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Continuity Through Transformation: American Jews, Judaism, and Intermarriage

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# Continuity Through Transformation: American Jews, Judaism, and Intermarriage

By

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M.T.S., Harvard Divinity School, 2000

Advisor: Don Seeman, Ph.D.

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies
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Abstract

Continuity Through Transformation: American Jews, Judaism, and Intermarriage

By Jennifer Thompson

Drawing on five years of ethnographic fieldwork in Atlanta, Georgia, this study analyzes how couples in which one spouse is Jewish and the other is not Jewish understand their religious lives. American Jewish discourse over the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has framed intermarriage as a key indicator of Jews' assimilation to American society, and cast it as a threat to "Jewish continuity," meaning the continuation of Judaism as a distinct religious, cultural, and ethnic entity. My ethnographic data show that while American individualism is heavily influential in at least some intermarried Jews' lives, it functions in complex, subtle, and contradictory ways.

My intermarried informants governed their families' religious lives using discourses that I call "ethnic familialism" and "universalist individualism." Ethnic familialism draws on nostalgia, ethnicity, and biogenetic kinship. Universalist individualism emphasizes individuals' duty to rationally choose their religious beliefs and practices, and holds that all religions teach the same values. Both of these languages shaped my informants' religious lives, as did traditional gender roles from American and Jewish cultures, whether my informants embraced or consciously rejected them. Non-Jewish women married to Jewish men often experienced the paradoxical demand to take leadership roles within the family in educating children to be Jews. In doing so, they transformed traditional religious boundaries while seeing themselves as continuing those traditions. Lastly, Atlanta rabbis whom I interviewed also struggled to reconcile Jewish norms with lay people's and their own understandings of personal autonomy.

Although intermarriage discourse demonstrates a great deal of anxiety about the assimilation of intermarried Jews, I argue that this discourse is a proxy for a more painful and difficult debate about personal autonomy and Jewish peoplehood more generally. The tensions of individualism and communal participation and obligation are inevitable for American Jews whether they are endogamous or intermarried. By framing these discourses in the contexts of American morality and religion, as well as secularization theory, these tensions are revealed to be part of the fabric of contemporary American Jewish experience. This contextualization also helps to depict intermarried Jews and their families in a more humanistic way.

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**Continuity Through Transformation: American Jews, Judaism, and Intermarriage**

Jennifer Thompson

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# Chapter 1

## Secularization and the Transformation of Jewishness

*"I felt like I would be forever alienated from my kid if he was in the Savior mode and I wasn't."*

*"You do the traditions because that's what you are, not because of what you believe."*

*"How can someone say that my son is not Jewish? They don't know what's in his heart."*

Intermarried Jewish-Christian couples who raise their children as Jews contend with contradictions in their own understandings of Jewishness and their place in the American Jewish community. The intermarried couples whose experiences form the basis for this study grapple with complex issues of belonging, belief, religious practices, and autonomy, and they manage these issues in ways that correspond to their equally complex ideas about fairness and duty. This study uses participant-observation and interviews to examine the experiences and culture of people involved in intermarriage discourse, in order to understand conflicting interpretations of intermarriage and their significance. Using participant-observation in addition to interviews provides opportunities not only to hear how informants explain their feelings and thoughts, but also to observe their actions and silences. Over time, these observations gradually have revealed the cultural and personal contradictions in my informants' experiences of Jewishness, i.e., Jewish religion and culture, and how they manage these contradictions.

Much of the existing literature about Jewish intermarriage, preoccupied with the policy concerns of Jewish organizations, is blind to the experiences of actual intermarried couples and what really matters to them. But overlooking these dimensions disadvantages

both the intermarried couples whom the literature discusses and the Jewish communities whom the literature purports to serve by creating a distorted picture of their concerns and obscuring the contradictions of their experiences. Thus, this study explores what really matters to intermarried couples who choose Judaism to anchor their families' moral lives. Some of these couples practice only Judaism, and some combine it with Christianity.

As this study aims to represent people whose concerns are largely missing from the body of literature about them, it also situates them within historical and contemporary American Judaism and American religion more broadly. My informants contend with tensions of individualism and belonging in their experiences of religion. These tensions resonate with those experienced by white, middle-class, native-born Americans more generally (Madsen 2009). They also are the same tensions that "moderately affiliated" American Jews experience whether or not they are intermarried (Cohen and Eisen 2000). That my informants' experiences are similar to those of other white, middle-class, native-born Americans and to those of endogamous American Jews points to the significance of the contexts of American religion and American Judaism for my informants' experience of religion. It also renders even more striking the anxieties that many American Jews continue to feel about assimilating into American culture: they are at home in both American and Jewish cultures, but often feel somehow apart from them. The intermarried Jewish-Christian couples, and to a lesser extent rabbis and Jewish educators, who are the subject of this ethnography strive to understand "Jewishness" in a way that they perceive as authentic to both Jewish and American cultural values.

To manage conflicting values in their lives both practically and ideologically, these couples used strategies that I call "universalist individualism" and "ethnic

familialism." These strategies reflect intertwined Jewish and American cultural values that contradict and reinforce one another in important ways. I developed these models from broad themes that emerged in the experiences of my informants. In universalist individualism, religious commitments were chosen consciously, based in notions of fairness that emphasized the unity of humanity and the autonomy of individuals. On the other side, ethnic familialism describes commitments based in an inchoate but deeply felt sense of "what you are," a responsibility to the Jewish people that could not be clearly articulated but was nevertheless compelling. My informants drew upon both of these models at different times and in different contexts, though most of them relied more heavily on one or the other.

The ways in which my informants combine these priorities and commitments reflect strong themes in American and Jewish cultural and moral experience. One strand of American culture emphasizes an ideology of individualism that has been developed and refined in many different directions and contexts over the course of American history (Gorer 1964[1948]; Mead 1975[1942]; Bellah et al. 1985 and 1991; Meyer 1987). Madsen (2009) points out that individualism is complicated by both detachment and connection to communities in which moral experience is lived. Likewise, Margaret Mead (1975[1942]) points out that American individualism is countered by intense conformity. By highlighting the subjectivity of each person as the salient element of his or her experience, American individualisms also reinforce a modern Protestant Christian emphasis on belief or faith above practice as the central element of religious experience (Bellah 1991[1970]; Asad 1993; Casanova 1994).

Individualism factors into American Jews' experiences of Jewishness in different ways depending on their movement affiliations (Lazerwitz et al. 1998), but as Americans they understand their religious experience through the central idiom of individualism nonetheless (Madsen 2009). These individualistic strands of American culture conflict somewhat with vague, monolithic conceptions of "Jewish tradition" and "Jewish community" that are deployed in both academic and popular discourses about intermarriage within American Jewish communities and media. I discovered no consensus on precise definitions for either of these concepts among my informants, but these terms are used in discourses about intermarriage as if they are universally understood. My intermarried informants often felt that "Jewish tradition" and "Jewish community" were concrete entities that had the power to sanction them as good or bad Jews. But my informants often did not realize that these conceptions of "Jewish tradition" and "Jewish community" deny the conflict and variety in contemporary and historical Jewish experience, and discourses that invoke these terms bank on these terms' power to encourage conformity to the norms that they imply.

Yet this monolithic tradition continues to be invoked as a rhetorical bulwark against Jews' assimilation to American culture. Jewish social and economic success in America since the mid-20$^{th}$ century has occasioned particular anxiety about assimilation. Jews may now choose their professional, social, and academic endeavors without external limits, but without these limits, worried voices in American Jewish discourses say, there is nothing more than personal choice to bind Jews to one another. This anxiety was exemplified in an October 30, 2009 exchange published in *The Jewish Daily Forward*, a leading American Jewish newspaper for over a century. In the *Forward*,

Adam Bronfman, managing director of the Samuel Bronfman Foundation, whose Web site proclaims that it "seeks to inspire a renaissance of Jewish life," writes that in contemporary America, intermarriage no longer signifies a Jew's attempt to assimilate. Rather, he argues, intermarriage is the result of taking full part in a multicultural society. Jack Wertheimer, a professor of American Jewish history at the Conservative Movement's Jewish Theological Seminary, strongly disagrees with Bronfman in the *Forward*. "Jews of all ages are choosing to inter-date," writes Wertheimer, insisting that blame for assimilation be placed where it is due. Jews actively choose intermarriage, he argues, because they are influenced by social norms that privilege "individual gratification" over "the ties binding people together." He hopes that Jews will completely immerse themselves in Jewish community and Jewish life, adding that, "[a]s with all choices, that means embracing some things and forsaking others." Wertheimer thus redefines personal choice, saying that Jews can choose to resist assimilation by focusing their energy within the Jewish community.

Intermarried Jews are often portrayed in these discourses as prime examples of Jews who have chosen to break their ties to other Jews. In American Jewish discourses about intermarriage, the use of "Jewish tradition" and "Jewish community" as monolithic concepts gives a sense that assimilation is easy to identify. But Bronfman suggests in his exchange with Wertheimer that the Jews whom Wertheimer might regard as assimilated are actually practicing a different kind of Judaism. This different Jewish practice exists in part because these "assimilated" Jews have never had access to the kind of active, vibrant Jewish community that Bronfman says Wertheimer assumes is normative. It also exists, in part, because many Jews reject "traditional Jewish institutions" because they find them

unsatisfactory, Bronfman says. Thus, he suggests, intermarriage may not reveal assimilation in the sense of purposeful rejection of Judaism or the Jewish people. Rather, it reflects the individual Jew's relationship to his or her Jewish background as well as to the wider American society in which he or she grew up.

My ethnography reveals that intermarried Jews' feelings about assimilation and Jewishness are indeed complex. Where many of my non-Jewish intermarried informants feel that the differences between themselves and their spouses are slight and insignificant, the Jewish spouses often feel that their differences are deep, substantial, and hard to explain. My informants' experiences suggest that for them, assimilation and Jewishness are both partial and ambivalent.

The multiple, overlapping communities to which my informants belong also struggle with the meanings of Jewishness. Their conflicting understandings of it are rooted in broad sociological and historical changes affecting Jews since the beginning of modernity and culminating in the conflict of individualism, often rendered as assimilation, and peoplehood. Jewish religious thinkers have given deep consideration to the role of individuals' relationship to God as well as to the Jewish people's relationship to God—for example, the "Lonely Man of Faith" described by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1965)—but in discourses on intermarriage, these complex understandings of the relationships of people to God and to one another have been flattened into a debate about assimilated individual Jews and the Jewish community.

As my intermarried informants integrate Jewish religious practices and traditions with American individualism in their lives, these discourses on intermarriage seem oblivious to the realities of the lives of the people about whom they ostensibly debate.

While most of my intermarried informants raise their children as Jews, which they see as their commitment to continuing Jewishness, the American Jewish community disagrees about the status of these couples and their children in the community. Because the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox movements of Judaism, to which many but not all American Jews belong, strongly disagree over fundamental matters such as who is a Jew and the nature of Jewish legal authority, they are unable to agree about the circumstances under which intermarried couples should be accepted in the Jewish community. This stalemate points out the futility of the terms "Jewish community" and "Jewish tradition" in these discourses: because these movements do not fully agree about what Jewishness is, they are also unable to agree on the significance of intermarriage for Jewishness.

**An ethnography of American Jewishness**

Over the course of five years, I conducted structured and semi-structured interviews with more than 50 Jews and non-Jews touched by intermarriage in the Atlanta area. I also did participant-observation at Jewish-sponsored outreach events. My entry into the field of study of intermarriage began with my employment in Atlanta from 2003–2005 as an interviewer for a sociological study on intermarriage, sponsored by the Susan and David Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies (now the National Center for Jewish Policy Studies). The study sought to understand the communication between intermarried couples and American Jewish community organizations. Using a series of questions given to me by the principal investigators, I conducted 36 individual interviews, each lasting between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours, with intermarried Jews and their spouses. In these interviews, informants described the religious aspects of their

upbringing, their experiences with rabbis and synagogues, how they raised or would raise their children, sources of tension in their marriages and their ways of resolving it. Informants, particularly the non-Jewish wives, often told me that they were happy that this study was being done and that they felt that they had much to contribute to the Jewish community if it would accept them.

While the informants appreciated the study, I found that the questions on my interview schedule sometimes simply did not make sense to them. Some of the informants responded to questions about their needs as intermarried couples by saying that they only wanted to feel welcome in Jewish organizations and they hoped for educational opportunities that were free of judgment or pressure to convert. But many of them saw this question as strange: why would their needs differ from anyone else's? Some of the men would answer the question in a sarcastically literal way, saying that their needs were food, water, shelter, and clothing. Outside of the context of the interview, I also sometimes observed intense emotional interactions between my informants and their children, situations that were clearly the result of raw feelings stirred up by our discussion of their experiences of intermarriage. The study eventually concluded that Jewish organizations should embrace and welcome intermarried couples, an outcome with which my intermarried informants would undoubtedly be very happy (Dashefsky and Heller 2008).

But even as this study did a fine job of learning about the experiences of intermarried couples for the purposes of Jewish communal organizations' needs, I felt that a missing dimension was how the study's informants experienced Jewishness. In a similar vein, academic literature on intermarriage demonstrate a preoccupation with the

ways in which intermarried Jews and their families differed from endogamous Jews. Endogamous Jews resist, and my intermarried informants conform to, trends in modern industrial societies in which choice of spouse is no longer governed by religious differences, social class origin, or parental influence. In general, the more important factors in choices of spouse are similarity in educational achievement and cultural convergence across religious groups in "attitudes about marriage, fertility, child rearing, and sexual matters" (Kalmijn 1991, 798; see also Chaves 1994:767–78). For the purposes of planning and assessing Jewish communal programming, fundraising, expenditures, and leadership needs, this focus on differences between endogamous and intermarried Jews may be helpful. But emphasizing the differences between intermarried and endogamous Jews hides the important similarities that come from their shared cultural contexts. It also overlooks the idiosyncratic ways in which intermarried Jews transform Judaism to fit the circumstances of their lives. Focusing only on differences hinders our ability to understand the feelings and ideas that shape intermarried couples' religious lives.

According to a study of the Atlanta Jewish population in 2006 commissioned by the Atlanta Jewish Federation, substantial portions of the population that includes my informants agreed that it was "very important" to be Jewish. Less substantial portions thought that it was "very important" to be connected to the Atlanta Jewish community, which may be reflected in Atlanta's relatively low rate of congregational membership (Ukeles Associates 2007, 70–71, 78).[1] One might read these figures as evidence that my informants are individualistic in their Jewishness. Yet of the Atlanta intermarried

[1] Atlanta's Jewish community is "relatively affluent" in the areas in which I did my fieldwork. Slightly less than half of the households having annual incomes of at least $100,000, though a quarter of the households were not comfortable financially (Ukeles Associates 2007, 68, 76). The community is also cosmopolitan and well educated.

households with children, 39% are raising them Jewish only, and 15% Jewish and "something else." This choice seems striking, since raising children in only Christianity might be an easier task in Atlanta, given its relatively large population of evangelical Protestants and megachurches.[2] However, according to many of my informants, the Southern setting makes them more aware of their Jewishness: one Jewish woman who had grown up in the South told me that in high school, she regularly found notes in her locker informing her that she was bound for Hell because she was Jewish. A Christian woman married to a Jewish man, both of them from the Northeast, said that they had made a point of joining a synagogue in Atlanta because of the pressure that their children's evangelical Christian friends put on them to attend their church. While they would not have felt such urgency about synagogue membership back in New York, she said, in Atlanta they felt that they needed to stand their ground and provide their children with an appropriate religious community.

Many of these intermarried couples are raising their children in Judaism not as members of Jewish congregations but with the help of other organizations like the Mothers Circle or Pathways, new groups that serve intermarried couples specifically without making demands on them about religious practices or loyalty. These groups are part of a growing infrastructure for intermarried couples in Atlanta, with several full-time and part-time staff members devoted to helping engage intermarried couples in Atlanta Jewish organizations. In choosing to have Jewish families, my intermarried informants go against the grain not only of the Jewish community's understanding of Jewishness but also the practices of the majority of intermarried couples in America who do not raise

[2] In raising their children in Judaism, my informants also depart from the statistical likelihood that they would simply have no religion (Sherkat and Wilson 1995).

their children as Jews. They carefully construct arguments about why they are "doing" religion in the ways that they are, whether as a two-religion household or as a family with one religious identity, even without all family members' belonging to the religious community. They raise their children in both religions or only Judaism because these choices seem to them to be the best way to handle conflicting commitments to themselves, their families, and their senses of where they fit into a history of people and religious traditions, demonstrating a complex interplay of individualism and conformity, self and belonging.

My personal experiences with Judaism, Christianity and intermarriage sometimes allowed my informants and me to identify with each other. Some of my informants expressed discomfort with what they perceived to be "agendas" on the part of researchers, and worried that Jewish organizations would use information that they provided to condemn intermarriage or intermarried couples. My own status as an intermarried convert to Judaism helped some of my informants to feel less threatened by my academic interest in them. I was raised as a practicing Roman Catholic child of intermarried Roman Catholic and non-practicing Lutheran parents, and I converted to Judaism in the Conservative movement at age 20. The conversion process began early in my time as an undergraduate at Brandeis University and was finalized in New York after about a year and a half. Some years later, I married a non-Jewish atheist. We had agreed before we were married to raise our children in Judaism, with a shared sense that growing up with a religious tradition provides real, if indescribable, benefits. But unlike some of my informants, we did not struggle with issues like whether to belong to a synagogue and which one, whether to have a Christmas tree in the home, or who was responsible for

religious practices and labor. In my household, Jewishness was primarily situated in religious practices. However, for many of my Jewish informants, who were what some of my friends at Brandeis University had called “Bagel Jews,” Jewishness was more often rooted in cultural and familial traditions. Questions about belonging to religious institutions and combining rituals from Judaism and Christianity in the home posed significant challenges for them.

