



Changes in American Jewish Identities Since 1948: From Norms to Aesthetics

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Jews Within

In the sixty-one years that have elapsed since the founding of the State of Israel, profound changes have taken place in Israel, in American Jews' relationship with Israel, and in American Jews' identities. With regard to the latter, two major changes are among the most salient and influential. One is the enormous change in the integration of Jews into the larger American society. In contrast with just fifty years ago, today's Jews have far fewer Jewish spouses, friends, neighbors, and coworkers.

This increasing integration certainly reflects several positive developments, such as lower anti-Semitism, rising Jewish achievement, and greater acceptance of Jews by non-Jews. Not only do most young American Jews have loving relationships with non-Jews, but hundreds of thousands of non-Jews love Jews – a very common circumstance now, and a fairly rare occurrence just a few decades ago. At the same time, this integration has brought some adverse consequences for Judaism and Jewishness, including diminished attachment to a sense of Jewish kinship, to Jewish community, to Israel, and to Jewish peoplehood. The link between numerous social ties to other Jews and numerous affective ties to collective Jewish things (including Israel), however, is clear and undeniable.

Aside from integration, the other major development in the lives of American Jews and Judaism is the rise of the Jewish Sovereign Self, as Arnold Eisen and I argued in *The*

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Jew Within. As compared with the parents and predecessors in 1948, Jews today feel far more ready to assert whether, when, where, and how they will express their Jewish identities, shifting from normative constructions of being Jewish to aesthetic understandings. A normative approach assumes that being Jewishly involved is both good and right. Moreover, Jewish norms, although often in conflict, in effect declare that certain ways of

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being Jewish are better than others. Such norms can derive from God, parents, nostalgia, tradition, *halakha* (Jewish law), and/or belonging to the Jewish people. An aesthetic approach, in contrast, is less judgmental and directive. It sees being Jewish as a matter of beauty and culture, as a resource for meaning rather than as an ethical or moral imperative.

As late as the 1960s, engaged American Jews still maintained a consensus that being Jewish was a matter of obligations. One could violate the norms, but then one felt guilty about it. The world has changed and the Jewish world has changed. Fewer people today

regard being Jewish as a matter of norms and obligations.

The combination of increasing integration into American society on the one hand and decreasing emphasis on Judaism as a normative system on the other has had a powerful impact. The twin forces have led to substantial changes in what it means to be a Jew in America, as defined and experienced by the American Jewish public – what Charles Liebman referred to as the folk religion, as opposed to the elite religion, of American Jews. These developments have produced changes in Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform – the rubrics that continue to define a large number of American Jews, even in the post-denominational age in which we think we live.

The Major Denominational Labels

The major labels that American Jews use to define their ways of being Jewish remain Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, albeit with other possibilities – such as Reconstructionist and Jewish Renewal – and the growth in nondenominational and postdenominational tendencies as well. Demographically, the JCC (Jewish Community Center) Movement is, however, the largest institutionally based association in American Jewish life, with about a million Jewish members. It even outnumbers Reform Judaism, the largest denominational movement in American Judaism. But few observers think of the 200 JCCs as constituting a movement within Judaism, notwithstanding an impressive organizational range and complexity that embraces early childhood education, day camps, youth groups, continentally based sports

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events, adult Jewish education, cultural events, community-wide organizing, and engagement with Israel.

The denominational nomenclature is so prevalent in the United States in large part because American society defines being Jewish as primarily a religious option: it's Protestant-Catholic-Jew – and now Muslim, Hindu, and so on – rather than Italian, Irish, Hispanic, Jewish. In other regions of the Diaspora, where being Jewish is more overtly ethnic, denominational labels are far less compelling. It is worth reviewing each denominational camp.

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Growing Larger and Sliding Right

In broad strokes, Orthodoxy has been demographically growing. Its population, according to all standard sociological measures, score highest in terms of Jewish commitment, education, activity, and social ties. On average, on a person-for-person basis, Orthodox Jews undertake more hours of Jewish education, perform more rituals, give more charity, have more Jewish friends, more often visit and move to Israel, more readily claim to be Jewishly committed, and on and on.

