteen were adopted—one quarter of them internationally. When the parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles and other extended family members are added, this number approaches 500,000 Jews touched by adoption. In addition, for every adoption, there

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**AS MORE CHILDREN and families of diverse backgrounds enter the institutions of Jewish life, it is hoped that these institutions will respond with a supportive and inclusive academic and social environment.**

are many Jewish institutions and Jewish communities that come into contact with the child and family.

The Hebrew word for adoption, *Ametz*, is mentioned in Psalms and literally means, “to hold strong.” The Ametz Adoption Program of the Jewish Child Care Association in New York chose its name to reflect its work to strengthen the family and its ties to the community.

Welcoming any child into the Jewish community is a celebration. Most adopted children do not have Jewish birth mothers. The first step for many parents is to interact with the Jewish community regarding bris, conversion and/or baby naming. There are more complications when an older child is adopted. While there are differences in how the various movements address conversion, it is important that the Jewish community recognize this is a time for the Jewish community to support the family and welcome its new member.

Another occasion when the Jewish community can show its strength and support is at the age of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, when identity issues during adolescence can be complicated by adoption. Adopted children may grapple with thoughts about where they belong or how their physical appearance differs from other family members.

These and other Jewish rituals mark times of transition and growth and provide an opportunity for the Jewish community to come together. *Ahavat hager* (“loving the stranger”) is a value emphasizing compassion towards strangers, empathy towards foreigners, and their inclusion in every aspect of society. Adoptive families live this ethic every day by opening their hearts and homes.

They ask only that the Jewish community does the same.

Acceptance of difference is a critical task facing the Jewish community. If a family has a weak Jewish identity, then incorporating another tradition may be easier. If there is a strong Jewish identity, then the issue becomes more complicated. A Guatemalan child adopted into a Jewish family may wish to learn Spanish or travel to the city where he was born. A child whose race is not that of her parents will need to learn how to respond to those who treat her differently because of the color of her skin.

The ethnic diversity represented by adoptive families may feel foreign to members of a particular synagogue or communal organization. As a result, Jewish multi-cultural adoptive families are easily recognizable and may feel like they don't belong. This can result in them leaving one institution and joining another perceived as more welcoming and diverse. Some families, feeling that the Jewish community cannot provide a home for them, seek a more comfortable environment for themselves and their children outside of the Jewish community. It is important to remember that Judaism teaches the wrongfulness of humiliating someone in public. The loss of personal dignity at the hands of others is considered one of the gravest wrongs in Judaism, akin to murder. It is our responsibility as Jews to not allow this to happen.

While there are many professionals and institutions who regularly interact with Jewish families and who have worked diligently to insure that everyone can comfortably engage in Jewish life, additional education is required.

Many synagogues, Jewish community centers, schools and other communal institutions are continuing to work towards heightening awareness so that sensitivity to the needs of adoptive families can be enhanced.

The first step to creating accepting communities is an awareness that Jewish families come in all shapes, sizes and colors. A public recognition of their presence is an indication that they are a full part of the Jewish community and an enrichment to *clal Yisrael*. Open dialogue with families regarding their needs and their perception of how to create a more welcoming community will benefit both the families and the community.

As more children and families of diverse backgrounds enter the institutions of Jewish life, it is hoped that these institutions will respond with a supportive and inclusive academic and social environment. Consider the following:

- Teach the value of diversity — within the family, synagogue, school and community.
- Add culturally sensitive materials to libraries and classrooms.
- Encourage others to learn and use positive adoption language.
- Talk about the meaning of being a minority, as Jews have been throughout history, and discuss what that experience means to individuals, families and communities.

Agencies such as the Ametz Adoption Program of Jewish Child Care Association, located in New York City, educate and support families before, during and after adopting and act as clearinghouses for ideas about Jewish rituals and inclusion in the Jewish community for families and Jewish professionals. ✿



# OF GONGS & GROGGERS: A Family Becomes Jewish, Chinese and (Really) American

by EVAN EISENBERG and SARA XING EISENBERG



**M**an walks into a kosher Chinese restaurant (which, given the crusty-yellow-mustard vintage of the joke, we may

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*Evan Eisenberg* is the author of *The Ecology of Eden* and *The Recording Angel*, an expanded edition of which will be issued this spring by Yale. His essays, humor and fiction have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic* and other periodicals. *Sara Xing Eisenberg* is a third-grader at PS 87 in Manhattan. They live in Manhattan with their wife and mother (respectively), *Freda Eisenberg*, an urban planner.

presume is Bernstein's on Essex). His waiter, whose features are Asian, addresses him in perfect Yiddish.

The customer waves the owner to his table. "How does it happen," he asks, "that the waiter speaks Yiddish?"

"Shh," says the owner. "He thinks he's learning English."

Raising a Chinese girl in a Jewish family, I sometimes feel guilty of a similar fraud.

*She thinks she's becoming American.*

When she gets wise, what will she say? "For this I left the Middle Kingdom, the world's most populous nation, the foredestined economic and military superpower of the 21st century — to be spat at by Mel Gibson fans?"

And I will hang my head. After all, any tribe that would accept me as a member is not one an infant in her right mind would fly 7,000 miles to join.