Gender also played an important role in my fieldwork and analysis. Because I am a woman with a non-Jewish background raising a Jewish child, it was easy for me to take part in settings among similar women. Much of my fieldwork took place with the Mothers Circle, so my informants are predominantly, but not limited to, non-Jewish women married to Jewish men and actively engaged in religious activities. This focus downplays many other possible configurations of intermarried couples: for example, Jewish women who married non-Jewish men and are raising Jewish children, or Jews of either gender who married non-Jews and are raising their children in no religion, or in a religion other than Judaism, or in Judaism but without guidance from Jewish educators or clergy. A study focused on people who fall into those categories might have different findings. Likewise, my analysis attends particularly closely to the questions that my informants’ experiences raise. Non-Jewish wives and mothers find themselves with the awkward responsibility of raising Jewish children for the sake of the Jewish people, while also being considered part of the “problem” of intermarriage. In contrast, most Jewish women who intermarry have the advantage that Jewish tradition recognizes their children as Jews. Particularly striking is the degree to which the non-Jewish women and some of the rabbis among my informants struggle with the same questions about Jewishness and

the boundaries of Jewish community, even though these groups' interests diverge in important ways.

My approach to ethnography is influenced by the anthropology of experience, which typically presents an extremely detailed account of the lives of informants in order to allow the reader to discern the most important themes in the informants' lives from the data presented (Wikan 1996; Kleinman 1997; Kleinman and Seeman 1999; Seeman 1999a, 1999b, 2003). Norwegian anthropologist Unni Wikan writes that her intention as an ethnographer is to "give a lived quality, an experiential sense" that depicts the "unpredictable and chaotic fashion" in which the sometimes contradictory elements of people's lives take place (1996,17). While the ethnographer inevitably does privilege his or her own analytic concerns, "experience-near" ethnography attempts to more evenly balance the power dynamics between ethnographer and informant, and between individuals and the potential essentialism of "culture" (Wikan 1990). This concern for the integrity of informants' representation inspires my ethnography among intermarried Jews.

Analysis starting from ethnographic observation of the experiences of contemporary intermarried Jews, lived in both Jewish and American cultural contexts, is missing from the existing literature, which often assumes the agenda of Jewish cultural survival from the perspective of Jewish institutions and emphasizes aggregate data from large groups of people (e.g., Phillips 1997). Sociologist Sylvia Barack Fishman's well-received *Double or Nothing: Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage* (2004), for example, is a qualitative study that seeks to illuminate issues such as "the impact of mixed marriage on Jews and Judaism." Fishman expresses concern that American openness to

Jews might lead to the dissolution of a distinctive Jewish culture in America. Fishman and I share interest in some themes and specific organizations, but we differ in many ways. For example, Fishman draws on data from focus groups, interviews and media studies and analyzes them in the context of literature on ethnicity and ethnic boundaries, Jewish identity, and contemporary Judaism. I focus on a detailed analysis of a small sample of informants in order to identify dimensions of the experience of intermarriage that elude focus groups and questionnaires, such as the systems of meaning in which intermarried Jews live, and how those cultural patterns shape the specificity of individual experience as they unfold amidst the multiple discourses about intermarriage. I also hold these analyses against the backdrop of American religion and morality. From a historian's perspective, Keren McGinity's *Still Jewish: A History of Women and Intermarriage in America* (2009) also analyzes for depth more than breadth. McGinity addresses similarities across endogamous and intermarried Jews by documenting the ways in which intermarried Jewish women continued to see themselves as Jews.

In attending first to the concerns of informants, dimensions of their understanding of Jewishness emerge beyond religious "meaning" in the sense of faith. My informants' lived experience is shaped by powerful feelings and habits that they cannot fully articulate and that they enact in sometimes self-contradictory ways. For example, if the Jewish community does not fully and unquestioningly accept Jewishly-identified children of intermarriage, what does it mean to my informants to create Jewish children whose Jewishness is contested? Why do intermarried Jews say they are responding to existential anxiety about the Jewish people's dying out by raising their children as Jews, and doing it in ways that have not been traditionally acceptable to the Jewish community—with non-

Jewish women, with little or no Jewish practice, and without regard for traditional definitions of Jewishness? When asked to articulate the meaning of these claims or their relationships to one another, my informants often resorted to platitudes or silence rather than fully realized introspection. "Meaning," as anthropologist Arthur Kleinman (1997) writes, "is understood as a cognitive response to the challenge of coherence" and "places greater value on 'knowing the world'…than on inhabiting, acting in, or wrestling with the world." I will argue that while meaning is a significant part of my informants' experience of Jewishness, there are other elements that they are unable to articulate but that remain extremely important for them. Moral experience, for my informants, comprises the claims of family, culture, religion and self. Thus, using ethnography, I intend to depict the contradictions that my informants inhabit and act upon, and to inject that complexity into the research on intermarriage and Judaism.

My fieldwork took place across several sites, over the course of five years. Atlanta, the primary setting of my fieldwork, is notable for its high rate of intermarriage, almost 70% for marriages made since 1990 (Ukeles Associates 2007). My intermarried informants are in the majority among their cohort, even though they are regarded as outsiders because of their intermarriage.

In January 2006, I spent three days at a conference sponsored by the Dovetail Institute for Interfaith Family Resources in Bethesda, Maryland, to learn about one influential approach to intermarried family life. This organization emphasizes that "there are no definitive answers to the questions facing interfaith families," as its publication, *Dovetail: A Journal By and For Jewish/Christian Families*, explains.

Between March 2006 and April 2008, I spent many Sunday mornings, and some Friday and Saturday nights, with the Mothers Circle in Atlanta, Georgia. The Mothers Circle is an educational support group for non-Jewish women raising Jewish children. The Mothers Circle began as a pilot program in the Atlanta Jewish community in the early 2000s and the national Jewish Outreach Institute spread it to 25 other U.S. cities, each of which uses its own local funding sources to pay Mothers Circle facilitators and coordinators. I also attended events sponsored by Pathways, an Atlanta Jewish community organization that does "outreach" to intermarried couples with events focused on Jewish holidays and free classes about Judaism. I met intermarried couples through these groups and events and spent time with them informally in their homes as well. Between August 2005 and June 2008, I conducted interviews, each of which lasted between half an hour and 1.5 hours, with 13 Atlanta Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative rabbis and Jewish educators. In October 2007, I spent two days at the Jewish Outreach Institute conference for Jewish educators from all over the United States who deal with intermarriage. By including the perspectives of rabbis and Jewish educators in my analysis, I was able to see that they struggled to integrate contradictory American and Jewish themes in their lives just as my intermarried informants did.

**Secularization and Jewish Distinctiveness**

Contemporary American Jewish debates about intermarriage embody a "continuity of conflicts" in modern Jewish history concerning the balance of individual autonomy, obligation to the Jewish people, and the authority of Jewish law (Lazerwitz et al. 1998). American Jews rallied against intermarriage as awareness of its increasing rate

over the course of the 20th century grew. The rate of intermarriage and the intensity of opposition to it has varied across time and space, however. Spanish and Portuguese Jewish immigrants to colonial America intermarried in large numbers. Later German Jewish immigrants to the United States, particularly in western and southern states, intermarried at a rate of approximately 33% (Fishberg 2006[1911], 203). But 19th and 20th century Eastern European Jewish immigrants had no such reputation for intermarriage, and this provided the primary historical backdrop for mid- and late 20th century discourses on intermarriage (Geffen 2009). Julius Drachsler's study of intermarriage in New York from 1908–1912 found an overall intermarriage rate among Jews of 1.17%. Drachsler noted that the rate varied depending on the particular Jewish community's country of origin and degree of assimilation. However, Jews' religion kept them from intermarriage with other groups, just as African Americans' "difference of color" prevented their intermarriage with whites (Drachsler 1920, 128–129). New York saw a slow increase over time in the rate of intermarriage, rising to about 8% by the 1950s and 1960s. In areas with sparser Jewish populations, such as Iowa, the rate in the same period may have been more than 50% (Sowell 1981, 94), though others place the intermarriage rate in both Iowa and Indiana closer to 20% (Geffen 2009). Nationwide intermarriage rates from 1980–1984 were reported at 38%; from 1985–1995, 43%; and by 2001, 47%, according to researchers behind the National Jewish Population Survey (Goodstein 2003).

A rise in the rate of intermarriage from as low as 1.17% in 1908 to 47% in 2001 demonstrated that over this period, some assumptions about the meaning of Jewishness and communal boundaries on which Jews had relied for generations were being shaken to

their core. Anxiety about assimilation, or the loss of Jewish distinctiveness, rose sharply along with the rate of intermarriage, prompting sociologist of American Judaism Marshall Sklare to ask American Jews in a 1964 *Commentary* article, "What do you stand for when you wish to remain separate?" A compelling answer to this question about why and how Jews should be separate from non-Jews was vital to any effort to curb intermarriage, Sklare argued, and yet participants in the debate avoided it. But the American Jewish community is largely unable to answer this question in a unified and coherent way, I will argue, because the categories and conditions of American culture, predicated on individualism and the notion of religion as belief, make it nearly impossible.

Contradictions between Jewish and American cultures that feature so prominently in my informants' experiences are rooted in the processes of secularization and modernization that took place over the course of the 17th through 19th centuries. Secularization and modernization changed many western Europeans' assumptions about Jewishness by separating religion from citizenship, offering Emancipation or full citizenship to Jews, and turning religion into a private, individual affair. José Casanova describes medieval Europe as having been organized by categories of "sacred" and "secular" and plagued by conflicts between spiritual and temporal rulers as they attempted to subsume both categories under their own rule. Under the medieval system, "everybody was a Christian" and a member of the church, with the exception of Jews and Muslims who lived separately (1994, 14–16).

Western European Jews had lived separately from Christian society in corporate communities that were governed according to Jewish law within Christian kingdoms.

Jewishness was woven into the fabric of these communities' inhabitants' lives. Under Christian rule, Jews experienced occupational, marital, educational, and residential restrictions as well as persecution for their resistance to conversion to Christianity, through the Inquisition, the Crusades, pogroms and show trials (Baron 1957; Katz 1998). But the process of secularization involved a transition from dualism within "this world" to a "separate spheres" model that limited religion to a circumscribed area (Casanova 1994, 14–16). Emancipation promised professional and social opportunities and freedoms, but it came at the cost of a cohesive Jewish community because it recognized Jews only as individuals (Endelman 1997, 19).

Modernization removed western European Christians and Jews from their overtly religious worlds by separating the category of religion from other areas of life, so that religion no longer served as a primary dividing line. This transition affected religion's authority in society and over individuals, destroying the holistic "sacred canopy" of premodern European societies that had united human experience under the framework of religion. The conception of religion as a separate sphere is itself a product of the process of secularization, a modern phenomenon involving differentiation, rationalization, pluralism and disenchantment. Secularization theory uses the model of European governments with state churches to understand how religion's position in the modern world has changed (Berger 1990[1967]; Lechner 1991; Casanova 1994, 20–25; Chaves 1994; Durkheim 1995[1912]; Yamane 1997; Gorski 2000; Weber 2002[1930], 1991[1922]). Judaism came to be categorized as a religion rather than the more holistic communal and individual experience that it had previously been. This separation of religion from other spheres of society allowed England, France, the United States, and

Germany to offer Jews citizenship because of their natural rights as individuals, relying on the development of political theory about the relationships of individuals to the state separate from religion. Examples of political theory in this vein include Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651), John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), and Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality (The Second Discourse)* (1755) and *The Social Contract* (1762). But this type of citizenship asked Jews to promise to regard themselves as individual citizens whose loyalty was only to the state and their fellow citizens, not to fellow Jews.

In 1806, intermarriage was a key topic in Napoleon's engagement with the Assembly of Jewish Notables and the Paris Sanhedrin over the question of how earnestly French Jews planned to participate as citizens in civil society and the French nation (Katz 1998[1973]). These French Jews hoped to preserve their distinctiveness while also hoping to be full citizens, so they attempted to satisfy Napoleon by saying that French law overrode any conflicting commands in Jewish law, and that French custom would shape Jews' behavior as well, they said. However, they were unable to endorse intermarriage, even though it would represent their unequivocal integration into and embrace of French society.[3] Jewish law only forbade intermarriage in certain cases, they claimed, and intermarriage did not void any Jew's Jewishness. Still, the sacred ritual of the Jewish wedding ceremony could only be properly appreciated and respected by Jews, they said, just as only Catholics could participate with integrity in a Catholic wedding ceremony. The Jewish Notables thus cast marriage as a religious, not civil, issue, so that intermarriage need not occur for full participation in French society. These claims about

[3] Count Molé, "Napoleon's Instructions to the Assembly of Jewish Notables (July 26, 1806)," and "The Assembly of Jewish Notables Answers to Napoleon," in Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz 1995,125–132.

sacredness and Jewish law placed the question of intermarriage in a new context. Jewish law, tradition, and experience actually made no room for intermarriage (Katz 1998[1973], 138–139, 156–157). The Jewish Notables were trying to merge two different worldviews, the traditional Jewish and the newly secular, in order to be good citizens while still trying to preserve Jewish distinctiveness.

European Jews continued to struggle to balance these concerns. In 1844, the Reform Assembly at Braunschweig recognized intermarriage between Jews and Christians, as long as state law allowed intermarried parents to bring up their children as Jews. This decision did not have immediate practical implications. Before the first World War, the absence of civil marriage in Russia, Austria, and a number of Middle Eastern countries prevented legal intermarriage for well over half of the world's Jewish population (Fishberg 2006[1911], 195). Since civil marriage did not exist at the time, such intermarriages could not take place. But the decision provoked strong reactions from Orthodox and some Reform Jews. The latter argued against intermarriage for a number of reasons, from disapproval of the ostentation of some upper-class Jews who had intermarried to the fear that Christian spouses would relentlessly pursue the conversion of Jewish spouses to Christianity. Other Reform Jews argued that intermarriage could facilitate Christians' acceptance of Jews (Levenson 1989). The issues present in the Jewish Notables' exchange with Napoleon continued to resonate for European Jews. As they struggled to resolve these issues, they were unable to fully satisfy the deepest assumptions and ideals of either side.

European Jews were relieved from having to fully work out their ideas about how they would fit into society as full citizens because their social integration lagged behind

their legal standing as citizens. Assimilation was one response to the lack of full integration in countries that were relatively tolerant of Jews, such as England. Some English Jews undertook "radical assimilation," leaving the Jewish community entirely, on a "largely secular and opportunistic" basis (Endelman 1990, 4). Elsewhere, social prejudices and religious divisions maintained barriers to Jews' full participation in civil society. Because of antisemitism, some Jews felt that they had to assimilate or convert to Christianity in order to take advantage of their new opportunities. Some Jews, such as the German philosopher Moses Mendelssohn and the Wissenschaft des Judentums school, attempted to overcome such anti-Semitism by demonstrating religious similarities between Judaism and Christianity. Some Jews argued for a neutral, strictly secular civil society that would elicit no conflict between citizens' religious and civic obligations—an idea that Yehudah Leib Gordon rendered as, "Be a man in the streets and a Jew at home" (Endelman 1997, 18; Dahlstrom 2006). Some Jews viewed Christian acceptance as undesirable, since it could, and sometimes did, lead to assimilation (Endelman 1990, 2; Katz 1998[1973]). The unevenness of Christian social tolerance helped Jews to maintain their distinctiveness as a community by maintaining their consciousness of their difference from non-Jewish society, even as they remained divided about the nature of Jewishness itself.

Modernization also institutionalized a growing cultural emphasis on autonomy and individual choice. The Protestant Reformation privileged the individual's relationship with God, and laid the path for people to take religious authority into their own hands through their reading and interpretation of the Bible (Asad 1993; Casanova 1994; Chaves

1994; Yamane 1997).[4] These Protestant ideas about what mattered most in religious experience—the "doctrine of justification by faith," "universal priesthood of all believers" and principle of "private judgment"—came to inform the modern western definition of religion itself, as well as the modern western idea of the individual (Bellah 1991[1970], 36–45; Cross and Livingston 2005a). Calvinist theology emphasized "inworldly" individualism, which translated into an individualistic economic and moral worldview that became "the spirit of capitalism" (Dumont 1982; Weber 2002[1930]). This individualistic worldview was especially important in American culture in its translation into opposition to regulation and authority generally. Because of ways in which Protestant Christian ideas inform some of the fundamental categories of modern western society, calling the historical processes that occurred over the 18th and later centuries "secularization" is misleading, because it suggests that political and civil society became neutral, free from particular religions as well as religion in general. Rather, it was more of a Protestantization, a reworking of Christianity's place in society rather than a removal of it from society, by privileging individualism and the idea of separate spheres of society (Asad 1993; Casanova 1994; Gorski 2000). In this respect, as many Jews recognized, becoming a neutral individual meant agreeing to live within a Christian worldview.

Jews' experience in the United States reflects this Christian-influenced environment in its guarantee of religious freedom, an idea rooted in the Protestant notion of belief as the most important part of religious experience. American government and

[4] Casanova suggests this when he says that the Protestant Reformation is understood to have been "destructive" for existing unity and authority of "*the*" church (1994, 21–22). Louis Dumont summarizes Luther's Protestantism as having "removed God from the world by rejecting the mediation institutionalized in the Catholic Church," and making God "accessible to individual consciousness through faith, love, and, to some extent, reason" (Dumont 1982, 20).

culture lacked the formal restrictions on Jews that European societies had. The few state governmental restrictions on Jews' eligibility to run for office by requiring religious tests were discarded by the first quarter of the 19th century (Gaustad and Schmidt 2002, chapter 6; Sarna 2004, 41ff). As a settler society, America lacked a deeply ingrained set of common social and religious prejudices and social hierarchy. While religious coercion did exist in early America and thereafter (see, e.g., Butler 1990), there was no deep-rooted common history of a state church. The sense of being a nation was always in the process of being built. Jews' affiliation with a Jewish community was a matter of choice, encouraged and enforced by social prejudice from Christians. Jews' consciousness of being different from Christian Americans was thus social and informal.