At the same time, Orthodoxy has gradually become more separatist and sectarian with respect to other Jews. This 'Sliding to the Right' is partly due to a triumphalist conviction that only Orthodoxy will survive the assimilatory impact of the larger society, and in part a reaction to what Orthodoxy sees as failure and immorality in non-Orthodox versions of Judaism.

Deep within, most committed Orthodox

Jews see other systems as violating Torah-true, authentic understandings as to what Jews should do and what they should believe. They thus have far more of a problem with Conservative or Reform rabbis than with Conservative or Reform Jews. This attitude expresses itself in many ways such as the refusal of Orthodox rabbis to in any way lend legitimacy to non-Orthodox rabbis, even as many Orthodox bodies make a massive investment and commitment to reach and educate non-Orthodox Jews as individuals. Of the most traditional Orthodox figures many say, in effect, 'To non-Orthodox denominations, nothing; to non-Orthodox Jews as individuals, everything.'

Ethnic Decline and Conservative Shrinkage

The Conservative Movement has traditionally reflected the underlying ethnicity of Jewish America. Marshall Sklare referred to the Conservative synagogue as an 'ethnic church,' drawing its strength from the ties of family, community, and peoplehood – or ethnos – that once widely characterized American Jews. As Jewish ethnicity has weakened, with the decline of Jewish marriages, friendships, and neighborhoods, so too has Conservative Judaism. In the 1950s and 1960s it was the major affiliation of synagogue Jews, about two-thirds of whom belonged to Conservative congregations. Now it has declined to about one-third, and is rapidly shrinking demographically.

Yet Conservative Judaism still occupies a very critical place – ideologically, socially, and philosophically – between Orthodoxy and Reform. The movement offers a model of intensive Jewish living that is both modern and accessible to large numbers of American Jews. It boasts an institutional infrastructure that embraces congregations, day schools, camps, youth movements, Israel-based institutions, publications, and informal networks, to say nothing of its thousands of rabbis, cantors, educators, other professionals, and lay leaders. Those who care about a healthy American Jewry should worry about how to help the

Conservative Movement revive itself and become again a strong pillar of American Jewry.

Jews (and others) Choosing Judaism

The Reform Movement, for its part, has made a signal contribution to American Judaism by strongly advancing and developing the notion of 'Judaism by choice.' In effect, its leaders have taught that for Judaism to be compelling and sustainable, Jews must make their own choices, which are informed by teaching that is Judaically authentic and at the same time relevant to the contemporary, modern context.

This approach has attracted and sustained the involvement of hundreds of thousands of Jews, including many with minimal exposure to Jewish education and social networks. Under the leadership of Rabbi Eric Yoffie, at the helm of the highly regarded Union for Reform Judaism, the Movement has grown to 900+ congregations, many of which display an extraordinary level of energy and vibrancy. With four campuses in the U.S. and Israel, the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, under the extraordinary leadership of Rabbi David Ellenson, has been training scores of rabbis, cantors, educators and communal professionals annually for an expanding Movement with ongoing demands for its ranks of professional leadership.

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At the same time, perhaps half of the couples joining Reform temples have a partner who was not born Jewish, only a minority of whom have converted to Judaism. Because the Reform Movement attracts these people, it has a population of congregants that, on average, is not highly educated in Jewish terms, at least when compared with their Orthodox or Conservative counterparts in the aggregate.

Not coincidentally, the Reform Movement, its synagogues and rabbis, are often blamed for serving as the primary home for apparently 'weak' Jews in their midst. In response, we can do a thought experiment and assume that the Reform Movement decided to close shop. What would happen to all these Jews, particularly those who are intermarried, or had weak childhood education in Judaism, or both – as is often the case? Certainly some would join Conservative synagogues, but probably the vast majority would not be attached to Jewish life. And, notwithstanding the large number of mixed-married and poorly educated Jews, over the years the Movement's official policies have placed more emphasis on ritual practice, Jewish learning, Zionism, prayer, and Hebrew, trends embodied and exemplified by its newly published siddur, *Mishkan T'filah*.