Perhaps, however, she is already wiser than the wisened-up child I fear. For when,



**IF I WERE AN INVESTOR** in literary futures, I would bet my all on the horde of Jewish-Chinese-American female novelists that is sure to hit the scene in a decade or so.

in flagrant violation of child labor laws, I asked her to write an essay on being Jewish, Chinese and American (not necessarily in that order), so that I would not have to do it myself, she obliged me with this: “I like being Chinese American Jewish because I like speaking the languages and it’s fun to have friends, American Jewish or Chinese American or Jewish Chinese, so you can share some of your same culture with them. Like my friend Xian does different things on Chinese New Year so we can share what we do different and the same. My friend Anna is American Jewish and we usually celebrate the Jewish holidays together and it’s lots of fun. ...”

It is fun, though it is also taxing, this project of mingling in one household two of the three great civilizations that have shaped the world we know and whose chains of tradition stretch largely unbroken from ancient times to the present. (Adopting a boy from India would complete the trinity, but the resulting cultural rijstafel might be too rich and spicy even for us.) Affinities between them exist, of course, which makes things easier: family, food and learning loom large in both. But differences are equally notable: while the Jews build fences around the dinner table, the Chinese pride themselves on eating everything, from jellyfish to crocodile. Yet even here a deep affinity may be glimpsed: though I don’t know the Mandarin for *bal*

*tashchit*, I do know that avoiding waste is one reason for this omnivory.

If American civilization (if that is the word) is not one of the ones in which we are trying to mingle, that is because we don’t have to try; it is the soup in which our kreplach and wonton inevitably float. Float, or sink, or bump against each other like funboats at Coney Island.

Shortly after crossing the Pacific and emerging from the *mikva*, our daughter officially received her Hebrew name, Sara Mazal. For most of her first six months she’d been known as Fu Xing, or Lucky Star. Lest striking the Fu from her English name — Sara Xing — impair her fortunes, we grafted it onto her Hebrew name. (Mazal means constellation, another piece of luck.) In a Zhang Yimou film we’d seen a baby passed through a huge, bagel-shaped steamed bun one month after his birth; accordingly, we had a baker friend bake a giant, bagel-shaped, braided challah and passed our baby through it at her naming ceremony. In the snapshot taken by my brother-in-law, she looks as bewildered as if she’d just crawled out of the birth canal. Chinese friends who attended said the steamed-bun ritual was news to them — some non-Han ethnic thing, maybe.

Eight years later the melding goes on, with home-baked meaning trumping authenticity. On Sukkot — which, thanks

to dovetailed lunar calendars, coincides with the Harvest Moon Festival — we eat mooncakes in the *sukkah*, gumming lotus-paste filling as the moon grins through the cedar boughs. On Purim we schlepp a huge Chinese gong to the *megillah* reading. Children of all ages line up to strike it. The noise it makes fills the great hall, drowning out not only Haman’s name but the noise that is meant to drown out Haman’s name, and hence, perhaps, defeating the purpose; but glorious fun nonetheless.

Fun, multicultural fun, can be hard work. Even by New York standards our daughter is overscheduled, with two afternoons of Hebrew school and one of Mandarin on top of cello, piano and judo. To be a French-Spanish-American family would have been easier — no *aleph-bet* to learn, no 50,000 characters.

Early on, Sara Xing had mixed feelings about being Chinese. Like most adopted children, she wanted to be as much like her parents as possible. Then a famous star of Kunqu opera came to live with us. As Sara Xing writes in her essay, “I watched how beautiful she danced and I loved the music, so I changed my mind and I wanted to be Chinese again.” Even so, in third grade she has decided to call herself Sara, mainly because she’s tired of hearing Xing mispronounced. (In case you’re wondering, it’s “Hsing” or “Shing,” depending on whether the speaker is a Litvak from Beijing or a Galitzianer from Shanghai.) When a friend’s mother offered to buy her an American Girl doll, she chose one with Chinese features but named her Zoe Beth.

She has not been back to China since we plucked her from the banks of the Yangtze. Nor has she been to *Eretz Yisrael*. Both these lacks we plan to remedy soon — or, at the very latest, when she’s twelve or thirteen. If I were an entrepreneur, I would start a travel agency called Wall to Wall Tours, offering packages (Western, Great) for *b’not mitzvah* and their families. If I were an investor in literary futures, I would bet my all on the horde of Jewish-Chinese-American female novelists that is sure to hit the scene in a decade or so. What tales of gongs and groggers, of mooncakes and moonstruck Jewish boys, will they have to tell? And what (I wonder with some trepidation) will they say of their doting, demanding, awkwardly world-straddling parents?

Never mind. Mr. Bernstein — may I call you Schmulke? — we don’t have to whisper. They *are* becoming Americans, in the richest sense of the word. ✨



# On Advocating For Endogamy

## [2 VIEWS]

AFTER SEVERAL DECADES of intermarriage, American Jewish families have become much more diverse than they once were. In light of this, we asked two experts whether the community has the right — morally, communally and even pragmatically — to send the message to parents and children that Jews must marry other Jews. In the long run, has the community's policy of promoting endogamy been effective in nourishing a strong Jewish family life? Has this approach come to repel the large numbers of Jews who are intermarried or who are the children of intermarried families? Is there a way that the community can emphasize endogamy without alienating large numbers of American Jews?