In this setting, American Jews were free to experiment individually or collectively, changing Jewish practice or abandoning it as they wished (Faber 1993). Many adjusted their practices and self-representations in an unsystematic way that responded to local conditions. For example, some synagogues mirrored Christian churches in seating patterns and decorum, so as not to appear foreign and uncivilized to their Christian neighbors (Jick 1976; Cohen 1984; Goldman 2000, 120; Sarna 2004, 18). These changes happened in tandem with Jews' pursuit of different kinds of economic opportunities that brought them to parts of the country without many other Jews. Immigration of Jews over many decades, from different places and traditions, led to diversity among Jews, their practices, and their ideas in America. Jews dedicated themselves to helping to make America an inclusive, tolerant society for the sake of their own success and integration into it (Dollinger 2000).

Freedom from government interference in religious matters and the relative lack of antisemitism inspired greater fear and harsher rhetoric about intermarriage among 19th-century American Jewish leaders than had been the case among 19th-century German Jewish leaders. American Reform Jewish leaders not only condemned intermarriage but also criticized Christianity, hoping that Christian spouses of Jews would convert to Judaism (Davis 1968, 179–182; Levenson 1989, 326, 331). Yet even though American Reform Jewish religious leaders officially opposed intermarriage, in practice their responses to it varied (Rose 2001, 136). In 1909, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the Reform rabbinate's organization, adopted a resolution that permitted Reform rabbis to handle intermarriage according to their individual consciences. For some years, the small number of Reform rabbis willing to officiate at intermarriages was sufficient to keep up with demand. Other Reform rabbis referred prospective intermarriers to them; Orthodox and Conservative rabbis occasionally complained about it; but the arrangement was generally convenient enough for all (Sklare 1970, 55).

Despite religious freedom, experimentation, and anti-intermarriage rhetoric, before the mid-20th century, many American Jews assumed that Jews would not intermarry. This had been a more or less reliable assumption for generations. Intermarriage between European Jews and Christians in the centuries before Emancipation had been uncommon. After Emancipation, intermarriage occurred perhaps more frequently, but was heavily dependent on local, external circumstances (Barron 1946; Levenson 1989; Melammed 1991; Lowenstein 2005). Before Emancipation, the existence of Jewish-Christian relationships is suggested by Christian and Jewish religious leaders' repeated interdictions and punishments of them. The first in a long series of

Christian prohibitions of intermarriage was issued at the Council of Chalcedon in 388 (Fishberg 2006[1911], 188–189). Punishment for Jewish-Christian sexual relationships, including interreligious prostitution, in 15th and 16th century Italy included burning at the stake (Adelman 1991, 143–144). Occasionally, men in endogamous Jewish marriages converted to Christianity and refused to give their wives a Jewish divorce, or Jewish women married Christian men and lived as Christians without converting to Christianity (Adelman 1991, 150). In pre-Emancipation Berlin, some marriages occurred between Christian men and divorced Jewish women from the upper echelons of society who converted to Christianity (Hertz 1991). In the United States, and in Germany after Emancipation, there were some "mixed marriages" between Jews and Christians, but these may have been regarded as "out-marriages" since the resulting children often were not raised as Jews (Hertz 1991; Kaplan 1991, 208; Rose 2001). In general, religious divisions continued to be social divisions, with most Jews marrying, befriending, and spending time with other Jews (Endelman 1997). But by the late 19th and early 20th century, intermarriage rates varied widely depending on "the degree of religious toleration and the number of persons who profess the religion," as Maurice Fishberg, a physician and anthropologist, wrote in his 1911 study of Jews' distinctiveness as a group (Fishberg 2006[1911], 206). Marriage records of some European cities, including Copenhagen and Hamburg, show intermarriage by Jews to have occurred almost as frequently as endogamy, while in other areas the rate of intermarriage remained in the single digits (Fishberg 2006[1911], 197). About 75% of children born to such mixed marriages were raised as Christians, and 25% were raised as Jews (Fishberg 2006[1911], 214–215).

Much as social realities prevented Jews from having to fully respond to Emancipation immediately, before the mid-20th century, intermarriage was more of a theoretical than a realistic threat. While Jews had pursued an agenda of full inclusion in American society, before World War II, social barriers between Jews and non-Jews could be relied upon to maintain Jewish distinctiveness, cohesion, and community. But after World War II, new social, occupational and residential opportunities altered the conditions under which many Jews grew up (Moore 1981 and 1994; Sarna 2004). Non-Jewish Americans came to consider Jews to be white people whose religious preference was Judaism, and Jews no longer referred to themselves with racial language (Goldstein 2006). These groups not only interacted, but they also felt themselves to be substantially similar. Because of this change in social and subjective experience, many of the Jewish community's assumptions about the likelihood and acceptability of intermarriage were challenged. For many young Jewish men and women, the relevant cultural backdrop was becoming simply that of America, not a particularly Jewish or Christian context. Many American Jews welcomed it with reservations. There was no agreement on how to balance the interests of Jews as Americans with the interests of Jews as Jews.

In the early 21st century, Jews have not reached agreement about how Jews can remain distinctively Jewish while being fully integrated into American society, even though they have become legally, socially, and psychologically integrated into American society. In contemporary America, individual choice has become an institutionalized language that Americans use to describe their lives, including their religious experiences (Bellah et al. 1985; Meyer 1987; Bellah 1991[1970]; Cohen and Eisen 2000; Madsen 2009). Catholics and Jews have internalized this Protestant-founded language or have

rejected it in favor of a consciously constructed appeal to institutional and divine religious authority (Dolan 1985; Cohen and Eisen 2000). But in contrast to these purposeful rejections of individualistic language, many middle-class American Jews who have grown up in the United States experience the contradictory push and pull of the cultural values of contemporary American society and often non-observant American Jewish experience as simply part of what it is to be Jewish in America. As discourses on intermarriage debate whether intermarrying Jews are assimilated individualists who have betrayed Judaism by marrying outside the Jewish people, and whether and how to accept the children and non-Jewish spouses of intermarrying Jews, they also implicitly debate how American Jews understand Jewishness and the mutual obligations of Jews, which are embedded in the concept of "peoplehood." Examining these debates, analyzing their passion and their longevity, and comparing their claims to the actual experiences of the intermarried couples whom they ostensibly discuss leads to insights about contemporary American Jewish experiences that are obscured by many of the existing approaches to the subject of intermarriage.

The complex ethical, religious, and cultural tensions that my informants experienced suggest a need for an appropriately elastic category to talk about Jewishness that has room for my informants' emphasis on Jewish ritual and emotional experience and their varying attitudes toward religious belief and individualism. These multiple factors are operative in the lives of intermarried couples as well as of American Jews more broadly. Some Jews have attempted to respond to their sense of Jewishness as encompassing more than just religious belief by claiming Jewishness as race or ethnicity. As Goldstein (2006) shows, using the language of race and religion reflected Jews'

attempts to use categories consistent with American culture, to which the more nebulous traditional understanding of Jewishness as "peoplehood" was foreign. Jews' use of the language of "race" became somewhat delegitimized as they both claimed whiteness and were cast as white, but the language of religion did not fully capture their experience of Jewishness either. This lack of appropriate American categories to talk about intermarriage helps to explain why the arguments against intermarriage never seem to express clearly what's really at stake. What's at stake is a shared definition of Jewishness, but the meaning of Jewishness has been muddled because the conditions of modernity and the cultural categories of America have both pulled the traditional understanding of Jewishness out from under contemporary American Jews. The category of race is particularly important for understanding why some secular Jews continue to regard themselves as Jewish, when American culture understands Judaism as a religion and not a race. Such Jews sometime say that they understand their Jewishness as "genetic," or in their "blood," which comports with a sense that it is racial heritage (Tenenbaum and Davidman 2007).

In the following chapters, I discuss the American Jewish community's discourses on intermarriage over the second half of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century as a proxy for a painful and unresolvable discourse on Jewishness. These discourses objectify intermarried people in their attempt to assign blame for the decline of religious authority and the perceived decline of the Jewish people. I also describe and analyze the discursive strategies that my intermarried informants use against discourses critical of them. In some cases, they substitute their own ideology that I call "universalist individualism," enabling them to see the practice of Judaism as completely malleable to

personal preference, not as a tradition with its own integrity. Other intermarried people, in the model I call "ethnic familialism," try to live with dissonance, paradox and ambivalence. Ethnic familialists live two definitions of religion at once—a traditional Jewish one and a Protestantized American one. These definitions intersect at some points, such as the role of women and domesticity. These definitions are at odds at other points, like the conceptions of kinship and the role of individuality. Both groups are concerned with meaning, their sense of "who they are," and an authentic connection to God.

At the same time as they generate their own understandings of Jewishness, my intermarried informants and their families take into account and respond to discourses critical of intermarriage. The reality of their lived experience is different from what such discourses presume. Discourses within the American Jewish community concerning intermarriage have at times cast intermarriage as a problem of individual Jews who have chosen to betray the Jewish community for personal gain, with passionate rhetorical claims that intermarriage "gives Hitler a posthumous victory"—in other words, that intermarriage will destroy Jews and Judaism. Some rabbis who have officiated at interfaith weddings have faced these accusations as well (Fishkoff 2004). The invocation of Hitler's name to accuse certain Jews of betraying and endangering the Jewish people has not been limited to the issue of intermarriage.[5] The use of such rhetoric in the debate over intermarriage signals the perceived stakes in this debate. These discourses have also included more optimistic voices proclaiming that non-Jewish spouses of Jews present an opportunity to increase the size of the Jewish community through conversion and Jewishly-identified children. On the spectrum between these two poles, rabbis, scholars,

[5] E.g., Norman Podhoretz directed this accusation toward Jews critical of Israel's Lebanon War in 1978 (Novick 2000, 163).

Jewish communal workers, and philanthropists discuss whether and how to fund "outreach" to intermarried Jews, the moral worthiness of intermarried Jews, the limits of the Jewish community, and the status of intermarried Jews' children. They conduct sociological studies of intermarried couples, Jewish educational efforts to prevent intermarriage, and the most effective ways to entice intermarried couples to affiliate with the Jewish community. On all sides, there is deep concern about the perceived threat of erosion and eventual loss of Jewishness in America.

Yet these discourses cannot escape the American context in which they take place, a context in which arguments about individualism are entwined with conceptions of fairness and multiple construals of what fairness means. They feel that the requirements of fairness differ depending on the context. A marriage between equals requires a different construal of fairness than does a parental desire to respect their children's self-determination. In turn, these situations require different understandings of fairness than balancing raising children as Christians in a world with many Christians against raising them as Jews after the Holocaust and amidst deep fear of cultural extinction. Different forms of fairness compete in my informants' lives as well as in discourses on intermarriage. My informants attempt to balance all of the forms of fairness and individuality that they perceive to be relevant to their lives and their obligations to others, and find that this balance often requires contradictory stances at different times.

The debate about intermarriage, and the implicit debates within it about fairness, Jewishness and the responsibilities of Jews to one another, reveals the lack of appropriate categories in American culture to talk about Jewish peoplehood among Jews who are thoroughly American. For my informants, these discourses' portrayal of them was often

oversimplified because it denied the existence of these contradictions. The paradoxes of my informants' experiences of Jewishness, including their sense of mutual obligation with other Jews and their insistence that only they could determine their own religious lives, are largely absent from these discourses on intermarriage. This study focuses on them, using ethnography to explore the paradoxes of Jewishness in contemporary America.

# Chapter 2

## "What do you stand for when you wish to remain separate?"

## American Jewish Discourses on Intermarriage

The history of discourses on intermarriage in America reflects their participants' struggle to understand Jewishness in the context of America and modernity. By the early 2000s, the social circumstances under which American Jews lived were vastly different from those they had known in previous centuries, but the central issues with which they struggled remained consistent. American Jewish leaders continually asked themselves how Jews could maintain their distinctiveness within an open society dominated by Christianity. Emancipation had provoked questions about what bound Jews together. The acceptance of Jews into mainstream American society in the second half of the 20th century was accompanied by a rapid rise in intermarriage, raising further questions about the nature of Jewishness as well.

The prospect of intermarriage had inspired a great deal of anxiety for generations of American Jewish leaders. Historian Alan Levenson characterizes mid-19th through early 20th century American Reform rabbis' responses to intermarriage as rhetorically "harsh." Reform rabbis were willing to impose strong sanctions against intermarrying Jews, such as barring them from synagogue membership while paradoxically also desiring these Jews' continued membership in the Jewish community, and arguing stridently against Christianity and American society in order to retain intermarrying Jews' loyalty (Levenson 1989, 326). Faber (1993) observes a similar contradictory stance toward assimilation and intermarriage among leaders of colonial Jewish communities.

Jewish leaders struggled to articulate a vision in which Jews could remain a legitimately separate group within American society, and at times argued that such separateness was essential to American democracy (Berman 2009).

Social changes taking place after World War II complicated the separation of Jews from non-Jewish society. Leading up to and including the 1960s, when attention to intermarriage began to increase, the second and third generations of the East European wave of immigration "became American" (Moore 1981; Dollinger 2000). Universities, professions and neighborhoods granted Jews greater admission than they had before. The "insular" mentality of early 20th century Jews who associated primarily with other Jews, described in University of Chicago sociologist Louis Wirth's *The Ghetto* (1928), gave way to a more fluid relationship between Jews and non-Jewish society (Berman 2009, 34–40). But as this relationship changed, so did Jews' relationship to Jewishness.

Discourses on intermarriage represented in American Jewish print media in the second half of the 20th century reveal struggles to define Jewishness and membership in the Jewish community amidst these shifting social and cultural contexts. Discourses about intermarriage taking place in other media, such as television, have been discussed by historians and sociologists such as Michael E. Staub (2002), Sylvia Barack Fishman (2004), Eric L. Goldstein (2006), and Lila Corwin Berman (2009). In newspaper and magazine articles aimed at Jewish readers, Jewish leaders sought to shape the American Jewish community's views on individualism and social change through their debates on intermarriage. As these leaders' views were reflected in popular media, they sometimes

lost the nuances with which they had originally been composed, but they nevertheless conveyed the tensions between individualism and Jewish mutual obligation that these leaders sought to resolve. In late 20th and early 21st century discourses, rabbis debated whether they should perform "interfaith" weddings; local Federations decided how to allocate money for outreach; and sociologists attempted to quantify how many people were intermarrying and whether intermarried Jews affiliated with the Jewish community. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency and local Jewish newspapers regularly covered intermarriage-related stories, and Jewish popular and "self-help" literature offered suggestions for preventing intermarriage or making the best of it once it has occurred.[1] The perspectives of intermarried laypeople who affiliate with the Jewish community are represented to some extent in these discourses on Web sites like interfaithfamily.com, which describes itself as "the online resource for interfaith families exploring Jewish life and the grass-roots advocate for a welcoming Jewish community."

On the surface, discourses on intermarriage reflect the shared concern of Jewish community leaders and the more general Jewish public about the fate of the Jewish people as a whole. Participants in these discourses suggested that as Jews have taken advantage of new opportunities that helped them achieve professional, social, and educational success, their religious identification has become more individualistic and they have become more interested in intermarriage. But at a deeper level, these discourses also use intermarried Jews to represent conflicting points of view about individual autonomy and communal obligation. They suggest that while the American

[1] For example, among the sociological studies I describe are Kosmin 1990; Tobin 1999; Tobin and Simon 1999; Fishman 2004. Among the popular and "self-help" literature I describe are Hertzberg 1989; Kugel 1990; Lamm 1991[1979]; Reuben 1992; Cantor 1994; Gordis 1994; McClain 1995; Silverstein 1995a and 1995b; Abramowitz 1997; Dershowitz 1997; Jaffe 2000; Weiss and Block 2000; Friedman 2002; Tugend 2003 and Luxner 2006.

Jewish community has found open recognition of its lack of a shared communal understanding of Jewishness to be too painful, the issue of intermarriage provides an oblique route by which to try to understand this perceived loss of communal integrity.

**Isolating the Problem: The Individualism of Intermarriage**

American Jewish leaders have often accounted for growing rates of intermarriage by finding fault with particular intermarrying Jews and ignoring the changing social circumstances that facilitated their intermarriage. Marshall Sklare, who would later be described as "the founding father of American Jewish sociology" (Sarna 1993) wrote in a 1964 essay in the popular Jewish intellectual magazine *Commentary* that the Jewish community described intermarrying Jews in ways "invariably involv[ing] the imputation of some defect in the contracting parties": for example, they were depicted as status-seeking, assimilating, and hostile toward their parents. This portrayal of intermarriage as the result of personal failures shifted responsibility for intermarriage to individuals and away from the Jewish community. However, this portrayal of intermarrying Jews did not reflect reality as much as the community liked to believe, Sklare warned. Predicting an increase in intermarriage, he said that the Jewish community would be forced to deal with the very meaning of Jewish existence.

Sklare used sociology to develop insights into American Jewish existence, despite the discomfort that these insights could cause for Jews who were comfortable with the status quo. In a memoir, he told the story of a Conservative rabbi's comment to him after the publication of his book *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement* (1955): "Young man, how dare you tell the truth about Conservative Judaism!" (Sarna

1993). Sklare grounded his sociological thought in both his experience as a Jew and his deep appreciation of history. His articles in *Commentary* "helped to explain the American Jewish community to itself," wrote historian Jonathan Sarna. Yet as the following discussion will suggest, Sklare's insights often arrived ahead of his time.

Because Jewish leaders had misunderstood why Jews intermarried, Sklare argued, their strategies to combat intermarriage were ill fated. Sklare called one such strategy, prominent in the 1950s and 1960s, the "discord approach." It contended that marriage was hard enough "without introducing yet another potential disharmony, such as a mate of a different faith." Thus, this approach held, Jews should marry each other to eliminate a potential source of marital strife (1970, 53). This strategy aligned with sociological findings about marriage from studies of the 1930s and 1940s. Spurred by a perceived "crisis" in American marriage demonstrated by rising divorce rates in the late 1920s and 1930s, scholars sought to understand the factors most essential to happy marriage. They determined that "shared culture," interpreted to mean religion in particular, was fundamental (Berman 2009, 59–61). But Sklare argued that the discord strategy was unpersuasive to Jews who observed happy intermarriages and unhappy in-marriages. Worse, it failed to address the larger question of what constituted a particularly Jewish marriage other than its inclusion of two Jews.