Reform rabbis, educators, and lay leaders are thus engaging with and struggling to engage with their population, some of whom are among the most marginally involved in conventional Jewish life. This struggle is to their credit. Sometimes they succeed. On other occasions they fail, as is manifest in the large number of congregants who leave their temples upon the *bar/bat mitzvah* of their youngest child; perhaps about half do so. Even more worrying, perhaps, are the large numbers of children raised in Reform Judaism who marry out, more by far than the other two major Movements. But, with that said, Reform is now the largest Jewish denominational Movement in the United States, holding steady in recent years, as the number of non-Jewish Reform congregants grow, while the number of Jewish Reform congregants (be they born-Jews or converts to Judaism) slowly decline over the long haul.

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The Orthodox Struggle with Klal Yisrael

All three major religious Movements are standing at a crossroads. One major struggle within Orthodoxy is over whether Orthodoxy will remain part of the real *Am Yisrael* (Jewish People) in America – not the Jews they may want, but the Jews we actually have. That struggle translates into the question, 'Can one have common educational, intellectual, or communal relationships, not only with non-Orthodox Jews but also with non-Orthodox rabbis? How does one maintain dialogue and genuine collaboration with them?'

For many Orthodox, the break with Jewish law as they understand it by Conservative, Reform, and other non-Orthodox Movements is too high a barrier to overcome. The ordination of gay and lesbian rabbis is one issue. Also the seeming acceptance of intermarriage and the incorporation of large numbers of non-Jews into Jewish congregations deeply trouble Orthodox rabbis of all persuasions.

The high rates of intermarriage, patrilineal descent, and what they regard as illegitimate conversions mean to many Orthodox parents that their children might unknowingly marry what to them are non-Jews, albeit those who were raised and educated in Reform or Conservative congregations. Significant numbers of Orthodox Jews insulate their children not only from the effects of the larger society, but from intimate contact with non-Orthodox Jews.

Yet despite these tendencies, a number of notable efforts seek to promote more openness and engagement with all of Jewry. One finds an internal struggle at Yeshiva University over which way the institution will go under the leadership of Richard Joel as its president, either in the direction of greater sectarianism or greater engagement with all of Jewry. The newly established Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, headed by Rabbi Avi Weiss, is producing rabbis committed to the unity of the Jewish people.

Conservative Turnaround?

The population of the Conservative Movement is shrinking. Reflecting trends that date back to 1960 or so, there are probably twice as many Conservative senior citizens as there are Conservative children.

The newly emerging Conservative leadership – both the recently installed and the soon-to-be appointed – will be addressing the critical demographic challenges of shrinkage and aging. Any transition from great leaders of the older generation to younger persons of great talent raises hopes for change. With Arnold Eisen as the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), there is a widespread expectation of revival in the movement, notwithstanding that JTS is just one important element in the Conservative institutional array.

Among major Conservative institutions, JTS is not alone in the transition to a new and younger leadership. In the three major

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professional leadership positions of the Conservative Movement, the older generation is giving way to a new one. As with JTS, that has happened at the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and the Rabbinical Assembly, signaling a thoroughgoing and appropriate shift in culture, language, and ethos that only a new generation can bring.

The emerging generation of prominent Conservative rabbis, congregational leaders, thinkers, and others will need to reconfigure the Conservative Movement so that it regains the attachment of its erstwhile natural constituency. These are young-adult Jews who are socially progressive, religiously liberal and, at the same time, religiously and textually serious, and committed to high-quality spiritual experiences. In the recent past, the exodus of such individuals to Orthodoxy or to nonaffiliated communities has deprived Conservative congregations of their highest-caliber potential leadership.

“Who Lost BJ?”

Over the years, the Conservative Movement has been extraordinarily productive, and has created important endeavors – many of which, however, are no longer associated with it. It is American Judaism’s biggest exporter of home-grown talent, people, ideas and institutions. Conservatism just can’t seem to hold on to some of its finest creations.

The Reconstructionist Movement is but

one example of this tendency, as is the Havurah Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The American Jewish University – the former University of Judaism – is no longer Conservative, while its rabbinical school is still formally Conservative. The Jewish Museum is affiliated with the JTS, yet hardly anybody knows this. The well-known synagogue B’nai Yeshurun (‘BJ’) on New York’s Upper West Side was formerly Conservative but disaffiliated some years ago. This innovative congregation, with arguably the highest profile in North America, is one more formerly Conservative export. So too are the many independent *minyanim* (prayer groups) that have been started by people trained in the Conservative movement. These leaders were and are capable of being leaders in the Conservative Movement, yet have decided – at least for now – to build their communities outside the formal boundaries of Conservatism.