## Optimism for the Jewish Future

by RABBI KERRY M. OLITZKY

While I would have perhaps preferred a historical Jewish journey for our people that did not include intermarriage, especially at the rates we are now experiencing in North America and elsewhere, I recognize that the phenomenon is not new to us (or any community in this generation) and, in fact, is reflected—and celebrated—in various episodes in the Torah and throughout the *Tanach*, as well as in all stages of Jewish history.

As a rabbi, this phenomenon and the tension that it has created have always been a challenge to me. I think that my struggle is emblematic of those of my colleagues who likewise confront the reality of the American Jewish demographic every day. How can we celebrate and affirm a loving relationship between someone who is not Jewish with someone who is, while at the same time encourage those who have not yet made a decision to marry, to marry someone who is Jewish? In working with families comprised of a Jewish and a non-Jewish parent, I have come to realize that we have established a false dichotomy in our message to people, and especially to our children, about whom they seek out as a life partner. There are many among us who have placed the message to “marry Jewish” above all else. No other demands are being made, nor is anything required to back up such a directive. As part of this message, an endogamous marriage is seen as a success in the commu-

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## Cultivating Jewish Roots: Why American Judaism Should Advocate for Endogamy

by SYLVIA BARACK FISHMAN

Inclusiveness is a compelling concept for many American Jews. Outreach activists urge synagogues and Jewish institutions to lower or obliterate boundaries between Jews and non-Jews in intermarried households and to welcome non-Jews into Jewish congregational and communal life with or without conversion. Correctly asserting that intermarried households comprise an increasingly large proportion of American Jewish households, some argue that urging endogamy or conversion into Judaism will needlessly alienate intermarried parents—and their children—and thus further diminish an already challenged Jewish community. This policy advice, often passionately expressed, is articulated in the name of pluralism, tolerance, and the universalistic elements of biblical and historical Judaism.

Research unequivocally shows, however, that having one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent literally reverses the likelihood that children will identify as Jews and create Jewish homes of their own. When American Jews ages 25 to 49 have two Jewish parents, 72 percent are married to Jews. When they have one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent, 79 percent are married to non-Jews. Moreover, having a Jewish mother is critical. Although the great majority of affiliated intermarried Jews join the Reform movement, which recognizes Jewish fatherhood as equal to Jewish motherhood since the Patrilineal Descent Decision, a study of Jewish college

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# Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky

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Interfaith marriage is not the end of Jewish continuity. Not raising Jewish children is the end of Jewish continuity.



nity, while an exogamous marriage is seen as a failure. Yet, in most cases, both kinds of marriages are more reflective of local demographics than they are driven by any “successes” or “failures” in Jewish identity formation. And they certainly do not represent success or failure in child-rearing or Jewish education or the role modeling that emerges from Jewish communal leadership.

Moreover, the community has already tried advocating for Jewish endogamy and it hasn't worked. So what happened? Were our parents and grandparents not yelling loudly enough? Were they not sitting *shiva* dramatically enough? Those who advocate for a “return” to such a strategy never offer concrete programmatic plans as to how to do it, because they suggest it while sitting in an ivory tower rather than while working in the “trenches.” They use statistics to suggest causal relationships that are not provable while ignoring myriad other factors. They see reality through their own clouded lenses and then present it as “scientific fact” in order, for example, to discount a family's Jewish identity simply because the children eat Christmas dinner at the home of their non-Jewish grandparents.

If there are other core values in Judaism, especially those which are manifest in forms of ritual practice, why don't we advocate for them more strongly? Why don't we hear pulpit exhortations about Shabbat (especially if Ahad Ha'am is correct that “Shabbat has kept the Jewish people”)? Or about *kashrut* (since so many of its laws kept us separate from others throughout our Diaspora travels)? Instead, we are consumed by an emphasis on endogamy that seems to eclipse everything else that

is dear to us. As more Jews marry those who are not Jewish, such an emphasis tends to alienate an ever-growing number of people. Even more so, it sends a message of exclusion to their children and often to their parents—driving them away from the community, something that we cannot afford. And it causes us to miss opportunities for engagement.

While our communal obsession over interfaith marriage has driven countless children of intermarriage away from the organized community, it has not necessarily driven them away from Jewish *identity*. That may explain why the NJPS found that a huge percentage of Jewishly identifying college students hail from so-called interfaith families (45 percent), as compared to the much more oft-quoted NJPS statistic about interfaith families raising Jewish children (33 percent). To us it says that the potential spark of Judaism remains within, waiting to be rekindled. But these kids will never join the community if our ultimate measure of their identity continues to hinge on whom they marry (or whom their parents married). Marriage is not the end game. It reminds me of what has happened with the functional reality of *b'nai mitzvah*; they have become the end of a process of Jewish education rather than the beginning. Similarly, an emphasis on in-marriage, if it is to come, should organically evolve at the end of a process of adopting Jewish personal practice rather than at its beginning through communal proclamations.