Sklare argued that the value system of some Jews had turned from traditional Judaism to a more secular and universalistic "Academic Commitment," an individualistic and universalistic "religion" of academic and professional values. Sklare predicted that their children would intermarry at a high rate even with two Jewish parents because they were raised without a committed, strong foundation in Judaism. Intermarrying Jews

subscribed to a different value system. Implicit was the idea that they were also simply acting on new cultural opportunities. Here Sklare (1970) is relying on Rabbi Henry Cohen's study at University of Illinois. A detailed investigation of secular and universalistic value systems among Americans would later be conducted by Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985).

When Sklare published his next essay on intermarriage in *Commentary* in 1970, he noted that the discord approach had been discontinued, signaling that Jews had given up on preventing intermarriage. While the discord approach was poorly constructed, he wrote, its use had at least demonstrated that the Jewish community was relatively united in its opposition to intermarriage. Instead, American Jews were now focused on their individual wishes and needs. Many Jewish parents did not demand endogamy, Sklare said. Since they were not religiously observant themselves, such a demand would make them feel uncomfortably ethnocentric and hypocritical. Jewish parents hoped to maintain good relationships with their intermarried children, while blaming intermarriage on bad religious schools, rabbis, or synagogues. Their loyalty to the Jewish people did not outweigh their attachment to good relationships with their children, and even Jews who opposed intermarriage were unwilling to "face an estrangement between themselves and their children over intermarriage" (Sklare 1970, 52).

As Jews sought to manage conflicting needs within their families and themselves, they also navigated contradictory relationships with Jewish rituals and institutions. Some American Jews sought ritual legitimation of intermarriages through rabbinic officiation. Such gestures were not meant to imply that the marrying couples intended to observe Jewish law, since the non-Jewish spouse would have converted to Judaism in that case.

Rather, this was a symbolic gesture. Yet rabbis did not generally regard rabbinic officiation at weddings between Jews and non-Jews as acceptable. New ways to legitimate intermarriage were required, since conversion for the sake of marriage was undesirable according to Jewish law. Moreover, requiring conversion could imply that Judaism saw itself as superior to the non-Jewish spouse's religion, reinforce stereotypes of Jews as insular, and conflict with American values of egalitarianism and universalism (Sklare 1970, 57).

Underscoring the connection of individualism and intermarriage, families could solicit Jewish officiants for interfaith weddings without connections to synagogue communities or even rabbinical credentials. In 1973, the New York Jewish Week alerted readers to the existence of "fraudulent rabbis" who offered to officiate at interfaith weddings despite their lack of official recognition as rabbis. "These men are vultures who are exploiting for financial gains the tragedy of Jewish parents whose children are about to marry a non-Jew," said Rabbinical Assembly executive vice president and Conservative rabbi Wolfe Kelman (Rosenblatt 1973). "Legitimate" rabbis and Jewish social workers warned the Jewish community away from them, and they joined across denominational lines to strategize against intermarriage in ways that would be foreign to them a decade later.

The terms of American Jewish existence had changed so that Jews could no longer rely on old assumptions about one another's common values and priorities. Sklare argued that the Jewish community avoided inquiring too deeply into intermarriage because it would make plain the contradictions of American Jewish life that were too uncomfortable to address openly. Since it was easier to ignore intermarriage than to solve

these personal, cultural and religious contradictions, many American Jews accepted intermarriage as inevitable. Eventually, the American Jewish community would have to face an existential question arising out of intermarriage:

> American Jews [have] avoid[ed] confronting the stark question: "What do you stand for when you wish to remain separate?"-the defense against intermarriage will necessarily involve a coming to terms, sooner or later, with what one is defending (Sklare 1964, 52).

Jews' values and priorities would have to be articulated openly, as terms subject to debate among autonomous individuals.

A coherent Jewish communal strategy to address the rising rate of intermarriage would have required acknowledgement of inherent contradictions in American Jews' experiences. Instead, the Jewish community addressed intermarriage in instrumental and functional ways. Synagogues, rabbinical associations, and secular Jewish organizations came together to sponsor the 1976 National Conference on Mixed Marriage, held in New Jersey, at which speakers at the conference described intermarrying Jews in the same terms that Sklare had identified as faulty several years earlier (*New York Jewish Week* 1976). For example, Conservative Rabbi Robert Gordis, a professor of Bible and Philosophies of Religion at the Jewish Theological Seminary, portrayed intermarrying Jews as desperate for non-Jews' social acceptance and inclusion, even though Sklare had argued that Jews were gradually adopting a differently-oriented value system altogether. Gordis added that some Jews also might intermarry as rebellion against parental authority, echoing the characterization of intermarriers that Sklare had rejected years earlier. Increased Jewish education and home observances could help prevent intermarriage, Gordis said, but conversion should also be emphasized since it would not be possible to entirely eliminate intermarriage (Gordis 1978, 127–132). Left out of his

account was any mention of intermarrying Jews' subjective experiences, such as love for their non-Jewish spouses (*New York Jewish Week* 1977a).

Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, a historian and past president of the American Jewish Congress, did take account of intermarrying Jews' subjectivity as he described a new conception among American Jews of intermarriage (Hertzberg 1978, 11). They regarded marriage and intermarriage, like religion, as a private decision and not a "total break with the Jewish community," he said. Intermarrying Jews, he seemed to say, had internalized the idea of secularization too well, sealing off Judaism into an ever-smaller separate sphere. This private Judaism, argued Brooklyn College sociologist Mervin Verbit, was "the real threat" to the Jewish community because it changed the definition of Jewishness. Verbit asserted that the "Jewishness of the Jewish community is not merely a characteristic of the individuals who make it up," but that it is "a characteristic of the community itself" across the world, through history, and as defined by Judaism as a religion (Verbit 1978, 97). Verbit felt that contemporary Jews' lackadaisical attitude toward intermarriage would gradually change the nature of Jewishness itself by positioning individualism, instead of Jewish peoplehood, as a first principle. While Verbit recognized that individualism grew out of the sociological processes of secularization, he felt that the Jewish community's response had to be resistance because "an individualistic definition of Jewishness is too internally contradictory" (Verbit 1978, 100–101). For the good of both the Jewish people and Jewish individuals, Verbit urged emphasizing Jewish unity over/against the individualism of the broader culture. Thus, while individual Jews might have unique subjectivities, they ought to restrain them.

Restraint of individual choice in order to preserve the Jewish community's

existing structure occupied the attention of many rabbis and Jewish community leaders, as they feared changes that they saw as lowering chances for Jewish survival. The popular Jewish press in the 1970s listed intermarriage as just one among many other threats to the Jewish people: for example, the Zero Population Growth movement, the oppression of Jews in the Soviet Union, the State of Israel's constant threat from its neighbors, women's expanding public and workplace roles and the concomitant shrinking average family size. Milton Himmelfarb, a senior staff member at the American Jewish Committee and a contributing editor of *Commentary*, blamed the demographic problem on Jewish women's use of contraceptives. The Jewish Population Regeneration Union urged Jews to have larger families to counteract the effect of the Zero Population Growth movement (Staub 2002, 261–62). Demonstrating the longevity of these concerns, a similar plea was made by the Conservative Movement in 2006, in which families were enjoined to have a "mitzvah child," which would be one more child than they had originally planned. This additional child would help to offset the continuing Jewish population slowdown (Moline 2006).

Writers for the new feminist Jewish magazine *Lilith* noted that the Jewish "population panic" coincided with women's increased career aspirations and the need to change the structure of the contemporary Jewish family (Frank 1978). Jewish men had enjoyed increasing autonomy as they became middle class Americans, but Jewish women were relative newcomers to it, along with other contemporaries of the second-wave feminist movement. Reflecting on this period, later Jewish feminists argued that Jewish men blamed stereotypes of Jewish women for "forcing" Jewish men to intermarry. Feminist writers dissected American Jewish men's masculinity, arguing that Jewish men

displaced their ambivalence about assimilation and Judaism onto Jewish women. The opposition of the non-Jewish woman, the "shiksa," to the Jewish woman, cast as the "JAP," or "Jewish American Princess," demonstrated their worries "about becoming American men," anthropologist of American Judaism Riv-Ellen Prell (2003) argues. The ambivalent Jewish man could choose a feminizing Jewish woman, who would threaten him with her demands to make the "right" choices such as a Jewish marriage partner and to have Jewish children. Or he could choose a non-threatening "shiksa" who would demand nothing, but who "makes it impossible to continue Jewish life" because she does not contribute to the continuity of Jewish tradition through the family. These stereotypes' genesis coincided with the increase in intermarriage of the 1960s (Sarna 1994, 55–58). The Jewish family had come under fire from several different angles, not only intermarriage. So much was in flux—family and community structure, the moral status of individual choices and communal goods—with no clear way to decide how to proceed.

Where some focused on intermarriage's contribution to the population panic, others dismissed its seriousness. When the 1971 National Jewish Population Study results finally become widely available in 1977, the Jewish media reported that, contrary to popular wisdom, intermarriage was *less* of a problem than had been believed.
The NJPS researchers had concluded that the low Jewish birthrate was more to blame than intermarriage for population shrinkage. The majority of intermarried Jews' children, said Fred Massarik, the NJPS's scientific director, were raised as Jews (*New York Jewish Week* 1978). While the rate of intermarriage was already almost a third, the survey defined intermarriage as "a marriage in which one or the other partner was identified with a non-Jewish religious - cultural viewpoint at the time that he/she met his/her future

spouse," regardless of whether the non-Jew later converted, so that only born Jews marrying born Jews counted as endogamy. The 1971 study reported that 9.2% of American Jews were then intermarried, and of those who had married between 1966 and 1972, 31.7% intermarried. Thus, while it was troubling to most that nearly a third of new marriages were intermarriages, that figure could be assumed to include some conversions to Judaism, and even some of the non-conversionary couples were still affiliating with the Jewish community (Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds 1973).

Despite scientific reassurance, those who were already convinced that intermarriage was a threat continued to regard it as such. In a 1979 issue of *Commentary*, David Singer argued that Massarik's interpretation of the statistics reflected an impossibly rosy view of intermarriage that would only "buoy the accommodationist spirit." This approach would obscure the fact that intermarriage was, in Singer's words, "a threat both to Jewish group survival…and to the continuity of generations within the family and the ability of family members to identify with one another" (Singer 1979). Singer argued that rather than "attitudes—how many non-Jewish spouses identify as Jews; how many intermarried couples plan to give their children a Jewish education," the surveys should have measured "behavior" (Singer 1979, 52).

But in a society in which religion was a matter of individual choice, how would a measure of Jewish behavior work? Singer suggested that "belief" or subjective attitudes should not be considered a reliable indicator of membership. However, religious identification in America essentially is based more in attitudes than behaviors, across religious groups. For example, many more Americans say that they go to church than actually do so (Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves 1993 and 1998). As members of American

society, many American Jews would likely follow this pattern of religious membership and see nothing unusual about it, nor any reason why their religious membership should be considered illegitimate. In addition, measuring behavior reveals that exogamous and endogamous Jews are not completely distinct in their religious observances. Singer's argument demonstrated that two different definitions of religion were already operative in American Judaism: a traditional Jewish one favoring behavior, identification across generations, and group survival; and an American one that was shaping many Jews' practices and beliefs. The future of the Jewish people itself had already been felt to be at stake, and growing unease about the definition of a Jew only added to that sense of urgency and potential doom.

In the 1970s, Jewish social surveys had begun to document that intermarriage was increasing and that it had begun to occur equally among Jewish men and women. A debate over the surveys' statistical data and their meaning emerged, and they came to be implicitly regarded as holding symbolic power to see into the Jewish future, carrying the authority of science. The reports emphasized the scientific authority of these data:

> While the survey itself was carried out several years ago, the computerized analysis was completed only recently at Bar-Ilan University in Israel by Prof. Bernard Lazerwitz, a research expert who used the university's giant IBM computer to reach his conclusions (*New York Jewish Week* 1977b).

Several major surveys of the American Jewish population supplied statistical data for discussions of intermarriage from the 1970s onward. These included the National Jewish Population Study, carried out in 1971, 1990, and 2000–01; the American Jewish Identity Survey of 2001; and the American Jewish Committee's Survey of American Jewish Opinion, carried out annually from 2000–2006. These statistics were widely publicized in the mid- to late-1970s. Rabbis had already been using statistics rather than religious

prescription to explain the need for endogamy since the 1950s. The proliferation of these numbers had a strong impact on American Jews' consciousness of intermarriage and helped to construct it as a problem that could be solved (Berman 2009, 44–45, 69, 202n).

**Intermarriage and Denominational Divides**

Two responses to intermarriage became standard: outright opposition and making the best of it. Yehuda Rosenman, director of Jewish Communal Affairs of the American Jewish Committee, took a hopeful view of intermarriage, writing that intermarrying Jews were not necessarily trying to cut themselves off from the Jewish community, but rather that they simply saw their marriage choices as separate from religion. They wanted "acceptance and understanding from the Jewish community" (Lester 1978). The American Jewish Committee report "Intermarriage and the Jewish Future," released in January 1979, said that a "spiraling" intermarriage rate threatened the Jewish community. It recommended both conversion of non-Jewish spouses and welcoming of non-Jews into the Jewish community regardless of conversion (Omaha Jewish Press 1979).

Institutional structures were created to respond to intermarriage even as debate about it failed to approach resolution. Daat Elohim, a synagogue in Manhattan led by Reform Rabbi Roy Rosenberg, accepted intermarried couples without requiring the conversion of the non-Jewish spouse. In 1979, the fourth year of its existence, it had 100 members. Rabbi Rosenberg wrote in *Sh'ma* magazine that Daat Elohim "fill[ed] a perceived need in the lives of those whom it serves, in the process preserving and passing on the Jewish heritage in family lines where it would otherwise be lost." Modern Orthodox Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, who was later described as "one of the few Orthodox

leaders to defy the growing resistance to pluralism" and said that he felt that Orthodox rabbis needed to "work out a solution to our problems" with Reform leaders, responded to Rosenberg in a letter to *Sh'ma* (Mark 2008). Lookstein argued against giving "sanction to intermarriage not only by officiating at a wedding but by inviting the couple to participate fully in a Temple of Universal Judaism," adding that "it is not Judaism." Rabbi Rosenberg responded that his model was realistic and he expected Daat Elohim to join the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) when its membership was large enough (Gallob 1979). These rabbis felt the future and definition of Jewishness itself to be at stake in their responses to intermarriage.

While liberal Jews experimented with responses to intermarriage like Daat Elohim, traditional Jews went in the opposite direction, opposing both intermarriage and liberal Judaism in general. At the 1980 annual meeting of the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), its president, Rabbi Sol Roth, argued that intermarried Jews and rabbis who officiate at intermarriages should be excluded from leadership positions in Jewish organizations. Roth also expressed concern over the Reform movement's consideration of a rule of patrilineal descent, which would count as Jewish any child who had one Jewish parent and who was raised as a Jew, rather than the traditional determination of Jewishness through the mother (*New York Jewish Week* 1982). "This breach of Jewish law by Reform leaders would create a sect which would erroneously regard itself as Jewish but whose Jewish identity would not be acknowledged by the mainstream of the Jewish people," said Roth.

The idea of patrilineal descent had been taken up and later abandoned by the Conservative movement in 1977. Rabbi Solomon Goldfarb had argued in *Conservative*

*Judaism* that "these are new times in Jewish life and we are faced with new demands especially in matters concerning the Jewish family." Inspired not by the situation of intermarried American Jews, but by that of intermarried Soviet Jewish men immigrating to Israel, Goldfarb asked, "Why, in the light of the liberation and relaxation of the prohibitions against intermarriage, do we still insist that only the child of a Jewish mother be considered a Jew?" In Israel, Goldfarb said, many Soviet immigrant children of non-Jewish mothers were not counted as Jews under the Israeli Law of Return, which gave Israeli citizenship to Jews who immigrated to Israel. According to a news report, the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards planned to consider the question of patrilineal descent, and its members were surprised that Goldfarb, who was reportedly resistant to change in ritual and practice, had proposed it. Conservative Jews' consideration of patrilineal descent suggests that the idea may have appealed more broadly than later portrayals of it would admit (Yaffe 1977).

More than just considering the idea, though, the Reform Movement adopted a policy of recognizing patrilineal descent in 1983. As Conservative Rabbi Goldfarb had done, the Reform Movement also characterized its decision as a response to what it saw as the needs of the time. It was a watershed in the debate on intermarriage. The CCAR argued that in the past, rabbis had adopted changes that fit the needs of the time, and they felt compelled to bring Jewish practice in line with current values. As the first movement to ordain a woman rabbi (Wertheimer 1993, 105), the Reform movement was committed to equality between men and women. It recognized that the world now offered equality and freedom for Jews, social contact between Jews and non-Jews, changes in family structure and gender roles, and an increase in "mixed marriages" (Central Conference of

American Rabbis 1983). Furthermore, since the matrilineal principle was rabbinic, not from the Torah, there was precedent for patrilineal descent in the Bible. And in contemporary America, children from intermarriages already existed. Thus, the CCAR felt "morally obliged to make provisions for the offsprings of such a union when either the father or mother seek to have their children recognized and educated as a Jew." Finally, by requiring "positive acts of identification," it went beyond the requirements of traditional Judaism, so that even someone who was Jewish by matrilineal descent would have to demonstrate their Jewishness by, for example, celebrating a *bar* or *bat mitzvah*.

The patrilineal descent decision thus responds to a specific American, even Protestant, context. It acknowledges the centrality of choice, in addition to ascribed ties, melding sociological and religious reasoning in its redefinition of Jewishness.