One might thus conclude that Jewish intensification often means leaving Conservative Judaism. The question then becomes how does one create a space where these people will have a sense of belonging? How can they remain within the Conservative orbit even if they operate with no formal affiliation with the usual Conservative institutions?

The Intermarriage Challenge

The extent of intermarriage and intergroup friendship is truly significant. About two-thirds of older American Jews have mostly Jewish friends. In contrast, two-thirds of the under-thirty generation have mostly non-Jewish friends. Most young Jews today who have a partner – married or not – are either married or romantically involved with non-Jews. I can say with relative certitude that none of my grandparents ever dated a non-Jew; and I can say with equal certitude that the vast majority of Jews my children’s ages have had intimate and loving relationships with non-Jews.

The Reform Movement, in the forefront of efforts to engage intermarried Jews in congregational life, is tackling the question of

how to keep the intermarried and their children attached to Judaism in an authentic way. This issue is particularly challenging as so many non-Jews with hardly any Jewish background come into Reform temples with their Jewish partners, many of whom themselves have weak Jewish backgrounds.

More and more, Reform temples consist of two contrasting sorts of congregants. One segment consists of growing numbers of well-groomed alumni of NFTY, religious schools, and URJ camps; the other comprises Jewish and non-Jewish congregants with minimal Jewish social and educational capital. The growth of both populations propels seemingly contradictory tendencies. For example, more alternative services have been springing up in Reform temples’ chapels and basements. At the same, the larger sanctuaries on *Shabbat* mornings are filled with one-*Shabbat*-a-year worshippers celebrating *bar* and *bat mitzvahs*.

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And a good fraction of the *bar/bat mitzvah* families will soon leave the congregation (a troubling event to say the least).

Both intermarried Jews and their non-Jewish spouses function as full members of Reform congregations, serve as temple board members, and officers, albeit with some limitations on the leadership opportunities available to the non-Jewish partner. Their needs and values shape temple practices, policies, and personnel, underscoring the

challenges posed by the presence of so many non-Jews and their intermarried spouses. For example, how does the rabbi clearly promote the conversion of non-Jewish spouses to Judaism without undermining the attempt to welcome mixed-married couples? Even more pointedly, how does one teach a confirmation class of adolescents that Jews should marry Jews when half the sixteen-year-olds are the children of Jewish and non-Jewish parents? While these dilemmas are most keenly felt in Reform temples, they emerge in Conservative and Reconstructionist congregations as well.

Losing the Intermarriage Battle?

No matter how well Reform congregations handle the intermarried families they reach, American Judaism as a whole is failing to reverse the deleterious impact of intermarriage on the Jewish population as a whole. As HUC-JIR sociologist Bruce Phillips reports, of those raised by two Jewish parents, almost 98% were raised as Jewish by religion; of those raised by one Jewish and one non-Jewish parents, the figure drops to 39%; and of those raised by a “half-Jew” and a non-Jew, that is with one of four Jewish grandparents, just 4% are raised in the Jewish religion.

On a proportionate basis, the number of Orthodox Jewish children is almost twice the number of Orthodox middle-aged people; while the number of non-Orthodox children falls to almost half of non-Orthodox middle-aged people. Of people with at least one Jewish parent who are now elderly, over 90% identify as Jews; of young adults with at least one Jewish parent, less than half identify as Jews. Because of intermarriage, we are in a sort of Jewish population meltdown with grave consequences for the future of Conservative, Reform, and other Judaic Movements outside of Orthodoxy.

Outreach and welcoming are certainly having an effect, bringing large numbers of intermarried Jews into our congregations. The true challenge lies not with the intermarried Jews we see, or we know, or are in our generally more committed families where, thankfully, many intermarried young people

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are making Jewish choices. The real problem lies with the intermarried we never see, the ones who live in areas of the country distant from congregations, the ones with only a single Jewish parent who begin their married lives with only a tentative tie to being Jewish. The two-generation outflow of such individuals – clearly visible in all our population studies – is truly sad and worrisome. Well over a million Americans today, perhaps two, report they had a Jewish parent or grandparent, yet identify as Christian or as otherwise non-Jewish. And, whatever their true number, the vast amount of recent intermarriage promises hundreds of thousands more in the coming years.