Our emphasis should be on what it takes to create a Jewish household and raise Jewish children, or on what it takes to live a Jewish life, irrespective of the choices we have made with regard to a

partner. After all, interfaith marriage is not the end of Jewish continuity. Not raising Jewish children is the end of Jewish continuity.

There is no denying the fact that statistics do not paint an optimistic picture with regard to the Jewish future and the results of interfaith relationships. But I refuse to allow the past to determine what the future will look like. If we don't open our institutions and ourselves to interfaith families, then we will have no one to blame but ourselves. And we know that there are literally hundreds of thousands of intermarried families already rising to the task, with perhaps hundreds of thousands more who would join them if they were welcomed and encouraged. One of our pilot programs in Atlanta, thanks to the generous support of the Marcus Foundation, is called the Mothers Circle. It includes, among other things, an educational course for women from other backgrounds committed to raising Jewish children. It is a free program, a “thank you” from the Jewish community for accepting the challenge of creating a Jewish household. In speaking to these women, we know it is one of the most powerful statements of support they have ever felt from the Jewish community.

Finally, this conversation belongs in the midst of a relationship, not as a diatribe from the pulpit (where few people are there to listen in any case) nor in op-eds or propaganda pamphlets. I would welcome the opportunity to sit with colleagues, including those with whom I disagree, so that we might fashion a Jewish community where in-marriage is encouraged but not at the expense of those who have already intermarried. And similarly, I would like to imagine that we might work together toward the creation of a community where those who have intermarried are welcomed without judgment or distinction. I pray that the day may come where in the midst of such a dialogue, our leaders might be able to echo the words of the Talmud and declare, “*Elu v'elu . . . both are for the sake of Heaven.*” 🌸



# Sylvia Barack Fishman

*continued from page 9*

freshmen with only one Jewish parent showed that 40 percent of students who grew up with a Jewish mother considered themselves to be Jewish, while only 15 percent of those with a Jewish father considered themselves to be Jewish.

Children growing up in households with mixed religious traditions are strikingly less likely to identify as Jews because Christian and Jewish holiday and life cycle celebrations are celebrated side by side: December brings both Christmas trees and Chanuka candles, April brings Easter dinners and Passover Seders. The 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) showed that intermarried families who say they are raising Jewish children have almost identical rates of Jewish behaviors and affiliations, as measured by the NJPS, as those saying they are raising children in two religions. Dual religion households, however, have more Christian observances, and they are more likely to attend church and to send children to both church schools and Jewish Sunday schools or supplementary religious schools than those defining themselves as raising Jewish children. Families with mixed religious celebrations are not environments that succeed at raising Jewish children.

Inclusiveness advocates counter statistical data and systematically collected interview data with anecdotal evidence, such as essay contests or email surveys they have conducted among families that subscribe to their specialized chat groups. They quote stories of warm connections with Judaism forged by outreach programs. They suggest that Christian celebrations in intermarried households do not necessarily interfere with Jewish identity, and they accuse those who worry about mixed messages as lacking confidence in Judaism as a product.

Religious identification is like the marketplace, they suggest. If Judaism is sufficiently attractive and compelling, Judaism will win a bigger market share even in households where Christianity gets equal billing. They assert that if Judaism is not winning out in these households, the Jewish community is failing in marketing Judaism to this potential population. Indeed, some suggest that the marketing failure is due to a deficit of Jewish commu-

nal inclusiveness for interfaith families.

The marketing analogy is familiar but misleading, because potential “customers” for religion are not choosing between “superior” or “inferior” products, where a superior product will naturally rise to the top and claim an increasingly large market share. The personal attractiveness of particular ethno-religious lifestyles is dependent on many factors, including social networks, family background, education, activities and experiences, not on the innate superiority of one religion over another.

Ecological or agricultural models are more useful than marketing models in thinking about religious choices in an open society. History shows repeatedly that connections to a minority religion must be nurtured in order for that religious group to transmit its culture to the next generation. The cultivation of a minority religion is enhanced by (1) creating conditions that nurture that religion and by (2) maintaining a certain number of boundaries. Gardeners often create a specific environment for particular plants to thrive. They know that if current conditions favor another species and if boundaries are not in place, the desired plant can falter and become an endangered species.

In New England, for example, the acid soil favors acid-loving plants. Gardeners who want diversity in their plantings, including green grass and the many other plants that cannot tolerate acidic soil, must apply lime frequently. Similarly, along New England waterways, brown cattails are increasingly pushed out by plants with tall purple spires called loosestrife, because loosestrife is a pervasive plant that has an easier time of multiplying. Ecologists are willing to intervene to protect endangered species like cattails, precisely because they believe that diversity is precious.

Similarly, religious diversity is pre-



**Families with mixed religious celebrations are not environments that succeed at raising Jewish children.**

cious, but all recent systematic research shows that it thrives only with cultivation. Jewish culture is most effectively transmitted under certain conditions, including: (1) having two Jewish parents, especially having a Jewish mother; (2) having Jewish social networks, such as neighborhood and friendship groups, during the teen years; (3) receiving formal (classroom) Jewish education during both elementary and high school years; (4) growing up in a family that includes regular involvement with Jewish religious rituals and cultural celebrations, and does not include the celebration of any other religion. We can call them the three Ps—Parents, Peer group, and Pedagogy.