> 1. We do not view birth as a determining factor in the religious identification of children of a mixed marriage.
>
> 2. We distinguish between descent and identification.
>
> 3. The mobility of American Jews has diminished the influence of the extended family upon such a child. This means that a significant informal bond with Judaism which played a role in the past does not exist for our generation.
>
> 4. Education has always been a strong factor in Jewish identity. In the recent past we could assume a minimal Jewish education for most children. In our time almost half the American Jewish community remains unaffiliated, and their children receive no Jewish education.
>
> For those reasons the Central Conference of American Rabbis has declared: "The Central Conference of American Rabbis declares that the child of one Jewish parent is under the presumption of Jewish descent. This presumption of the Jewish status of the offspring of any mixed marriage is to be established through appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people. The performance of these mitzvot serves to commit those who participate in them, both parents and child, to Jewish life (Central Conference of American Rabbis 1983).

With this upheaval of the traditional Jewish definition, the Reform movement seemed to

say that it did not need to consider other Jewish movements' ideas about what Judaism was. It had implicitly recognized that America had thrust upon Judaism a new definition of religion, and it had attempted to merge American and more "traditional" Jewish ideals as authentically as it could.

With first intermarriage and then patrilineal descent pressing upon it, the Jewish community as a whole could no longer feel confident that it held a shared identity. American Jews were already worried about the state of Jewish unity because of the furor between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews over the Law of Return. The introduction of patrilineal descent fractured the Jewish community's unity much more deeply. Before the introduction of patrilineal descent, the Jewish community generally had agreed on the halakhic definition of a Jew as one who is born to a Jewish mother or converted. Jews under this broadly accepted definition made up "the Jewish people," a construction that is partly religious, partly (multi-)ethnic, so that Jews are presumed to be related to each other by both religion and ethnicity. In traditional terms, each Jewish family is meant to continue the Jewish people and its covenant with God (Lamm 1991[1980]). Jewish families are thus traditionally understood as interdependent links in a chain going far into the past and future.

These contested ways of talking about intermarriage have continued into the 1990s and 2000s with the same emotional intensity and scientific scrutiny that they held in the 1970s and 1980s. The continuing climb of intermarriage rates—as high as 52%, according to one major survey—was taken by some as a clear sign that the scales had been tipped in favor of assimilation. The 1991 NJPS reported that 52% of born Jews who married between 1985–1991 had married non-Jews who did not convert to Judaism

(Kosmin et al. 1990, 13). The number itself—52%—was repeated over and over, taking on a life of its own as a symbol of assimilation and communal threat. The statistics attained intense symbolic power in these discourses as they confirmed people's fears about the Jewish future in a more powerful and concrete way than could be done by mere anecdotes. The power of the statistics has given rise to a hunger for more statistics, ever more precise, and more social scientific research is continually carried out on behalf of Jewish continuity.

Recognizing the power that the numbers had gained, some scholars attempted to debunk the statistics. In 1994, Egon Mayer, a sociologist who studied intermarriage and directed the Jewish Outreach Institute, described a 1984 study that had been used erroneously to support claims that intermarried Jews would not have Jewish grandchildren, a fate widely seen as the sign of imminent communal demise (Mayer 1994). The study's sample comprised 13 intermarried people in Philadelphia whose parents had also been intermarried, and whose children were not of "the Jewish religion." People who had intermarried parents but who were married to Jews and/or raising their children as Jews were excluded from this sample. "So at least some of their parents (who had intermarried) had Jewish grandchildren," Mayer concludes. The sample's boundaries were not the only problem: the phrasing of the question was also faulty. The study did not ask if their children were *Jews*, which Mayer thought would have elicited a positive response, citing other surveys' findings that many Jews tend to answer that they are Jewish, but their religion is "none." Mayer highlighted the fact that "secular ethnics" made up a large portion of Jews in America, intermarried or not, and that people with two unquestionably Jewish parents who are "secular ethnics" are still Jews by any commonly

accepted definition of Judaism. Finally, even in this sample of 13, some fasted on Yom Kippur and maintained mostly Jewish social circles. Again, the concomitant operation of different definitions of religion renders the picture of intermarriage murky.

Mayer suggested that Zionist anti-Diaspora ideology motivated the researchers behind this "lachrymose" interpretation of intermarriage. He implied that statistical studies of intermarriage functioned as an ideological mirror, or a sort of Rorschach test, reflecting whatever viewers wanted to see about the state of American Judaism. "[W]hy the eagerness to write off possibly hundreds of thousands of people who may well think of themselves as Jewish or have the potential to do so? And why is this being done by the very people who claim to be so concerned about the quantity as well as the quality of the Jewish future?" asked Mayer. Echoing Sklare's words from thirty years earlier, Mayer said, "Writing these people off often masks the as yet insufficiently explored issue of disaffection among the descendants of the in-married. Not only do the grandchildren of the intermarried opt out of Jewish identification, so do Jews marrying other Jews, in proportions that have yet to be measured."

Mayer's suggestion that statistics on intermarriage served a Rorschach test-like function dovetails with David Schneider's (1980[1968]) concept of "folk science." Americans' theory of kinship, Schneider argues, in part depends on a "folk scientific" notion of genetics. Presented with contradictory information reflecting actual scientific knowledge of genetics, Americans nevertheless cling to their original, scientifically inaccurate "folk scientific" theory. Mayer's argument about the uses of statistics on intermarriage makes a somewhat similar point: because the statistics have the authority

and legitimacy of science, and they confirm a pre-existing fear of cultural extinction, they continue to be used.

In 2001, Jack Wertheimer repeated Sklare's claims from the 1970s about intermarriage as if they were new, saying that Jews viewed intermarriage as inevitable and "beyond prevention" (Wertheimer 2001). Wertheimer found Jewish "outreach" to intermarried people to be a preposterous waste of time and resources, since if such people had wanted to practice Judaism, they could simply take part in Jewish institutions like any other Jew. This claim suggests that a view that "the community" has not changed even if the people within it have.

American Jews' conceptions of religious authority also have adapted to those of American Christianity. The "democratization" (Hatch 1989) and "feminization" of religion (Braude 1997) strongly influences American Judaism, as we see today in the widely-reported sense of American Jews that they feel that their practice of Judaism is a matter of personal choice (Cohen and Eisen 2000), and the increasing proportion of American Jewish institutional life that is run by women (Nadell 1998; Fishman and Parmer 2008). The specter of "assimilation," meaning wholesale adoption of the dominant non-Jewish culture, has continued to haunt American Jewish discourses throughout 20$^{th}$ century. In the wake of social movements emphasizing ethnic specificity in the 1970s, discussions about assimilation have tended to focus on ethnic rather than religious dimensions of Jewishness.

Explaining American Jews' shift in self-consciousness in historical and sociological terms, much like Sklare had done in his *Commentary* essays, Jonathan Sarna (1994) has argued that American Jews are confronted with new self-conceptions because

of changing ethnicity, religion, marital patterns and identity patterns in the contemporary U.S. While Jews may previously have seen themselves as a distinct ethnic group, other white Americans did not always share that view, and their ethnic difference was seen as mainly symbolic. Furthermore, American religious diversity had grown, so that Jews had become one tiny minority religion among many, while the number of "unchurched" grew. While religious and ethnic endogamy had been the rule for most Americans until the 1960s, intermarriage began to grow for Americans of all religious backgrounds, so that Jews experienced the same social trends as their non-Jewish peers. Finally, the shift in identity patterns meant that people felt free to choose their ethnic identity rather than feel it to be ascribed—what Sarna termed a "shift from descent to consent" (Sarna 1994).

Intermarriage generates so many different discourses because it represents so many issues that are fundamental to the structure of Jewish peoplehood. Anxiety and anger about intermarriage are linked to anxiety about Jewish survival amidst changes thrust upon Jews by modernity. Regardless of what statistics about intermarriage say, they always evoke this anxiety. Jews in earlier times and other places have also worried about the survival of their people, and historically, American Jews have consistently rallied to the cause of imperiled Jews in other countries. As Simon Rawidowicz wrote, Jews throughout history have feared that their own generation was the last and that when they died, so would Jewish tradition and values. Nevertheless, generations of Jews continued to study, extend, and in their turn fear for Jewish tradition. Rawidowicz thought of this as a double process of ever-dying and ever-living: as much as Israel was the "ever-dying people," its dread of death ensured its vitality (Rawidowicz 1986). These inseparable and self-renewing processes are visible in contemporary America as well, as

the United Jewish Communities responds to the “crisis” in Jewish affiliation rates with efforts to create a Jewish “renaissance” through promotion of Jewish education and identification (Wiener 2001).

The American context projects that dread of dying into a new arena: instead of physical survival, continuing peoplehood is at stake. In other times and places, Jews have lived in relatively self-contained communities within relatively hostile host societies. While antisemitic sentiment still exists in contemporary America, it does not have widespread popular support, nor is it ingrained in public institutions. Instead, contemporary American Jews now enjoy abundant acceptance and goodwill from American society to the extent that many non-Jews want to marry Jews. Some Jews experience this situation as a threat to Jewish survival: if non-Jews marry into the Jewish people, they disrupt the traditional stream of Jewish kinship. But some other Jews, who see a possibility to turn these spouses into new Jews, see it as an opportunity. If intermarriage is indeed a threat to Jewish survival, it is a new kind of threat has nothing to do with Jews’ physical safety. Other situations that have captured American Jews’ attention and energy, such as the rescue of Ethiopian Jews, have involved donating money, volunteering, and lobbying congressional representatives. Activism about intermarriage mainly takes place through the persuasive and analytical voices that participate in the multiple discourses on intermarriage.

The American Jewish media’s discussion of intermarriage from the 1960s to the present aimed to persuade readers that the Jewish community was under siege from within. The parties involved in these discourses have been gripped by the reality of trying to reconcile two cultural worlds, American and Jewish, which hold equal part in their

lives, but use different languages, symbols and reference points. Each cultural world has demanded allegiance and exacted consequences for failing to meet its demands. What was at stake was at once personal, familial, and cultural. At the personal level, nostalgic and identity elements connected Jews to their Jewish background, within a familial and cultural context that was intrinsically both Jewish and American. Neither of these cultural elements could be separated from their self-concept. The fact of intermarriage has forced Jews to ask what Judaism is, in this American context. Attempts to define Judaism in America have led to only diffuse answers and partial agreements.

American values and ideologies have complicated the relationship between Jewish individuals, families, and the Jewish people. As Cohen and Eisen (2000) found, American cultural and social-structural emphasis on choice and individualism heavily influence American Jews' interpretations of Judaism. Their lack of involvement in Jewish organizations and lack of religious observance does not diminish their sense that they are part of the Jewish people and share in its collective identity. They see themselves as free to choose whether to belong to Jewish institutions based on personal considerations such as their feelings about the rabbi, not their sense of obligation to the Jewish people. They report greater interest in home rituals, such as Shabbat dinner, than in synagogue worship that clergy or other leaders control (Cohen and Eisen 2000). But the Jewish community is formed not only by the symbols and rituals that these Jews choose and use; it is perpetuated by Jewish organizations and discourse in Jewish media. The community's continued existence depends on individual Jews' recognition of and commitment to it. Hence, some Jewish leaders fear that the Jewish people will not survive the perceived turn toward individualism.

In contrast to these discourses that reveal ideological statements and representations about intermarriage, an ethnographic approach allows us to ask how traditional ideas about Judaism, Jewish community, Jewishness, and different understandings of fairness and individualism factor into the religious lives and choices of intermarried people. Balancing American, Christian, and Jewish cultural and religious thought and practices, my intermarried informants understand their families' religious lives, broadly speaking, in two ways, which I call universalist individualism and ethnic familialism. While my informants' experiences do not neatly fit into only one or the other of these two categories, these categories reveal elements of my informants' lives left out by discourses about intermarriage.

# Chapter 3

## "Prophetic Outcasts":

## Individualism, Universalism, and Community among Intermarried Couples

Some of the intermarried Jewish-Christian couples among whom I did participant-observation responded to normative Jewish discourses on intermarriage by asserting their integrity as individuals, the truth of universalism, and a vision of community based on these principles. These couples regarded such ideas as essential to any conception of religion. They suspected religious norms and institutions of conspiring to rob them of their autonomy. Their conceptions of Jewishness were strongly influenced by these ideas.

On a Friday night in January 2006, a group of "interfaith" couples and Jewish and Christian clergy gathered for a communal Shabbat dinner at a building shared by a church and synagogue in Bethesda, Maryland. This group of approximately 100 Jewish-Christian couples, mostly white and middle class, had come from all over the United States for a weekend together to discuss ways to make dual-religion families work, as part of a conference entitled "How Interfaith Families Can Thrive and Contribute in a Polarized World," held by the Dovetail Institute for Interfaith Family Resources. This organization's journal, *Dovetail: A Journal By and For Jewish/Christian Families*, describes its mission as follows:

> **Dovetail**'s mission is to provide a channel of communication for interfaith couples, their parents, and their children. No matter what their specific choices regarding faith for their home and children, the more interfaith families can share their ideas, experiences, resources, and support, the more they can make peace in their homes and communities. Jewish and Christian perspectives can dovetail.
>
> Believing that there are no definitive answers to the questions facing interfaith families, **Dovetail** strives to be open to all ideas and opinions. Editorial content

> attempts to balance and respect the perspectives of both Jewish and Christian partners in interfaith marriages, as well as the diverse perspectives of parents and children of interfaith couples.

The Dovetail journal was founded in 1992 by Joan Hawxhurst, a Protestant married to a Jewish man (Hawxhurst 1998, 1). Dovetail supports "Jewish/Christian" families, emphasizing that such families can be configured in many ways. It argues that the best configuration for any given family is whatever that family feels is best.

The meaning of "interfaith" for the conference participants was indeed flexible as Dovetail's mission statement intended. It also appeared to be somewhat exclusive of strictly normative religious observances, as I learned at the communal Shabbat dinner. When I chose kosher food from the kosher and non-kosher options available for our buffet-style Shabbat dinner, my Jewish and Christian dinner companions, whom I had never met before, expressed surprise. This choice seemed to mark me as especially religious, perhaps in their eyes incongruous with my being intermarried. Since we had all attended this conference to learn about ways to make "interfaith" religious lives work, I wondered what "interfaith" meant to my companions, given that they seemed startled at my observance of religious norms. The meaning of "interfaith" became even more curious to me as I overheard a couple discuss their son's impending wedding. A woman asked about the engaged couple, "Is that a diversity situation?" "Diversity" appeared to be either a synonym or a euphemism for intermarriage. I surmised from these conversations that "interfaith" was akin to "multicultural," a value with which my informants seemed to identify, but not normatively religious.

The next morning, I learned more about the relationship of the term "interfaith" to normative Judaism and Christianity. I attended a discussion group of about two dozen

people, middle-aged and younger, about ways to avoid "confusion" and the responsibilities of "modeling" interfaith life for others. We gathered in a circle of folding chairs in the function hall of the combined church-synagogue and introduced ourselves. Two couples in the group were not yet married, and the possible gender and religion combinations seemed to be distributed evenly among all of the couples. Many of the participants were raising their children in both spouses' religions. These couples hoped to inspire each other and themselves to view intermarriage as a positive force and a special privilege, over/against normative religious rhetoric critical of intermarriage.

After the group members introduced themselves, the session's moderator, Nancy, noted that their comments demonstrated "practical, political, and prophetic aspects of interfaith." The discussion to follow would not merely highlight pragmatic ways in which intermarried couples could resolve disagreements over conflicting religious celebrations. It would instead emphasize the ways in which "interfaith" families epitomized and surpassed the religious insights of the normative traditions from which they came.

One participant, Sharon, emphasized that interfaith couples have a prophetic role in society and make a special contribution to *tikkun olam* ("repairing the world"), referring to the Jewish mystical concept of repairing the broken world that has been extended in contemporary Jewish and Christian groups to mean "social justice" generally.[1] Though intermarried Jews and Christians are "outcasts" from normative religion, she said, like the prophets, they have a special understanding of religious teachings. Her rabbi even acknowledged the prophetic nature of interfaith relationships, she told us, even though he still advises couples to raise their children in only one

[1] For example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America highlights on its Web site that it not only agrees with Jews that *tikkun olam* is important, but that Jews and Christians should work together for it. See Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "Tikkun Olam—Mending the World," 2002.

religion. Sharon remarked that refusing to choose one religion over another was a form of "idealism," a way of focusing on the religions' teachings without being encumbered by their rules. With this comment, Sharon suggested that "teachings," or religious beliefs, outweighed "rules," or religious behavioral norms, practices and institutions. Similarly, a number of my informants characterized normative Judaism as overly focused on "rules" without attention to their "meaning."

Next, two invited panelists told their story to the group: Jude, who was Jewish, and his wife Tabitha, who was Catholic. Long married, Jude and Tabitha were raising their children in both Judaism and Catholicism. Jude described to the group his nine-year-old daughter's reflection on being part of an interfaith family, clearly delighted at her insight.

> Our daughter said, 'If I'm Jewish and Catholic, and I marry someone who's Buddhist and Muslim, our children would have four religions!' I thought this was so profound. It showed that, contrary to what people say, being raised in both religions is *not* confusing. My daughter can identify with more than one religion without being confused. She gets that it's the individual and humanity that matter, not the religion.[2]

Here Jude interjected that normative religious institutions and their representatives, such as priests, rabbis, and their professional associations that forbade intermarriage ignored the importance of both individual persons and the world beyond the religions' own membership. Instead, he suggested, these figures were more concerned with preserving their own power over their members and false divisions between their members and non-members. One of the ways in which they did this was to claim that children raised in multiple religious traditions would be "confused," as Sharon had alluded earlier. Repeating his daughter's comments was Jude's way of reassuring the assembled

[2] Names have been changed.

interfaith couples that the "scare tactics" of opponents of intermarriage were disingenuous and did not reflect the truth of intermarried families' experiences.

Tabitha added that religions teach the same ultimate truth, as Jude believed their daughter's comment to have shown.