Multiple Modes of Jewish Engagement

All this should not ignore the many other ways outside of religious congregational life in which American Jews are Jewishly engaged. Many still live in such Jewish neighborhoods as New York’s Upper West Side, Squirrel Hill (Pittsburgh), and Silver Spring (Maryland), even as more move to such radically different locales as Las Vegas and other sparsely settled Jewish environs in the Mountain and Pacific regions. Jews in areas of greater residential concentration, largely in the Northeast and Midwest, not only have more Jewish neighbors; they also report more Jewish spouses, more Jewish friends, and more Jewish institutional ties. Jews in the older areas of settlement often still have an ethnic style; many manifest Jewishness through domestic political concerns or with regard to Israel.

On another plane, the JCC movement, as I mentioned earlier, is widely overlooked as a locus of Jewish community-building, to say nothing of its great strides in informal Jewish education. Furthermore, American Jews have a very rich cultural life in music, art, literature, scholarship, journalism, dance, museums of various kinds, and also now on the Internet.

Indeed, there are hundreds of millions of pages on the Internet on Jewish matters. Obviously, none existed fifteen years ago. There is a documented increase in Jewish involvement in social-justice activism, of which Ruth Messinger and the American Jewish World Service (AJWS) is the most visible phenomenon. There are more Jewish cultural activities than ever, be they concerts, musical events, drama, art exhibitions, or Jewish literary magazines. There is thus a plethora of Jewish life that is being led by people in their twenties and thirties outside the traditional network. And we cannot ignore the ongoing influence of more pervasive Movements and what we may call Jewish sensibilities, be they nearly forty years of Jewish feminism, or the more recently emerging Jewish spirituality Movement with its shaping of prayer, healing, and pastoral clergy such as by Rabbi Rachel Cowan (see page 54) and others.

Particularly exciting is the work of many of the younger generation – Jews in their twenties and thirties – who are involved in self-initiated acts of Jewish communal creation. The newly established independent *minyanim* and rabbi-led emergent spiritual communities is particularly impressive. About eighty of these have sprung up all over the United States, several of them outside the major Jewish centers. Some such communities – Hadar and IKAR come to mind – report upwards of three thousand people on their mailing lists, while other communities number as few as sixty or seventy participants (they avoid using such conventional words as members or congregations or officers).

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Extended Singlehood

Today, reflecting a world-wide pattern, most non-Orthodox Jewish adults under the age of forty are not married. In the recent past, Jews used to marry five to seven years after leaving university. This now happens after ten to fifteen years, if at all. There are also somewhat higher divorce rates than at mid-century. All this means that among non-Orthodox Jews there is a large percentage of unmarried people, almost always without children. In the past, childrearing has brought Jews to congregations and JCCs.

Orthodox American Jews that makes three powerful points:

- However measured, younger Jews are much less attached to Israel than older Jews.
- The intermarried are far less attached to Israel than the in-married or single Jews.
- Younger intermarried Jews are even more alienated from Israel than their older counterparts.

In fact, were it not for the statistical inclusion of the intermarried, overall rates of attachment to Israel among the non-Orthodox would be holding steady. This is not to

postmodern and un-American.

Taking Hold of Torah

If Judaism is a matter of norms, of right and wrong, one can teach one's children that Jewish involvement is right, and distancing from Jewish life is wrong. But if to be Jewish is a matter of aesthetics, then one can only teach that Jewish engagement is akin to the love of music and art. Such engagement can lend purpose and meaning and spiritual enrichment, but it is by no means a moral decision.

In fact, many Jews now see being Jewish the same way as loving music or art. It is a good thing to do, but for them it is not a matter of right or wrong. They have no sense that for a Jew to be Jewish is the right way to be, akin to one's patriotic duty as an American or other nationalities.

Such morally laden language and concepts, while Judaically authentic, are admittedly not for indifferent contemporary Jews. We need to develop a third way of speaking, modeling, and teaching, one that combines the normative and aesthetic approaches, that appeals to Jews so that they will find it meaningful to be obligated, or to quote the title of Arnold Eisen's book, that they engage in *Taking Hold of Torah*. We need both individual autonomy (taking hold) and a turn to Torah, in the broadest sense.