Nurturing Jewish cultural transmission requires effort, because American Jews are a tiny minority, 2.5 percent, among a large Christian majority, 84 percent. Despite the attractiveness of Robert Frost’s poem, “something there is that doesn’t love a fence,” many living things, including minority religious groups, require interventions and yes, even some fences. Without boundaries, minority groups, like cattails along the water, can easily be overrun by the Christian largest common denominator.

Today, American Jewish leaders and religious and communal institutions are pressured to abandon advocacy for the creation of unambiguously Jewish homes. To some extent, communal norms have already changed in the direction of an unthinking espousal of inclusiveness as the highest goal. American Jewish denominations and movements will best succeed in their effort to transmit their living heritage by taking the countercultural stand of advocating for in-marriages whenever possible, conversion into Judaism where intermarriage has taken place, and exclusively Jewish religious traditions in homes where the goal is the raising of Jewish children. 🌸

# Coping With the Pressures of Infertility

by RABBI ELLIOT N. DORFF

**WE MUST RECOGNIZE the infinite worth of each Jew, married or not and with children or not, a value imprinted in each of us when we were created in the image of God.**

A surprising number of biblical figures had fertility problems. Abraham and Sarah, Rebekah and Isaac, Rachel and Jacob, and Elkanah and Hannah (who ultimately bore the prophet Samuel) all had difficulties. No other culture's sacred scripture focuses so extensively on infertility.

What can we learn from this? First, that children are precious. Indeed, the Jewish tradition sees them as a great blessing. In part that is because of their inherent value as human life, but it is also because of the psychological growth and joy they bring to their parents. The very difficulty that so many couples have in conceiving and bearing children is itself a mark of how precious they are when they come.

Second, the biblical stories amply indicate that infertility causes immense tensions in marriage. Many infertile couples begin to question who they are individually and what their future together holds. Worse, many couples seeking to become pregnant feel the equivalent of a final examination each month, and, if they are having difficulties conceiving, they will fail many of those examinations.

In our own time, Jews are especially troubled by this problem not because of Jewish genetic diseases, but rather because we have been duped by the American ideology that makes *work* the fundamental source of one's identity and pride. That leads Americans to sleep less and work more hours than any other nation on earth. It also inevitably takes a major toll on family life.

Part of that toll is in the very attempt to have children in the first place. While there are many factors that can cause infertility, age is the primary one. Physicians maintain that the optimal age for both men and women to procreate is 22. We human beings are designed to have children in our late teens and our early twenties. This ability continues unabated until age 27, but

from 27 to 35 a higher percentage of couples encounter problems with infertility than their younger contemporaries. Those problems become even more prevalent in the 35 to 40 age group.

It is good that Jews value education and seek to excel in their professional lives. For reproduction, though, the unfortunate result is that Jews postpone marriage and procreation. Rabbis routinely report that most young couples who ask them to officiate at their wedding these days are in their late twenties or early thirties. That means, however, that if they can have children, they will probably have only one or two, and there is a 30 percent chance, up to age 35, that they will have trouble having children altogether. Infertility, it should be noted, is not just a women's problem: 40 percent of infertile couples are infertile due to a problem in the woman; 40 percent are infertile to a problem in the man; 10 percent are infertile due to a problem in both members of the couple; and in 10 percent doctors cannot determine what is wrong ("undiagnosed").

Jews, who have had a virtual love affair with medicine for the last 2,000 years, trust that whenever they want to bear children, medicine will enable them to do so. While infertility specialists have made great strides in making it possible for many couples to bear children, they cannot do that for everyone, and the younger the couple is, the greater the chance that the new techniques will work.

Because infertility is a great source of pain for the couples involved and a demographic quandary for the Jewish people, we as a community must work to address this problem. First, in a proactive mode, teenagers need to be encouraged to choose colleges where there are many Jews — not just so that they might take a course in Jewish studies or attend a service or holiday celebration, but to increase their chances of meeting a Jewish mate. We also must communicate that it is not too early to look for a spouse while in college, and if one finds one, it is not too early to marry and begin to have children in graduate school.

Second, those of us beyond childbearing

years must "put our money where our mouths are." That is, we must help to provide day-care arrangements and tuition aid for Jewish day schools, supplementary schools and camps. Here the Talmud's insistence that grandparents have the same duty to provide a Jewish education for their grandchildren as parents do for their children is especially apt in our time. It is not a great favor when grandparents help with these costs; it is simply what our tradition expects them to do.

Third, we need to recognize that the emphasis on children in the Jewish tradition only exacerbates the problems of infertile Jewish couples. Not only do they suffer personally each time they see their contemporaries become pregnant or deal with their children, wishing that they could be in that stage of life as well; their own Jewish tradition seems to condemn them for not having children.