> The religions aren't incompatible or contradictory. Catholicism came out of Judaism. The ethics and morals are very similar. That's why we marry each other! For Jude and me, even ethnically we're more alike than different. Both of us are from working-class immigrant families where our grandparents didn't speak English, so we relate to each other's backgrounds.

Like Jude, Tabitha argued that religious institutions and norms created false divisions between members of different religions by focusing on what makes them unique. But Jude and Tabitha emphasized their similar backgrounds and outlook on life throughout the discussion, saying that because of their similarities as individuals and their recognition of their religions' shared teachings, their multi-religion household ran smoothly. The descriptions they offered of their religious background did not sound terribly similar, however, at other points in the discussion: Tabitha spoke with warmth of the liberal, activist Catholic community she was raised in, and Jude recalled his non-English-speaking Orthodox Jewish upbringing in a Jewish neighborhood. But here they emphasized the aspects of their backgrounds that were shared or similar.

Jude and Tabitha's argument that parents could teach children to understand their identities as inherently multiple was an idea with some currency in settings from multicultural education to raising multiracial children to contemporary American political ethics. Just as multiracial children were often pressured to "choose" one identity lest they have one assigned to them by society, multi-religious children felt a similar pressure to

choose one religious identity.[3] But children should resist such pressure, Jude suggested, for their own good. From an early age, children could see that religious values like tolerance and acceptance reached beyond any one religion, suggesting that these values were natural and obvious to anyone. Thus, in his view, the contention that religious identity should be single and not multiple was faulty because it ignored every religion's own universalist teachings.

In this view, since norms found in more than one religion were identified with ultimate truth, intermarried couples had special access to it because they approached it from more than one standpoint. The imaginary person in Jude's daughter's comment who had four religious backgrounds would see clearly the similarities in those religions' teachings. Thus, he or she would have deeper religious understanding than someone with only one or two religious backgrounds.

Despite its arithmetical simplicity, this interpretation of the basic oneness of religious truth stood at odds with some major teachings of classical Judaism and Christianity. Christianity has had a complex history of contradictory stances toward other religions, including supercessionism, the claim that Christianity is the "New Israel" and thus replaces Judaism, and denigration of Judaism. After the Holocaust, a serious effort arose to stop anti-Judaism, as seen in publications by the World Council of Churches in 1948 and Vatican II in 1965 (Cross and Livingstone 2005b). Most Jews see belief in the divinity of Jesus, a belief fundamental to normative Christianity, as a boundary that Jews do not cross (Edelstein 1994). Jews have not even always agreed on whether Christians are monotheistic because of their Trinitarian God (Schwarzchild, Berman and Elon

[3] Ideas about multiculturalism and multiracialism can be found, for example, throughout the Web site of the National Association for Multicultural Education. See also American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry 1999.

2007). Some universalist ideas can be found in Judaism in the example of the "Noachide Laws," which Jewish tradition sees as a set of universal moral laws that apply to non-Jews, prohibiting offenses such as idolatry, blasphemy, bloodshed, and theft. However, Christianity and Judaism each bear complex, multi-faceted, and at times contradictory relationships to other religions, relationships that have developed and changed over many generations and in many different contexts. Dovetail conference participants' views reflect the Protestant conception of a "universal priesthood of all believers," principle of "private judgment." They also include the American Protestant emphasis on the "moral and psychological improvement of individuals," religious tolerance, and individual rights, in their emphasis on individuals' right to interpret religious teachings for themselves, with or without the approval of religious institutions, and their interpretation of "ultimate religious truth" (Cross and Livingstone 2005a).

Nevertheless, many couples at the Dovetail conference overlooked their religions' historical, structural, and theological differences in favor of what they saw as more fundamental similarities. This move toward reductionism and universalism facilitated a corresponding move toward individualism. For this group of intermarried couples, individual persons were more important than religious rituals or norms. Tabitha continued, "We're always modeling openness to religious ideas for our extended family. And we're modeling how to accept people the way they are, by not asking them to become another religion." Tabitha felt a responsibility to teach others her understanding of universal religious truth through "modeling," because in her view some people were blinded by religious norms to the special insights that intermarriage offered.

By modeling acceptance and openness, said Nancy, the session's moderator, Jude and Tabitha were also modeling respect for humanity and individualism. "Modeling" these insights from the experience of intermarriage would benefit not only religious leaders, who might awaken to unrealized religious truths, but also American popular culture, which was plagued by shallowness. "Interfaith" life centered on living out these deep values, said Nancy, even though American culture more broadly seemed to equate "interfaith" with the view that "everyone should get along," which she saw not as a religious view but a cultural one. Nancy pointed out an instance of this view on the television show *The OC,* which aired from 2003 to 2006. This prime-time drama, centered on a group of Californian teenagers, had made pop culture waves when it introduced "Chrismukkah," an irreverent blend of Christian and Jewish holiday symbols. In one "Chrismukkah" scene, a teenage boy places candy canes and menorahs side by side on the mantel, delighted that he and his family can have both. In another scene, a teenage girl presents her Chrismukkah invention: the "yarmuclaus," a velvety red yarmulke-shaped Santa hat with white faux fur around the edge and a white faux fur ball on top. As of early 2008, the yarmuclaus could still be purchased on the WB television network's online shop even though *The OC* was off the air, demonstrating that it endured as a humorous way of promoting tolerance. Nancy disliked this portrayal of an "interfaith" holiday celebration because it ignored the religious basis of such celebrations in favor of a "shallow, cultural" understanding, not a "serious" one. When celebrated together, she said, these holidays ought to teach peace, universal respect and the unity of humankind.

Nancy went on to describe what she saw as a failure to understand these holidays' real teachings in the comments of a priest-rabbi team calling itself "The God Squad," whose message was deeply opposed to that of the Dovetail Institute. These clergymen had recently appeared on the television program *Good Morning America* to argue that Christmas and Hanukkah should be observed only by members of their respective religions. The intermarried couples at Dovetail felt the God Squad's rejection of holiday-blending to constitute a breach of religious authenticity: how could these clergy call themselves people of God while rejecting and excluding people who wanted to celebrate their religious holidays together? The God Squad represented an "uneducated" viewpoint, said Nancy, "stuck in the old defensive ethnic" model. While the God Squad would probably characterize their view differently, Nancy meant to depict the extent of what she viewed as misunderstandings of interfaith life more than to give Hollywood or the God Squad a fair representation. This comparison was meant to build solidarity among the people present. They felt misunderstood and shortchanged whether religious authorities rejected intermarriage or secular American culture celebrated it, because they did not see their self-understanding reflected in either depiction. Since the "simplistic" Hollywood approach and the "ethnic" approach that "forces people to stay in old irrelevant boxes" were all that most people knew of interfaith marriage, "we have to grapple with that when we model," Nancy said.

Where others saw interfaith couples as misguided, these couples saw themselves as prophetic. "Interfaith families are outcasts, like the prophets were, and like the prophets, interfaith families are contributing to *tikkun olam*," said Nancy. Her comparison of the intermarried discussion participants to biblical prophets does not just suggest that

the intermarried couples have special religious understanding, but that they have special access to God. They felt that their moral outlook was holy, and not only equally as legitimate as normative religious traditions, but indeed a surpassing of these traditions in the sense that they recognized both individual persons and the unity of humanity as ultimate values.

In Nancy's understanding, Dovetail participants' complex blending of religions to arrive at open, tolerant unity had been endorsed by God: "At different times, people have needed God's word in different ways," Nancy said. "So there have been different covenants and different interpretations." Thus she explained that the reason for the existence of multiple normative religions was that God spoke to people in the ways that they would be able to understand, which varied across time, but that God and God's messages remain unchanged. These different renditions of God's word were being modeled all at once by interfaith families in a "prophetic" way. Even though clergy and religious institutions often saw interfaith couples as wrong-headed and dangerous to their communities' cohesion, the couples themselves felt that they demonstrated the true core of these religions' teachings.

Indeed, one woman, Laura, believed that the Virgin Mary had directly given her divine approval to transcend religious exclusivity because love for and between individual persons was a higher value. Laura was a devout Catholic and was troubled by her sense that Catholicism was exclusivist, especially since she had married a non-Catholic. She went to see a visionary in Yugoslavia "who was seeing the Blessed Mother appear," and asked the visionary what Mary had to say about marrying a non-Catholic. Laura told the group that through the visionary, "Mary said it would be very hard, but

that [her husband] did not have to convert." She also talked to her priest one Christmas, early in her marriage, and he said that her husband did not have to become a Catholic: the important thing was that she loved him.

"Yes!" Tabitha agreed. "The most important thing is that you love each other and not your religion." The claims of religious norms had to be subordinated to love between individuals.

Even some clergy who were intermarried had adopted this view. Michael, a Presbyterian minister, was married to a Jewish woman, Deborah. While they were raising their children as Jews exclusively, he remained committed to Christianity for himself and led an evangelical congregation. "Christianity is individual," he said. "It doesn't have to cover the whole family."

But his congregants wondered how a Christian minister could head a Jewish family, since they did not share the same core beliefs or practices. Michael and Deborah did not see their religious differences as a problem. Their children were being raised in only one religion, so they felt that the children would clearly understand their own religious identities. The "interfaith" component of their family was in Michael and Deborah's spousal relationship, where they could discuss it and negotiate as needed. "I model for my evangelical Christian congregants that you can be strongly Christian without the whole family being Christian, and we can be strongly in Judaism too," Michael said.

For Michael, "modeling" meant teaching ways of being Christian or Jewish that would seem unfamiliar to many normative Christians and Jews. "My congregants are old progressives and young Koreans who are very conservative. I manage the conservatives'

objections to interfaith marriage by teaching scriptures that undercut Christian certainty about being the only way to salvation. Christian certainty is part of mainstream Christian culture, but it isn't necessary to interpretation of the Bible or Christianity." He interpreted Christianity as being tolerant of non-Christians rather than viewing them as condemned to hell for being unsaved.

Despite Michael's modeling and teaching, his congregants did not let go of their "Christian certainty" so easily. Often they would assume that Deborah was a messianic Jew, and that the children were meant to become Christian eventually. "My evangelical congregants see our raising children as Jews as an opportunity for the children to accept Jesus when they're thirteen or fourteen," Michael said. "I say no. This is identity formation. The goal is for the children to be and stay Jewish, not for them to choose as young adults." Even though he was a Presbyterian minister, there was nothing wrong with being the only Christian in his nuclear family, for Michael or for his family members.

Participation in both Jewish and Christian rituals helped many of the couples in this discussion to model respect for each other's religion as well as to augment their family's experience of them. Directly countering the claim that religious boundaries had to be maintained for the integrity of the religious community, participants in this discussion argued that they better understood and appreciated their religions when they crossed or erased such boundaries. "Our children are exposed to Christian rituals and church. They respect it and know the common ground between Christianity and Judaism," said Deborah. Michael credited himself with "energizing" Deborah's parents' practice of Judaism. He advocated for a Sabbath observance, so the whole family took up

the practice of having Shabbat dinner and lighting Shabbat candles at Deborah's parents' house.

While Michael admitted that the divinity of Jesus remained an irreconcilable point of disagreement between Jews and Christians, the decoupling of ritual and belief enabled his family to comfortably move between Christian and Jewish contexts. At the same time as they crossed boundaries, participants also redefined key religious terms so that their boundary-blurring was a fulfillment rather than a transgression of religious norms. Decoupling religious beliefs and rituals was an important part of this move. One participant distinguished between religion and tradition: "Tradition is more like ethnicity or culture, so theology shouldn't get in the way" of participating in other religions' rituals. Another participant clarified, "You can practice together without having to believe the same. Shabbat is a *practice*." These remarks suggest that religious ritual should be open to anyone who finds it meaningful—in other words, that it should be both individual and universal. Thus, even though he was not Jewish, Michael could urge his in-laws and his Jewish immediate family to have Shabbat dinner together every week because he found the Shabbat rituals meaningful for them as a family. The fact that he was a devoted Christian had no bearing on his practice of Shabbat or the meaning he found in it, because its meaning could be universally understood.

Similarly, Jude said that his own Jewish practice was energized by the interfaith context of his family.

> If I'd married a Jew, I wouldn't be as religious. I would have been lazy about it. Being married to a Catholic, I'm responsible for the Jewishness in the family, so I have to know the religion and do it and keep learning.

His interest in continuing Jewish practices in his family was rooted in the universalism that he discerned in Judaism, which he and Tabitha had discussed earlier. His upbringing in Orthodox Judaism, with Yiddish-speaking grandparents and a fully Jewish neighborhood, had done less to secure his Jewish practice than his having a Catholic wife. Their individual interests, family relationships, and universalistic interests shaped their religious practices more than the religion's norms did. Their experiences taught them that traditions, practices and ethnicities that seemed specific and exclusive to just one religion—for example, Shabbat or Christmas—were just the container, not the contents. Rather, the contents of any religious practice were universal respect for others and the unity of mankind. The "container" of religious ritual, properly understood, should be open to anyone who finds it meaningful.

Some people in the circle commented that even the divinity of Jesus did not have to be a stumbling block for "interfaith" families. Why not, they asked, just bracket the issue of Jesus' divinity, or the issue of salvation, and agree that each family member could have their own equally valid view? The family could still agree that religion itself was important. Returning to the universalist theme, a woman suggested that as long as they were religious in some way, they were united more than they were divided: "The problem isn't the two religions, it's religion versus the secularism of American culture." By focusing on their spiritual lives, even though they did not share one religion, the family could avoid the commercialism and consumerism that many people here saw as characterizing secular American culture. Their spiritual lives would follow the Protestant model of "private judgment," allowing each family member to use their individual conscience as the arbiter of religious truth.

"My interfaith parents chose Judaism for me," said Sharon. "I choose both religions for my kids. Kids will choose for themselves what they want at some point anyway. Having a choice made for you gives clarity and puts off ambiguity and struggle until later in life. If kids are brought up in both, they have to figure it out at a young age." In this view, religious norms had no role in a person's religious decision-making; rather, only personal preference, which could be discerned through "struggle," mattered.

Nancy summed up, "So parents should figure out how they want to go and the kids will adapt."

Most of the couples taking part in this discussion and others over the weekend said that they had been aware of a lack of acceptance of interfaith relationships from early in their relationships. At least two interfaith couples who were dating and contemplating marriage attended this discussion session in order to learn what issues they might face and how other couples were handling them. These couples worried about how their families might react to the idea of having more than one religious tradition in the family and how they would negotiate religious life cycle ceremonies. Wedding arrangements, as informants outside the context of this conference said, were just the beginning of the negotiations. The couples would have to negotiate their own potentially conflicting wishes about being married in a church by a minister or under a chuppah by a rabbi, or both, along with their parents' and grandparents' wishes or demands. Conflicts over these options were often smoothed over by choosing a secular location and officiant, such as having a judge perform the wedding in a park. The birth of children, many informants said, awakened latent wishes for baptisms or *brit milah* (circumcision) that had seemed totally alien before, but were now impossible to ignore. Knowing that they

could not please all of their parents and grandparents without doing things that were wrong for themselves, contradictory or impermissible for the clergy involved, some combination of these people would have to be disappointed or kept in the dark.

**Enlightened children**

Most participants in this discussion said that they had talked about how they would raise their children early in their relationships, since they were aware of the conflicting expectations of their families, clergy and religious institutions, and their own desires. Jude and Tabitha said that they had discussed how to raise their potential children even before their first date. From these discussions about childrearing initiated early in their relationships, the couples turned outward repeatedly for help with and validation of their choices. These worries combined with fears that their future children would be "confused" by having parents of different religious backgrounds, and that the children would opt for no religion at all rather than either or both of the ones with which they were raised. Dovetail conference presenters emphasized that their children were not confused by their families' religious arrangements, whether they raised the children in multiple religions or only one.

One panel featured the children themselves, teenagers who responded to questions about their interfaith upbringing. The universalism and individualism of the interfaith couples had clearly made its way into their children's views. Most of the teenagers' families were affiliated with a local organization for families raising their children in Judaism and Christianity, the Interfaith Families Project (IFFP). This organization ran a Sunday school "to teach, not preach," the "religious and cultural heritages" of Judaism

and Christianity. The school strove to "expose children to the moral values, traditions, history, and wonder of Jewish and Christian religious life," using an "objective" viewpoint. By "objective," IFFP seems to mean that they have no agenda, i.e., they wish to "teach, not preach." IFFP's "objectivity" seems to be informed by the concept of "fairness" as it operates in American news media, part of an America egalitarian and individualistic ideology. This version of "fairness" and "objectivity" assumes that there are two sides to every story and that the only way to be fair to both sides is to give each one equal time to make its case. The listener then discerns his or her opinion, since there is no clear truth other than whatever persuades the listener. The purpose of such exposure was not to bring up young Jews or Christians, but to help interfaith children "feel comfortable" with the two religions and their "dual faith identities" (Interfaith Families Project of the Greater Washington, DC Area, 1996a). This model of exposure to religions rather than indoctrination did not seem to assume the importance of "struggle" that Sharon had mentioned as part of determining one's religious preferences.

The panel was moderated by a Jewish youth leader who was an African-American convert to Judaism. With *tzitzit*[5] showing at his waist, he was clearly different in several respects from these white, mostly secular teenagers, and perhaps had had more experience with the "struggle" model of religious commitment. As his comments were animated and he appeared to be deeply engaged in thinking about religious education, mentioning research about adolescents' new interest in connecting to God through religious traditions and the maturity with which the panelists thought about God.

[5] Fringes worn by observant Jewish men.

Personal religious struggle or connection to God was not a central theme of the young panelists' comments, however. Most of them viewed themselves as primarily secular. Jon, one of the panelists, saw his religious education's primary value in its contribution to "tolerance" and having an "open mind." "I believe in the values that God represents, but not God as a being. The values of God are about helping people," he said.

Leah, another panelist, jokingly described herself as a "Cashew," for "Catholic-Jew," a term she said came from a *Saturday Night Live* TV sketch. A student in IFFP since childhood, she was now in college. Reflecting on her experiences, she echoed the universalist sentiments that the older conference participants had already raised.