Rabbis and other leaders in all three Movements and beyond are working on blending the Judaism of meaning with the Judaism of obligation. They are struggling to bridge the longstanding gap between the Judaic mission to which they are committed and the reality of the American Jewish marketplace in which they work. To the extent that they succeed, the future of American Jews and Judaism will be assured. Fortunately and unfortunately, the diversity of American Jews and the inevitability and rapidity of change makes the task of bridging Judaic mission and Jewish market an ongoing and never-finished challenge. ■

Fortunately and unfortunately, the diversity of American Jews and the inevitability and rapidity of change makes the task of bridging Judaic mission and Jewish market an ongoing and never-finished challenge.

Since this younger generation is spending many more years unmarried and without children, the Jewish community must develop institutions they can use. Few will come to JCCs, synagogues, or federations as currently constructed. There they would find mainly married people, most of them married to Jews, and often with young children of their own, or middle-aged and older empty-nesters.

Strengthening the Jewish Collective & Ties to Israel

The decline in commitment of many Jews to the Jewish people, Israel, and the Jewish community is deeply worrying. Fewer Jews see themselves as obligated to support the collective interests of the Jewish people, to feel attached to Israel, or even to relate personally to the very notion of the Jewish people at all.

The interplay between intermarriage and declining ties with the Jewish collective can be seen in recently collected data among non-

say that intermarriage brings about alienation from Israel. It is to say that whatever brings about intermarriage, plus whatever impact intermarriage may have on its own, operates to depress attachment to Israel and, by extension, to the Jewish community and the Jewish People.

The interpersonal and intimate ties of Jews with non-Jews poses major questions as to how one can strengthen, preserve, or make meaningful the Jewish commitment to the collective, without seeming or being racist. How does one argue for and promote Jewish marriage and friendship in this world without appearing bigoted and insular? Causes such as Israel, building the Jewish community, or caring about Jews locally and all over the world demand, at least empirically, the establishment and nurturing of strong Jewish networks of friends and family. Yet, to many Jews, younger somewhat more than older, teaching to forge and pursue such in-group ties seems so un-

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Steven Cohen's essay raises important questions about the nature of Jewish identity in America today. He asserts that we need to create a blending of a Judaism of meaning and a Judaism of obligation, but he doesn't give us guidelines for how to proceed. In fact, most of his examples, including the discussion of the problems of synagogues within denominations, and the distance many contemporary non-Orthodox Jews feel from Israel, makes a successful blending seem unlikely. The few hopeful signs he describes – including the “self-initiated acts of Jewish communal creations” such as “independent *minyanim* and rabbi-led emergent spiritual communities” are not, in my view, so different from what is happening in many existing synagogues. They are, rather, just younger organizations that will inevitably grow into some of the same challenges that more mature synagogues face.

These questions became very real to me in my role as the senior rabbi of a large congregation where people do not know each other very well. We were beginning the process of one-on-one conversations through *Hineni*, our congregation-based community organizing effort that begins with congregants talking to each other about what really matters in their lives. We trained several congregants to initiate these conversations. The way it works is that a congregant would call another congregant whom he or she often didn't know and say: “Hi, I'm from Temple Emanuel, and I would love to meet with you for about a half an hour to get to know you and to hear from you concerns you have about the quality of life in our city that the congregation might become involved with. Don't worry. This isn't about money or anything like that... just about developing connections among congregants that will strengthen our community and maybe even give us some clarity about what we might do as a congregation around social justice. I'm happy to meet you in your office, in your home, at the temple, or at a Starbucks... let me know a time that would work for you.”

Most people responded affirmatively, but several did not. Their response: “I'm sorry. I'm too busy to meet with you.” Even the sacrifice of a little bit of time was too much to ask.

I must admit I was surprised. It raised the question of what institutions have a claim on us. If your alma mater calls, do you respond? Your child's school? Your neighborhood association? Your synagogue... does it have a claim on you?

I shared this story with my congregation during the High Holy Days and asked them: who or what has a claim on you? People answered without hesitation: children, spouses, parents, more family members, friends, people in crisis.

As the discussion unfolded, it emerged that the meaning people discovered in their lives actually has something to do with being in relationships that can make a claim on them, relationships that create obligation. In other words, congregants instinctively made the connection between meaning and obligation. Given that, our challenge as a Jewish community is to make this connection clear.