Here it is critical to note two things. First, like all obligations in Jewish law, the duty to procreate ceases to apply to those who cannot fulfill it through no fault of their own. Furthermore, adoption is an honored choice in the Jewish tradition that should be encouraged and supported. Finally, we must impress upon Jews that even if childbirth is not an option, there are other ways to contribute to the nourishment of the Jewish people. For example, the Talmud analogizes those who teach other people's children to those who give birth to them.

Second, we in the Jewish community must take steps to support and assist young adults who would love to get married and have children, but cannot. Communal activities and Internet sites like JDate can help, but so can parents who host intellectual, religious and social gatherings at their homes for their children and their friends and their friends' friends. In Los Angeles, the Salters and Wagners did just that in the 1980s, and many marriages came from the "S and W Good Company."

We also must recognize that many couples in our midst would love to have children, but cannot. That requires minimally that we must not badger couples without children with questions about when they are going to have them. We must instead try to be there for them emotionally as they struggle with this issue and support them in their efforts to have their own biological children or to adopt. Moreover, in our programming we must plan for couples who do not have children as well as for those who do. Our Jewish institutions should not be only for couples with children, for that group constitutes a diminishing percentage of our people. Instead, we must recognize the infinite worth of each Jew, married or not and with children or not, a value imprinted in each of us when we were created in the image of God. 🌸

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*Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff, Ph.D. is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles and author of Matters of Life and Death: A Jewish Approach to Modern Medical Ethics.*





# Towards an Open Community

by RABBI SHARON KLEINBAUM

Lesbian and gay Jewish spiritual communities are politically challenging to the mainstream of our society. They are also a moral challenge to the mainstream of our society's religious discourse. In a society that tries to ignore us and would prefer to exclude us, lesbian and gay synagogues are an increasingly visible and undeniable social and religious reality. In a society that does not recognize same-sex marriage, our couples marry. In a society that considers homosexuality a threat to traditional family values, our congregants are raising children, and raising them in one of the world's greatest religious traditions. In a religious culture that still debates and largely opposes the ordination of openly gay clergy, we count half a dozen out rabbis among our Congregation Beth Simchat Torah membership and have seen half a dozen more undertake training for a career in the rabbinate. In a spiritual landscape that has been largely divided up among the religious right, new-age searchers, and the prevailing secular culture, lesbian and gay synagogues represent a vital religious alternative, putting forward a thriving model based on the traditional values of organized, institutional religion. Finally, in the face of the religious right's vigorous efforts to co-opt and dictate the terms of the dialogue of organized religion in America, our communities are living proof that the spiritual resources of traditional religion are not the exclusive preserve of one particular segment of society or of one particular view of the nature of religion and religious life.

Scientific studies estimate that between

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**Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum** is Senior Rabbi at Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, the New York City synagogue serving the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Jewish community as well as its family and friends.

**THE FAMILIES of gay and lesbian couples in our congregation, young and old, men and women, are deeply committed to being part of the larger Jewish community.**

2 percent and 10 percent of the population is gay or lesbian. If those statistics are correct, that means of the world's 12,000,000 Jews, 240,000 to 1,200,000 are gay or lesbian. This doesn't mean, of course, that these people are living visible lives as gay men or lesbian women. It does mean that the reality just below the surface, and certainly becoming more visible, shows that a significant part of the Jewish community is gay or lesbian. If we then consider how many of these people have parents, siblings, children, aunts, uncles or cousins, it's not long before we see that the majority of the Jewish community has a relative, in some cases very close, who is gay or lesbian. The question for our community is, as always, how visible will the population be.

I have been the senior rabbi of Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, the New York City synagogue serving gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Jews — our friends and our families — for thirteen years. In that time I have officiated at dozens of religious wedding ceremonies for same sex couples. These couples do not receive the legal benefits that heterosexual couples receive, and yet they yearn for and are deeply affected by a Jewish religious wedding ceremony that unites them in a Jewish way. I officiated at a ceremony for a woman whose employer, instead of sending a gift and having an office party, fired her for participating in a Jewish gay wedding ceremony. I have officiated at a ceremony for which one partner's parents refused to come. In fact, six months in advance, her mother scheduled elective surgery to take place the week of the ceremony. I have officiated at funerals at which

a gay partner was not allowed to have a say in his partner's burial, erection of the stone or any of the details of *shiva* and mourning. These are all Jewish families. We have families in our community with children who are adopted, or have been conceived through alternative insemination, or are children of previous heterosexual marriages or from surrogacy.

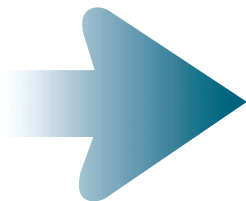
The Jewish family is radically diverse. And while some would have us believe that the Jewish family has looked the same from time immemorial, and that it is gays and lesbians who today are threatening the traditional family, let us simply remember what our ancestral family looked like in the *Tanach*: Polygamy was the norm.

The families of gay and lesbian couples in our congregation, young and old, men and women, are deeply committed to being part of the larger Jewish community. I have been accused by some of my colleagues of leading people into abomination and destroying the fabric of Jewish life. In fact, I believe that our families, families educated by our community and for whom this community presents opportunities for celebration and mourning, are strengthening the Jewish family. And when I officiate at a wedding ceremony for beautiful Jewish couples and see the pain on one of the bride's faces under the *chuppah* or the sadness in one of the groom's eyes because their parents are not at the ceremony, I feel a great sadness.