> God is connection between people, and the main tenets of religions are all about how to treat other people. War results from not recognizing that.
>
> I would not want to raise children in a strong one-faith household because I don't feel it myself. I'd rather have religious education for educational and tolerance purposes, to have my children be open-minded.
>
> People should do Bible study because it's part of our culture, so if you know the Bible you'll understand more. I experienced no pressure from IFFP to believe or practice anything.

Adam, also a college student, had attended IFFP until age 13 and had also had a Coming of Age ceremony. His religious self-description, he said, was "Bothie," that is to say, 'both Jewish and Christian.' He formerly described himself as "interfaith," but decided that this term was no longer satisfactory since he really was only Jewish and Christian, not a member of all faiths. Though his father is Jewish and he attends High Holiday services, Adam did not count himself in a minyan because the community in which he participated did not consider him Jewish. While he described himself as "Bothie," and he could "find God" in experiences of ritual that he chose to attend, such as a gospel church, he did not feel devotion to any faith for himself. On that note, Adam

sounded ambivalent: he admired people who had strong, devout faith, and he felt sad not to have that too. But IFFP had taught tolerance, openness, and respect for other people's faiths, with no pressure to believe or practice anything, and he was glad to have had that broad education.

Jake and Amy, two siblings on the panel, shared the view that "being knowledgeable about both religions is good," as Amy said, regardless of belonging to either one of them. "I'd like to learn about Kwanzaa because it's a different holiday, so it has a different meaning. I'd like to learn what that's like and how it feels," said Jake. "Broad exposure to different things is good. Having choice makes religion more meaningful," said Amy. They agreed that the Washington, D.C. area was a hospitable area in which to live as a multi-faith family because it was accepting of people's being "so many things at once," a comment that echoes Ira's view that his daughter understands her identity as inherently multiple.

The panelists maintained that the main attraction of religion for them was the opportunity to gather with family members for holiday celebrations. Jon, who considered himself "independent," neither Jewish nor Christian, said that he enjoyed the religious holidays that brought his family members together. Family was also central to the religious experiences of Jake and Amy. While their Italian Catholic father's family had not been happy with his marriage to a Conservative Jewish woman, both sides of the extended family traveled across the country to gather for religious holidays. Jake and Amy identified as Jewish but celebrated Catholic holidays, intertwined with Italian culture, and while their religious upbringing had mainly centered on Judaism, they studied Hebrew in religious school and Italian in public school. Though they were raised

mainly Jewish, their non-Jewish father was supportive and wanted the children to learn "both sides." Leah also reported that her extended family joined together for religious holidays.

Leah described her "Coming of Age Ceremony" in the IFFP Sunday school at age thirteen. She presented reports about the lives and ideas of one Jewish woman and one Christian woman. This ceremony was intended to both incorporate and replace *bat mitzvah* and Confirmation. The IFFP's Web site describes the Coming of Age Program as an embrace of young adulthood and adolescence, but not as a formal acceptance of either Judaism or Christianity as an adult, as the Jewish and Christian confirmation ceremonies involve. Rather, the Coming of Age Program emphasizes the uniqueness of the individual and the personal meanings that that individual finds wherever he or she wants. In the program, children

> * Discover and honor the unique spirit and qualities of each participant.
> * Help each participant find ways to create a rewarding and meaningful life for both herself and her community.
> * Honor the richness of each family's heritage and dual faith background and explore the meaning this holds for each participant.
> * Examine what the Jewish and Christian scriptures and traditions mean to each participant intellectually, spiritually, morally and ethically…. (Interfaith Families Project of the Greater Washington, DC Area, 1996b).

The Coming of Age Program's self-description emphasizes self-discovery and personal meaning. This language has made its way into mainstream religion as well, such as the common title of "Jewish journeys" for Jewish adult education programs. But in these cases, it functions more as a way into an existing normative tradition, not as something that is supposedly being invented.

The specific goals of the Coming of Age Program seem to reflect what religious educators in some Jewish or Christian congregations might seek for their students—for example, working together for the greater good, making thoughtful and caring choices, introspection—but in this case it is not situated as a response to God's command or call. Indeed, where God is mentioned, it is with a parenthetical note: "as one 'defines' God".[7] The Coming of Age Program encourages students to become introspective and socially aware adults, but it is unclear whether it encourages them to become religious adults. The definition of religion is itself in question in the program's structure and philosophy, since all judgments about meaning and spirituality are left up to the individual student. The only assumed element in the Coming of Age Program is "heritage," which comes from a student's parents and is an accident of birth whose subsequent significance is up to the student.

Ironically, the adolescent children's presentations at the Dovetail Conference innocently displayed both their parents' universalism and the kind of religious opting-out that their parents and communities feared. Only one of the six teenagers identified with either Judaism or Christianity as their own chosen religion; one of the other five was "half and half," and the rest were not religious. The value of religious education, they all agreed, was that it taught "tolerance" and "open-mindedness." They felt that it was important to know about Christian and Jewish religious beliefs and history since they were the premise of so much of western culture. Either religion was fine, as far as these children were concerned, but choosing neither religion was fine too. Adam even seemed to feel sorry for people who were worried about intermarriage's effect on children's

[7] Interfaith Families Project of the Greater Washington, DC Area, 1996b. Quotation marks around "defines" are in the original.

religious identity. At a Hillel discussion at his college, he said, “People said they couldn’t imagine marrying someone who wasn’t culturally Jewish. People are scared that their children won’t come out right. But really it will be okay.”

Some of the differences between the parents’ and children’s concerns for religion can be attributed to life course differences. As people raise children, they tend to use organized religion as a support to a much greater extent than when they were single and/or childless. Teenagers like these Dovetail-affiliated ones may well experience religion as more central to their lives as they progress through the life course. At the same time, the intellectual, choice-focused approach to religion with which their parents have raised them does appear to have made its mark on the teenagers’ thinking about religion.

While many of the people in the audience who asked questions and offered comments were still developing their thoughts about “interfaith” marriage, the speakers at the Dovetail conference had clearly formulated what I call a universalist individualist approach, a set of values and ideas heavily dependent on a popular American definition of religion. The majority of the universalist individualists raised their children in both religions or advocated doing so. Their model emphasizes that “interfaith” families—in which more than one religion is practiced—are unified by their rational approach to religion. They expect family members to make their own informed decisions about their religious beliefs and practices while demonstrating “respect” for all religious beliefs. They believe that all religions essentially express the same sentiments or ideas, and that people can and should participate in religious practices that are not their own to the extent that they choose to do so.

Mary Heléne and Ned Rosenbaum's book, *Celebrating Our Differences: Living Two Faiths in One Marriage*, provides a detailed model of universalist individualism in practice. They see religious identity as entirely individual and do not seek a unifying religious identity for the family. Instead, their family's identity is "interfaith." As a couple, they share the aspects of each other's religious observances that do not contradict their own, as demonstrations of solidarity but not shared religious experience. They foreground the sense that their family is composed of separate individuals with personal identities (Rosenbaum and Rosenbaum 1994). The model of intermarried family life that the Rosenbaums offer is more highly developed and deeply intellectual than that of many of my informants, emphasizing thought and deemphasizing normative ritual practice.

In their life as an interfaith couple, they follow two separate, parallel religious tracks: Ned is Jewish and Mary Heléne is a practicing Catholic. Their children are educated in both religions and encouraged to choose. The Rosenbaums describe it as "both parents [raising] all children in both faiths," arguing that this way the children "begin to think about making a serious religious commitment" as adolescents, so that their "religious identity…is likely to be more mature and thought-through than one that's merely the continuation of a set of habits inculcated in childhood" (Rosenbaum and Rosenbaum 1994, 112–113). They express appreciation for ritual, but see it as something malleable to the needs of the family rather than something that proceeds according to its own history and logic. For example, the Rosenbaums describe their family's own "rituals" of reading aloud together on Friday nights, based on traditional religious rituals but not a full enactment of them. Their adaptation of religious traditions is meant to include all family members while not pushing practices or theology on those who differ.

As far as belonging to community goes, the Rosenbaums see that commitment as one made by individuals rather than the entire family. Ned and Mary Heléne may attend religious services together at a synagogue or church, but never in a way that includes both as full participants. Their attendance is as individuals who choose to belong to the religious community, with their spouse as a supporter but not a member. In this way, they foreground the sense that their family is made up of separate individuals with their own freely chosen identities. Individuals can exercise their conscience in deciding which aspects of their own religion they agree with or believe in, and the parents can require the children to explore thoroughly before making a religious commitment.

Before that commitment, the child is without a particular religious identity. Mary Heléne tells a story of her daughter asking about her religious identity, and she told her: "'Your father is a Jew, your mother is Catholic; you are a little girl'….We were saying, in effect, that choosing a religion is something you ought to be grown up for" (Rosenbaum and Rosenbaum 1994, 113). Like the IFFP Coming of Age Program, Mary Heléne Rosenbaum here foregrounds the "choice" aspect of religious identity and downplays the role of "heritage" in a child's religiosity.

The Rosenbaums' book is written to be an example of how interfaith marriage can be done, but also as a gentle warning to those considering intermarriage. Mary Heléne writes that initially she felt that intermarriage was a bad idea. But she has changed her mind and now considers intermarriage workable due to her positive experiences as she and her husband have led parallel religious lives. Ned writes that he has experienced the opposite. After becoming more observant of Jewish law, he began to feel that intermarriage was more difficult than he thought it would be when he was first married

and non-observant. He now feels that Jewish observance ideally would involve the whole family and optimally is not an individual experience. Still, his change of heart remains individually-centered, not based on the needs of the Jewish community per se.

Clergy at the Dovetail conference participated in universalist individualist discourses as well, demonstrating that these discourses were persuasive not only to lay people. At a panel discussion, a rabbi, a Catholic priest, a Congregationalist minister, and an imam argued for the adoption of what I call universalist individualist ideas, saying that they benefited intermarried couples, their children, and ultimately the entire religious community. For example, the rabbi said that he looks to the idea that God has both essence and attributes to inform his approach to interfaith marriage. In this view, while there is only one god, there are different ways of perceiving God. Religions channel generically human experiences through different symbols, he said: thus, matzah and the cross both can represent agony and ecstasy.

The priest offered what he said was a "realistic" approach to intermarriage, saying that he preferred to "meet folks where they are, not where they should be." Against the backdrop of his experience of having performed about 1000 Catholic-Jewish weddings along with a smaller number of Catholic-Muslim and Catholic-Hindu ones, he said that he counsels engaged interfaith couples, he helps them work to figure out what they believe. Endogamous couples never have to face this task, he said. However, not all priests were as open to intermarriage as he was, he noted. While Vatican II had "technically" eased the process of intermarriage, some dioceses, churches, and priests still were unaware that the church allowed interfaith marriage and were unfamiliar with the dispensations that made it possible.

The rabbi echoed the priest's "realism," saying that the Jewish community's refusal to approve of intermarriage could not stop Jews from intermarrying. "To think otherwise is a rabbinical power trip," he declared. Worse, official opposition to intermarriage in the Jewish community prevented rabbis from interacting with intermarrying couples as effectively as they otherwise might, he said. Congregational rabbis often are not allowed to do interfaith weddings, even though some are willing, he said, and this situation has led to "maverick" rabbis who can be hired to perform interfaith weddings but who do not offer counseling to help the intermarrying couple discern their religious values. In addition, official opposition to intermarriage hinders religious education of children in synagogues, he said. As an associate rabbi at a synagogue, he had overheard a religious school teacher tell a group of third-graders that they needed to have a Jewish identity so that they would not marry non-Jews when they grew up. This was a "religious abomination," he asserted. Rather than educating children into a religious identity for the purpose of perpetuating the religion, he argued that children should be educated for religious values. Children of intermarriage should be educated in both their parents' religions so they will be "enlightened," not dedicated to their one religion out of "ignorance." At the same time, the rabbi said, the child should be raised in only one religion to ensure a coherent religious identity.

The Congregationalist minister said that her church had no official barriers to intermarriage, which allowed her to focus instead on creative rethinking of community and religious expression. She was interested in continuing Christianity and Judaism not through "preservation" and "enforcement" but through "creative exploration and heart." Though these religious leaders differed somewhat in their approaches to intermarriage,

they agreed that institutional disapproval was harmful to intermarried couples, their children, and clergy members' relationship to them. Their discussion emphasized the needs of intermarried couples as particular individuals as they discerned their personal beliefs, and the ways in which clergy members could help them understand their needs. It is likely that in other contexts, these clergy members addressed other perspectives about intermarriage as well—from congregants to other clergy to their communities' historical and theological self-definitions and shared practices—but these considerations were left out of this discussion.

**American Individualism and the Limits of Community**

These Dovetail conference participants' comments reflect themes of individualism and autonomy that have been present in American culture for generations. America's history as a settler society encouraged a cultural orientation toward the autonomy of the individual. It also engendered an American character that rejects the authority of traditions handed down from earlier generations in order to enable children to surpass their parents' status, as anthropologist Margaret Mead explained in her 1942 study of American national character (Mead 1975[1942], 41). This cultural "orientation toward a different future" includes a belief that when a child becomes an adult, he or she will "pass beyond" his or her parents and "leave their standards behind." Dovetail conference participants implicitly relied on such American cultural assumptions in their sense that their universalist and individualist understandings of religious teachings were correct despite resistance from normative religious communities and leaders because they could see themselves as "passing beyond" these normative standards toward a "different

future." Nancy's description of normative religious boundaries as "old, irrelevant boxes" and ethnic defensiveness suggests her sense that she and other intermarried couples had moved beyond these categories. Universalist individualists incorporate into their strategies for religious education this expectation that their children will choose differently from their parents.

But at the same time, Mead argues, an opposing emphasis pulls Americans toward conformity and away from innovation. Universalist individualists' use of the familiar model of the Sunday School to teach their children about religion, despite their own discomfort with religious norms, reflects this emphasis on conformity.

> Educators exclaim patiently over the paradox that Americans believe in change, believe in progress, and yet do their best, or so it seems, to retard their children, to bind them to parental ways, to inoculate them against the new ways to which they give lip service (Mead 1975[1942], 41).

Thus, according to Mead, American culture includes a tension between expecting children to reject traditions in favor of finding their own way and encouraging children not to venture far from their parents' traditions. This tension is evident in the discourses of the Dovetail conference. For example, the intermarried adults worry that their children might reject religion entirely, but they enroll their children in a Sunday School program in which they learn that the value of religion is primarily in its cultural relevance. Mead's observations of American culture highlight the tension in universalist individualist discourses between resisting religious norms and the desire to maintain connection to religious traditions.

This tension also highlights the extent to which individualism, understood in different ways depending on the context, is an ideology in American culture. Universalist individualist discourses explicitly call attention to individual autonomy even as the

people who engage in them recapitulate the forms of the very institutions they disavow, such as Sunday Schools. In asserting the right of every individual to discern universal religious truths for him- or herself, universalist individualist discourses suggest that all people are equal in their ability to do so, while also implying that the results of such introspection and spiritual seeking will ultimately be the same for everyone. Individualism as an ideology works in this fashion across many spheres of society, not just that of religion, according to sociologist John Meyer (1987). While many of us understand our lives to be organized mainly according to the choices that we make as individuals, in the typical "life course," most Americans people generally pursue the same activities at the same points in their lives: for example, age-graded schools and standardized retirement ages (Meyer 1987; Meyer, et al. 1987). But cultural ideologies of individualism highlight aspects of our lives over which we do have control, and ignore or explain away institutional structures and patterns in which we participate without explicitly or consciously having chosen to do so.

Universalist individualist discourses do something similar, using the language of individualism to interpret their personal experiences as the result of pure choice and resistance to externally imposed norms. Yet institutional structures and patterns continue to influence them, not only in the form of Sunday Schools but also in their engagement with religion itself. Belief in God, with or without participation in and acceptance by normative religious communities, is shared by most Americans. Only 5% of Americans said that they did not believe in God or a universal spirit at all, according to the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey that the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life conducted in 2007. Interestingly, many of those who said that they did not believe in

God still identified with religious traditions, including Judaism and Christianity (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2009b). While many of my informants who are affiliated with Dovetail and IFFP feel that they are creating new, personalized ways of engaging with their religious traditions, they do so with the same institutional structures and patterns that they criticize.

As much as they struggled with religious traditions' place in their individual and family lives, the Dovetail conference participants rarely spoke about the importance of membership in a local religious community, even though many of them did belong to churches and synagogues, and a church and synagogue that shared a building had hosted their conference. Their membership in these communities appeared to be peripheral to their personal religious experiences. This focus on the self, too, has roots in American culture. As Mead explains, whether the American self rejects the past or clings to it, it ignores the context in which that self arose. Similarly, universalist individualist discourses emphasized the particular religious experiences of intermarried couples, but tended to ignore the familial and social context in which their personal religious experiences had been formed.

This emphasis on the individual without acknowledgement of the context in which he or she lives and is formed has inspired concern about the vitality of American communities. In his observations of America around 1830, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that

> Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself (Tocqueville in Bellah et al. 1985, 37).

Tocqueville saw this self-isolation as problematic for American community, and more recent scholarly commentators on American society have continued to worry about this aspect of American culture. Sociologists, philosophers and political scientists have repeatedly described and analyzed the negative effects of individualistic ideology on the vitality of American community (Bellah et al. 1985, 1991; Putnam 2000; Wuthnow 1998; Walzer 1994). Universalist individualism emphasizes these currents in American culture that undermine the cohesion of religious communities. As the Rosenbaums said, individuals join communities by choice, not as part of a family or by default. As the IFFP teenagers showed, the religious choice can sometimes be "none."

This move toward individual religious autonomy places subjective experience equal to, if not more important than, communal experience of religion, so that religious and communal norms shrink in importance if the individual does not view them as personally fulfilling. Sociologist Robert Bellah observes that even "for many churchgoers the obligation of doctrinal orthodoxy sits lightly indeed, and the idea that all creedal statements must receive a personal reinterpretation is widely accepted" (Bellah 1991[1970], 41). This emphasis on personal fulfillment continues earlier versions of American expressive and utilitarian individualism (Bellah et al. 1985). In this newer form of American individualism, the individual can manage and manipulate his or her private life to achieve greater fulfillment, freely choosing or rejecting commitments, including marriage, work, and religious membership, solely on the basis of "life-effectiveness."