So the beginning of one answer to Steven Cohen's challenge is to create synagogues that help people understand that it is through the claims that emerge out of relationships that we create meaning. Our congregation-based community organizing is one model. Hundreds of these conversations have taken place over the past three years. People have shared with each other the concerns they have about the future of people they love. Out of those conversations have come connections and obligations and even some clarity about how we might work together to change the conditions that caused those concerns. That clarity, in turn, has led to coalitions with other faith communities in Los Angeles to work together on similar concerns. The conversations, the relationships, the obligation, and the work continue. All this adds meaning to people's lives, to our congregation, and to the larger Jewish community. It might also make a difference in the world. It is one important model of how to blend a Judaism of meaning with a Judaism of obligation, which, Steven Cohen concludes, is as an ongoing and never-finished challenge.

Dr. Bruce Phillips *Professor of Jewish
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Steven M. Cohen's piece is breathtaking in scope and poses a wide variety of policy and values questions to the synagogue community in general and the Reform Movement in particular. Given the depth and scope of the discussion of Steve's essay, I have chosen to explore in greater depth some issues that overlap with my own research. Steve paints a panoramic landscape of contemporary Jewish life with necessarily broad strokes. To better understand the implications some of the changes he describes, I was inspired to analyze some available studies in depth to measure with greater precision a few of the trends he discusses.

Cohen conjectures that “perhaps half of the couples joining Reform temples have a partner who was not born Jewish.” A partner not born Jewish includes both Jews-by-Choice, Christians, and secular non-Jews. The notion that the Reform Movement is being reshaped by intermarriage is widely held along with its openness to intermarried couples as an explanation for its continued growth. I have many times been told that there are synagogues in which intermarried couples outnumber in-married couples. Steven's article piqued my curiosity to investigate the extent to which this conventional wisdom is true. I began by turning to the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), which asked specifically about the denomination of the synagogue to which the respondent belonged. Of all respondents that reported belonging to a Reform synagogue, 14% were intermarried as compared with 6% of Conservative synagogue members and 3% of Orthodox and “traditional” synagogue members. Intermarried couples are most present in Reconstructionist synagogues where they constitute 22% of the member households.

Although the NJPS did not ask how long the household had been a member of the synagogue, we can assume that “couples joining Reform synagogues” refers to young couples. Because intermarriage is most prevalent among the youngest couples, it seems logical that intermarriage will be more prevalent among young couples who have joined the synagogue

recently than among older couples who have been members for longer. The data from the NJPS shows this to be the case. Among Reform synagogue members under 40, there are 150 in-married couples for every 100 intermarried couples (couples in which the spouse is a Jew-by-Choice are counted as in-marriages). Among 40 and older members of Reform synagogues, the in-married couples outnumber the intermarried couples by a factor of more than three-to-one. If Jews-by-Choice are added to non-Jewish spouses as persons of non-Jewish birth, the numbers get even closer. The trend is clear; more and more younger families in Reform congregations will include a non-Jewish spouse and Jews-by-Choice. Reform Judaism is not unique in this. Intermarried couples are less present in Conservative synagogues than in Reform, but they are nonetheless more prevalent among younger couples than older couples. Intermarried and conversionary couples are also changing the composition of Conservative con-