I believe with perfect faith that one day there will be a Jewish world in which our children's children may never know what it is to be rejected for being who they are. 🌸

# If You Build It, They Will Come

by CANTOR MARK S. HOROWITZ, DIANA GANGER and ERICA KAUFMAN



**WE MUST BE COGNIZANT of the varied relationships that can be formed in our Jewish meeting places. Family members need relationships in which they feel safe and respected just as children do.**

**H**undreds of years ago, the Jewish family unit was simultaneously simple and tightly knit. Communities were smaller, and there were fewer ideological spectrums to choose from. Today, the Jewish family is architecturally vast, spanning multiple ideologies and perspectives. The constitution of each individual family has become more and more unique. Families are no longer as large, and Jewish women delay having children. Such a shift or progression in what classifies a Jewish family makes creating an actual definition complex. This is why Jewish education, and early childhood education in particular, becomes essential. Families need a space to build relationships, a place from which to gain understanding and perspective.

In the past, a Jewish family would include several generations, an intimate web that often served as its own community. Knowledge was passed down from generation to generation. Judaism was an inherent tradition, omnipresent in many families. In contemporary America, the extended family is exactly that—in most cases, extended. After the Second World War, families moved from urban to suburban areas, and more recently they have begun to move from the east coast westward, creating a spatial gap between generations. Relatives are no longer in close proximity of each other, and the nuclear family is becoming more and more rare. As a result, families are more isolated now than ever. The Jewish community must reach out to engage them and provide healing, holy, covenantal spaces. The Jewish

community has the potential to become a family's core, or even its extended family. Judaism is a religion of community. If Jewish schools are employed correctly, this community will create families immersed in Jewish life.

We at the Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI) have spent the past few months visiting over 70 centers and examining Jewish early childhood education around the country, as well as in Israel. We've also been taking note of the different types of communities these schools are in, and how Jewish identity and community are present in these places.

Research shows that the beginning of family life is one of the most significant points of change for all involved, and holds the most potential for deepening identity and imparting critical values. We believe that families long for environments that offer support and genuine relationships, and an excellent Jewish early childhood center can offer such a space. Excellent Jewish early childhood centers need to be accepting of Jewish diversity, welcoming, supportive and loving. This will create a craving among Jewish families to continue within our system because once Judaism is genuinely experienced, the need for more becomes organic and systemic. In fact, our study and experiences show that families who have been welcomed into these environments continue their ties to Jewish culture.

It is as if, along the lines of the famous story, when a young woman approached Rabbi Hillel to ask him how to engage young Jewish families and ensure them a lasting and meaningful place in the Jewish community, he responded, "Relationships, my daughter... This is the entire answer. The rest is just commentary. Go and learn."

When the Jewish early childhood educational experience involves the

entire family, a system based on relationships is created. Educators have strong relationships with the children's families; collaboration takes place between the homes and the early childhood program; children's development and learning are enhanced; families become engaged in the life of the school and the community. When the school engages in living Jewish life within its walls in a real and genuine way (including the meaningful study of text), families can begin a journey to life-long Jewish living and learning. This principle is applicable to all institutions that come into contact with families of young children.