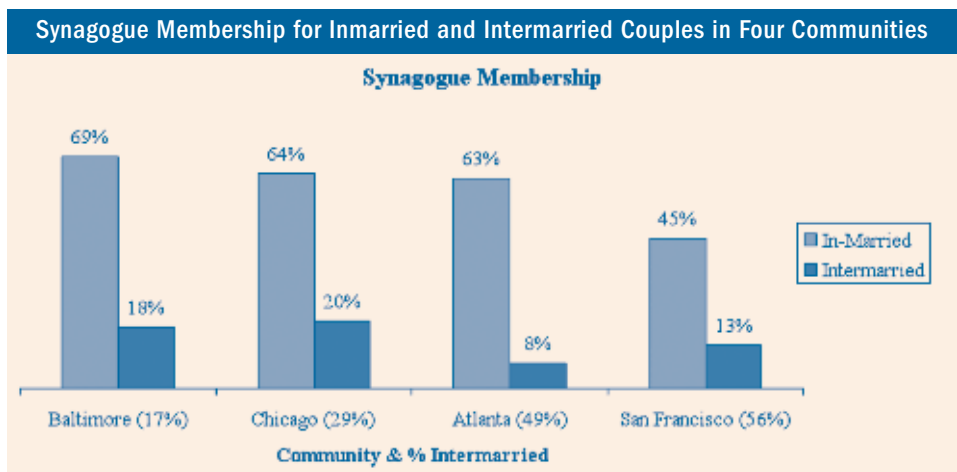
gregations, and they are more associated with Reconstructionist synagogues. Among Reconstructionist synagogues members under 40, intermarried couples slightly outnumber in-married couples. It is only in Orthodox congregations that intermarried couples are few and far between, and I suspect that the intermarried couples who reported an Orthodox synagogue membership were probably affiliated with Chabad. This is important for how the Reform Movement thinks of itself vis-a-vis Conservative Judaism. With regard to intermarried congregants, Conservative and Reform share many of the same dilemmas and concerns. This adds another dimension to the

growing gap Steve discusses between the Orthodox and other Jews.

Not all communities are equally impacted by intermarriage. This chart compares synagogue membership rates in four communities that have conducted demographic surveys since 1999: Baltimore, Chicago, Atlanta, and San Francisco. In Chicago, 29% of current couples are intermarried; almost double the percentage in Baltimore (17%), but the rates of synagogue membership for both in- and inter-married couples are almost the same. Half of all married couples in Atlanta and San Francisco are intermarried, and both these communities have seen their Jewish populations grow by 50% or more during the 1990s. In Atlanta only 8% of intermarried couples are affiliated with synagogues, as compared with 13% in San Francisco. Paradoxically, the rates are reversed for in-married couples in these two cities. Among in-married couples, synagogue membership is higher in Atlanta (63%) than in San Francisco

with the lower rates of synagogue membership among intermarried couples, but I highlight one that is of particular importance to synagogues, the religious composition of the couple. I have examined the impact of the religious composition of the intermarried couples on synagogue affiliation in both the NJPS and the San Francisco Jewish Population Survey, and the results are strikingly similar. Jews married to secular non-Jews are the most likely to join a synagogue (28% nationally and 33% in San Francisco), followed by Jews married to Christians (26% nationally and 20% in San Francisco). Only 1% of intermarried secular Jews in the NJPS and only 4% in San Francisco belonged to a synagogue. The figure is not much different for secular Jews married to other secular Jews (8%). Secular Jews (i.e. persons born Jewish who list "none" for their current religion) don't waste their money on religious institutions.

Dual Religion intermarriages (Jews married to Christians) in the NJPS outnumbered Judaic intermarriages (Jews married to secular non-Jews) by a factor of four-to-one in the NJPS, and similar proportions apply to local studies as well. Among members of Reform synagogues in the NJPS, Dual Religion couples outnumbered Judaic couples by a factor of three-to-one. Surprisingly, Dual Religion couples in the NJPS were almost as likely as Judaic couples to raise their children in Judaism (45% and 53% respectively). They do so for many reasons. Some are only nominally Christian, meaning that they classify themselves according to the denomination in which they were raised but do not identify strongly with it. Others are sympathetic to the minority status of Jews and agree that one more Jewish child will have a greater impact in the big picture than one more Christian child. Gender is also important; intermarried Jewish women are almost twice as likely as intermarried Jewish men to raise their children in Judaism. For synagogues this means that coping with intermarriage will involve dealing with non-Jewish spouses with various degrees of commitment to Christianity. This underscores Steve's conclusion that the increasing diversity of American Jews "makes the task of bridging Judaic mission and Jewish market an ongoing and never-finished challenge."



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(45%). Why is the synagogue gap between in- and inter-married couples smaller in San Francisco than in Atlanta? One possible explanation is that the San Francisco Jewish community has long funded outreach programs.

Three important conclusions can be derived from this comparison. First, intermarriage is higher in rapid growth communities. Second, outreach efforts appear to have paid off in San Francisco. Third, the great majority of intermarried couples in any community are not affiliated, which poses a growing challenge to synagogue sustainability as the number of intermarried couples continues to increase.

There are a number of factors associated