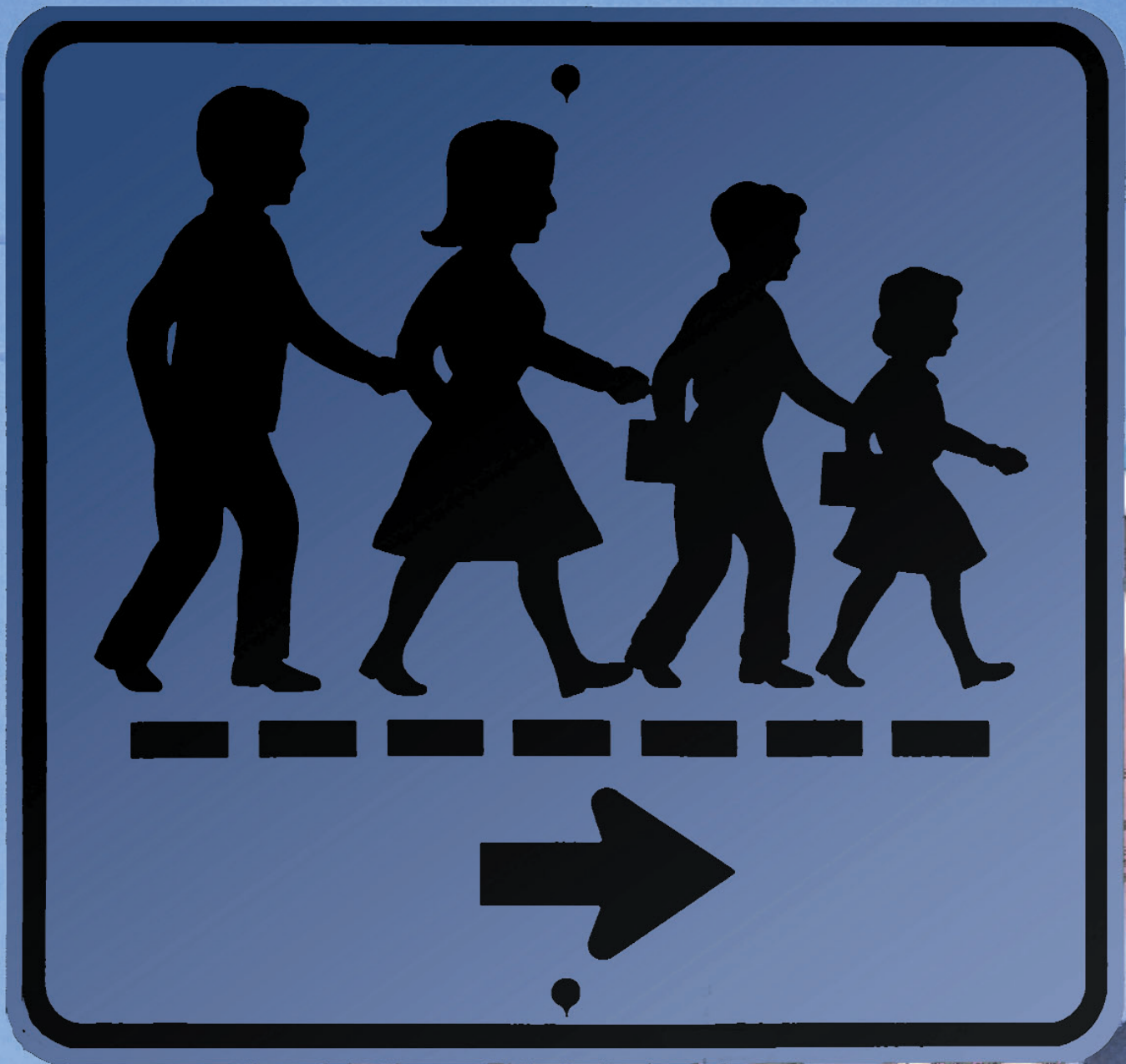
When an institution is open and democratic and invites a sincere exchange of ideas, it brings people closer. This allows for the opportunity to maintain a welcoming feeling for all who enter. This we refer to as collaboration and collegiality. It is characteristics like these that define excellence in Jewish early childhood education. JECEI plans to instill this sort of excellence in centers nationwide. Loris Malaguzzi, the founder and inspiration of the Reggio Emilia schools in Italy, wrote, "A rich integrated network of interpersonal relationships represents for children [families] a great potential for growth." We plan to take these theories of relationship building and bring them into communities in order to enrich the bonds between Jewish people, in and out of schools.

An example of this sort of excellence can be found in a teacher's home visit before the school year begins. The teacher takes pictures and brings them back to the classroom to strengthen the home-school connection. The teacher then follows up with an open house to share information while engaging the adults in a group setting. It is psychologically comforting for the child and reas-

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*Cantor Mark S. Horowitz, Diana Ganger and Erica Kaufman are Executive Director, Program Director and Executive Assistant, respectively, of Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (JECEI).*





suring to the parent when the staff understands where the child is coming from. As a result, parents are woven into the fabric of the school. Relationships are formed early on. Parents begin to feel welcome in the classroom, and trust between teachers and parents continues to blossom as time passes.

Likewise, in this sort of setting, as parents linger, the conversation flows. Parents support each other and normalize this shared experience. The opportunity to involve members of the staff, and even

social workers, arises. Social situations like these enhance the development of a community atmosphere in any school.

We must be cognizant of the varied relationships that can be formed in our Jewish meeting places. Family members need relationships in which they feel safe and respected just as children do. They want the best, not only in terms of the quality of education, but in the quality of interaction. They are searching for a community in which to belong. Parents will gravitate to those spaces where people

take the time and make a concerted effort to know them, to care about them and to form meaningful relationships that will continue to grow and develop. We must afford them this opportunity within the walls of our Jewish community, or they will certainly find it elsewhere. Building relationships is the cornerstone of our success, the path to true excellence. Ultimately, the mental, emotional and spiritual health of the family will transfer to the child, forming the start of a rich and meaningful Jewish life. 🌸



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Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation invites the submission of proposals for essays articulating the core ideas and values of a common Jewish narrative. The ideas and values should be authentically Jewish, capable of being held in common by Jews from across the denominational spectrum, and meaningful and compelling to the large numbers of Jews who are not actively engaged in Jewish life.

We would like to invite Jewish academics, rabbis and other professionals, as well as all interested lay persons, to submit proposals of no more than 2,000 words for 10,000- to 14,000-word final essays. Up to three proposals will be selected and the authors commissioned to write full essays. The deadline for submission of proposals is June 24, 2005.

For further information and submission guidelines, please go to [www.jewishlife.org](http://www.jewishlife.org).

## inaugural report

Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation is pleased to announce the publication of our Inaugural Ten Year Report, which includes information on our Foundation's history, mission and programs from 1994 to 2004. Please go to [www.jewishlife.org](http://www.jewishlife.org) to download the Report.