> The expressive culture, now deeply allied with the utilitarian, reveals its difference from earlier patterns by its readiness to treat normative commitments as so many alternative strategies of self-fulfillment. What has dropped out are the old normative expectations of what makes life worth living (Bellah et al. 1985, 44–48).

In other words, the context in which self-fulfillment takes on meaning beyond the individual, whether in terms of history, theology, ethnicity, or something else, is missing. Some of the participants in the American Jewish discourses about intermarriage denounced exactly this perceived lack of "normative commitments" among intermarried Jews.

The American cultural context clearly informs the ways in which universalist individualists framed their religious commitments as personal choices that emphasized self-fulfillment and commitment to the good of humanity. Scholar of American religion Wade Clark Roof (1993) describes emphasis on self-fulfillment and personal judgment as prevalent among baby boomers (Americans born between 1946 and 1962). This generation began to reach adulthood at the same time as American Jewish discourses on intermarriage began to reflect increasing anxiety about individualism among Jews and its role in growing rates of intermarriage. It appears that, at least among Dovetail conference participants, these individualistic themes have made their way into the consciousness of younger generations as well. As Bellah et al. (1985) worry that the growing importance of individualism in Americans' lives eats away at the fabric of American community, Cohen and Eisen (2000) likewise worry that it severely undermines American Jewish community. Cohen and Eisen feel that the "sovereign self" is likely to "contribute to the dissolution of communal institutions and intergenerational commitment." Like many of my informants, their informants, who are "moderately affiliated" Jews and who are predominantly endogamous, also conceptualize religion as a customizable and private realm of their lives, seeing themselves and not clergy or community as the final arbiter of their religious practices and identification. Cohen and Eisen argue that American Jews

today, unlike in the past, primarily experience Judaism in the "private sphere," with friends and family and within the self; make their decisions about Judaism based on "the sovereign self" on an ongoing basis; and reject the public sphere and institutional life as important expressions of themselves as Jews. For these Jews, Jewish practices and beliefs are adopted only to the extent that they are personally meaningful (Cohen and Eisen 2000). Even though individual Jews still seek meaning and attempt to do it through Judaism, they remain ambivalent about it.

Universalist individualism, then, echoes prominent discourses in American secular and religious culture, and it provides a language that many of my informants find powerful for explaining their religious experiences and for describing their religious decision-making as legitimate. Though religious traditions and communities supply the symbols and practices from which my informants choose, my informants do not see these traditions and communities as having inherent authority. My informants do not view religious communal norms and clergy as having influence over their decision-making about their families' religious lives, even though they often want clergy and houses of worship to be available for their life-cycle ceremonies. Robert Bellah (1991[1970], 43) observed a similar perspective among Protestants in the "increasing acceptance of the notion that each individual must work out his own ultimate solutions and that the most the church can do is provide him a favorable environment for doing so." Many of the rabbis among my informants had difficulty with this view because they saw themselves as upholding religious traditions and communities that had value beyond particular individuals' estimation of it. Many of my intermarried informants, however, did not see

religious traditions or communities as valuable except in their significance to the individual.

This tension concerning the respective roles of religious communities and individuals was reflected in a somewhat different way in my observations in a synagogue community that I observed in Atlanta. This Reconstructionist synagogue founded by and for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people viewed itself as unique because it welcomed people regardless of who they were or the religious choices they made. Heterosexual intermarried Jews, among others, also valued this environment, and over time heterosexual members grew to compose the congregation's majority. This community privileged the individual, honored his or her feelings of religious authenticity as the primary source of religious legitimacy, and rejected the authority of religious norms, as many of the participants in the Dovetail conference had done. In contrast to many of the participants at Dovetail, however, the individualism of this community seemed to be rooted in their feelings of exclusion and oppression from normative Jewish communities, rather than an intellectualized concern for individual rights. This community sought to maintain a shared self-definition, including a sense of Jewishness that both permitted intermarriage and included non-Jews as full members of the community who had a different relationship to the Torah than Jews had. This community attempted to balance the needs of the individual with the integrity of the group by rethinking religious boundaries.

In a dining hall at the church in which this community meets, several dozen people gathered to sit in two concentric circles of white lawn chairs. A well-known Reform rabbi, whom I will call Rabbi Green, had come to speak to the congregation

about her view of how spirituality, authenticity, and interfaith issues intertwined. “I’m not interested in boundaries; I’m interested in spirit,” she told the group. Some boundaries had begun to fade away already, Rabbi Green noted, saying that the atmosphere surrounding intermarriage had changed to allow people to feel “authentic in who they were.” She challenged her audience:

> *The* spiritual question is when God says to Adam, “Where are you?” It’s not that God didn’t know, in a geographical sense, but the sense of relationship or spiritual journey. Where was God? Or my deepest self? When did I hear that question, “Where are you?” or feel drawn somehow? “Where is my life? Is it what I want to be living now?”

She then distributed handouts featuring texts from Genesis and Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, a scholar well known for his book explaining Jewish mystical concepts for a lay audience, among other works. Rabbi Green asked participants to discuss in small groups, “Where have been the ‘Ayecha’ [‘where are you?’] moments in your life?” Participants earnestly shared their individual introspective processes with one another.

Some minutes later, together again in one large group, participants mused about authenticity and community membership. Many of them commented on how relieved they felt to belong to a congregation that consciously made itself a home for LGBT members. The congregation’s original composition, a “Prayer for the End of Hiding,” was recited at the end of services to acknowledge and honor the particular struggles of LGBT members. This prayer was the catalyst for several heterosexual members to join this synagogue. For participants in this discussion, the prayer marked the community as being profoundly different from other synagogues because it recognized that religious norms such as the prohibition of homosexuality, when enforced without respect for individuals, had harmful, oppressive effects. These norms, they felt, pressured them to

pretend their conformity, which made them feel both disingenuous and deficient. In contrast, this community accepted them as they were, which made them feel at home. One man, Alex, said, “This synagogue is the only one that I’ve attended that doesn’t make my skin crawl.” Rebecca, who described herself as “a Teflon Jew,” saying that she grew up participating in Jewish activities but “none of it would stick,” commented that this community’s Jewish practices felt genuine. “I don’t feel like rolling my eyes at everything we do.”

Abby, who said that she had grown up “Conservadox,” told the group that she had found this community when she was struggling with coming out. The experience of being in a synagogue so welcoming, where she did not feel that she had to hide, was so intense that she avoided the community for some time. Eventually, Abby felt ready to embrace it: “Growing up, I knew a lot about Judaism intellectually but never felt it.” This community was the first place where she did spiritually and emotionally experience Judaism, Abby said.

Gabe said that participating as a heterosexual in the congregation’s reading of the Prayer for the End of Hiding was helping him to learn about what it meant to be part of a community. Because the prayer is written in the first person, Gabe said, it felt awkward for him to say, “I, as a gay/lesbian Jew.” He came to see it eventually as stepping outside his own ego to be part of the greater community.

Rabbi Green responded that the community allowed people to feel safe asking questions about authenticity, “being who you are deep down.” Just as the important questions for interfaith relationships were, “What’s the authenticity? Who am I

authentically?" she said, "community can make it safe to ask those questions of yourself."

The topic of intermarriage prompted Gina, a woman who was not Jewish but was married to a Jewish man and raising Jewish children, to venture that because of this discussion, she had just realized that if she had lived in Europe during World War II, the Nazis would have come after her children. She thought she might have denied that they were Jewish to try to save them. "I often perform intellectual exercises," Gina said, in which she considered "hypothetical scenarios" such as whether she would have been "courageous enough to join the civil rights movement." Beginning to cry, Gina said that her realization about the Nazis was emotional and not just intellectual. Her comment suggested that she had come to realize the mutual obligation attendant upon being part of a religious community, particularly one that has been the target of persecution historically. Other discussion participants began to cry along with her.

Strangely, Gina's husband, who was sitting next to her, seemed unaffected by her intense emotional experience. Perhaps her realization was something he had already known because of his upbringing as a Jew, or perhaps he was unwilling to experience or express feelings like hers in this setting. Speaking about their family's religious life, he said, "She's making it very easy—for me, anyway." He later commented, "Judaism is hard, and there are a lot of religions that aim at the same thing that are easier."

Across the circle, someone responded, "Wrestling with God is the whole attraction of Judaism."

Abe said that the great thing about being in an interfaith marriage was that it connected him with another religion. He loved knowing that other religions taught the

same values as Judaism, because it gave him a sense of kinship with other people and staved off loneliness. He also found a sense of connection and relief from loneliness in nature, as well as a sense that he did not care if he died.

Rob, who was sitting next to Abe, worried about ultimate meaning in the face of death. He was "haunted" by the "Ayecha question," he said, "because it's always comparative of where your life is now to where you might want it to be, measured on a timeline, because life is finite. If it weren't, then the question wouldn't matter."

This introspective discussion differed from the discussion sessions at the Dovetail conference. This group shared the Dovetail participants' emphasis on rational tolerance and respect for all people, as well as their disdain for boundaries, which were always seen as set by other people and as an illegitimate exercise of authority over individuals. But members of this congregation expressed much more worry and doubt than were voiced at Dovetail. This congregation carefully constructed itself as a safe space for people who perceived themselves to be unwelcome in other religious contexts because of their sexuality or other concerns. This religious "safe space" seemed to fill a need for community amidst feelings of struggle and otherness that was not voiced at the Dovetail community. By disavowing normative boundaries that community members perceived to be externally and illegitimately imposed, this congregation used universalist individualist language to create boundaries with which it felt comfortable. This synagogue found its niche in welcoming people who did not feel that they fit into normative religious congregations and who used a language of individualism to connect with a community of like-minded people. This community features commitment to both individualism and

universalism, using Judaism as a common set of symbols and rituals, though not all members identify personally with that heritage.

The members of this congregation correctly note that the boundaries that religious norms construct do not necessarily reflect the lives of the people who identify with those religious traditions. The informants whom I describe in this chapter propose two ways of responding to this gap using discourses of individualism and universalism: Dovetail conference participants redefine religious belonging, and the LGBT congregation redefines the religious community. While these ways of framing religious experience can undermine the vitality of religious communities, the case of the LGBT congregation also suggests that universalist individualist discourses can support ties to normative religious communities for people whose lives deviate in some way from these communities' norms.

# Chapter 4

## Ethnic Familialism: Jewishness Refracted through Family and Gender

> My guess is that if women are the Jewish partner, they're more actively Jewish; if the women are the non-Jewish partner and the husband is Jewish, the women are more actively Jewish…. In most cases, the woman is leading the man. (Rabbi "Z")

While my informants sometimes argued that religious affiliation should be a matter of individual choice, at other times they contradicted this claim by speaking of their religions as being innate and passed down to them from their parents. This contradiction reflects longstanding tension among American Jews concerning the nature of Jewishness. For decades, American Jews have used different terms, such as race, religion, and ethnicity, to describe Jewishness because their experience of Jewishness encompassed more than any one of these categories. It was religious, familial, ethnic, and national all at once (Goldstein 2006). But in order to represent themselves in a way comprehensible to non-Jewish Americans, Jews also describe Jewishness in narrower American cultural categories (Berman 2009). This conflict between cultural categories and lived experience emerged for some of the intermarried couples among my informants, and it was expressed through discourses that I call "ethnic familialism."

Ethnic familialist discourses did not exclude universalist individualist sentiments, but they were comparatively less intellectualized and systematic, and they emphasized family and feelings more than rationality and self. Intermarried ethnic familialist spouses could not rely on shared unspoken assumptions about Jewishness, since they had different backgrounds. But unspoken assumptions nevertheless figured heavily into their conceptions and experiences of Jewishness. The couples often compensated for their lack

of shared assumptions about Jewishness by relying on shared assumptions about gender roles instead.

Jewish informants especially used the language of ethnic familialism, as I first discovered in a free-form discussion group at the Dovetail conference. The session was designed for spouses to describe their religious upbringing to one another. Alisa, who said that she came from a "non-practicing Conservative" Jewish family, and Mitch, who was raised "mostly Reform," met for the first time at this session, but found that they had had very similar experiences. Both Alisa and Mitch said that Judaism had seemed "contentless" to them as they grew up. Their families celebrated the High Holidays, Hanukkah and Passover, and they ate Jewish foods, but without a sense that there was any particular meaning to these activities. "You do the traditions because that's what you are," Alisa said, "not because of what you believe."

Mitch's Presbyterian wife, Diane, understood Judaism to be a religion, and to her, the idea that religion could be anything other than practices that expressed deeply held personal beliefs was incomprehensible. But she recognized that the Jewish community with which her family affiliated seemed to hold this same assumption that Jewishness was "what you are" rather than "what you believe." This assumption was accompanied by the community's apparent implicit expectations about behavior and belonging, but not about religious beliefs. She related her struggle to arrange their daughter's upcoming *bat mitzvah* within a Jewish community that felt strange to her, especially because she felt that the community's expectations for her daughter's bat mitzvah were based in everything but religious faith. She felt nervous, she said, that she would violate unspoken and unwritten communal norms of which she was unaware. Their local Jewish

community seemed to her to be full of these assumptions, not only in terms of ritual protocol but in an emotional sense as well, involving how Jews knew and felt that they were Jewish. Because she did not share these assumptions, Diane felt that she was constantly marked as an outsider.

**Understanding "contentless" Jewishness**

In my participant-observation experiences at the Mothers Circle, separate from the Dovetail conference, I saw other Christian wives of Jewish men struggle with such implicit assumptions about Jewishness as well. The Mothers Circle had been designed to help identify and explain these assumptions as part of an educational curriculum about Judaism for non-Jewish women raising Jewish children. A project of the Jewish Outreach Institute, the Mothers Circle began as a pilot program in Atlanta and quickly spread to over two dozen other cities. At meetings of the Mothers Circle, the group's facilitator followed a standard curriculum and also allowed the non-Jewish women to air their own concerns. The women frequently discussed the assumptions about their families' religious lives that they detected in their interactions with their Jewish husbands and in-laws. These women's experiences and perspectives reveal how the "contentless" Jewishness that Alisa described appears to non-Jews who do not share in it even as they live amidst it.

To the Mothers Circle women, their husbands' and in-laws' reactions to Christian symbols and celebrations revealed some inexplicable but apparently important assumptions about what it meant to them to be Jewish. The women frequently wondered how their husbands could be ambivalent and apparently indifferent toward Jewish

practices and beliefs while simultaneously protesting vehemently against any Christian symbols or practices in their homes. Over the course of the year, they came to understand, gradually and tentatively, that for their husbands Jewishness meant something like "what you are," rather than "what you believe." The Mothers Circle addressed this contradiction repeatedly, especially around the season of Christmas and Hanukkah. In Jewish educational circles, this winter period entails what is known as the "December Dilemma," when intermarried Jews attempt to discern how to show respect and love for the Christian side of their family while maintaining integrity as Jews. In universalist individualist discourses, there really is no dilemma because participation in another religion's rituals without actually believing in them is taken for granted. Many of my ethnic familialist Jewish informants, however, avoid Christian practices as a way of drawing a clear boundary around Jewishness without having to articulate its content. The conflict of their nebulous sense of Jewishness with their spouses' wish to maintain the Christian holiday practices of their childhoods often was experienced as a dilemma.

At one Mothers Circle meeting just before Passover in the spring of 2007, the women discussed their Jewish husbands' ambivalence toward Judaism. Six women had gathered at the home of the Mothers Circle facilitator, Denise. They sat in a half-circle on two deep sofas, chatting over coffee. In this session, the women were to acquaint themselves with Hebrew names and Jewish terminology related to conversion and baby-welcoming ceremonies, which most of their children had undergone. Denise coached the women as they took turns inserting their own distinctively non-Hebrew names into the Jewish pattern:

"Melanie bat John v'Ann. [Melanie, daughter of John and Ann.]"

"Cherise bat Michael v'Sharon."

"Alicia bat Steven v'Donna."

"Do you see how that works?" Denise asked encouragingly. The women shrugged awkwardly. Some of them were unsure that they believed it was that simple.

"We don't know if my son already has a Hebrew name," Cherise said. "How do we find out? Is it written down somewhere? Did they give it to him at the *bris* [circumcision]?" Though all of the women present had experienced some kind of Jewish ceremony to welcome their children, many of them felt unsure of what had actually taken place. They felt unable to ask their husbands because their husbands also had only a vague idea and felt uncomfortable with the topic of Jewish ritual. The men's discomfort created challenges in raising Jewish children, since they insisted on a Jewish household but resisted participating wholeheartedly in it.

"I don't know what my husband's Hebrew name is either," commented Alicia, a woman in her early thirties with a two-year-old son, Evan.

"Why don't you ask him?" asked Denise.

"Yeah, that would go over like a lead balloon," Alicia replied with a weary laugh. She did not elaborate, but the tone that she and the other mothers used to talk about this issue implied that their husbands were sensitive about such questions. Perhaps they experienced their wives' questions, to which they did not know the answers, as judgmental. Alicia changed the subject. "Evan came home from the JCC [Jewish community center] preschool talking about the Easter bunny. He found out about the Easter bunny there and now he expects it to come to our house. I don't know why they were talking about that at a Jewish school, or why I was able to buy two books about it

there. But now my husband is afraid Evan will be confused." Alicia's husband, she said, worried that Evan would not understand the difference between Judaism and Christianity, or know that he was Jewish and not Christian. Worse, she implied, perhaps their son would feel deprived of fun Christian traditions like the Easter bunny and Santa, especially if he was excited about them and then his parents told him he could not participate.

"My husband is like that too," said Cherise. "He's afraid of confusing our son who is only six months old! So he doesn't want us to have the Easter bunny. But I do! What's the harm in it? It's just a fun thing to do; it's not *religious*. So what are you all going to do for Easter?"

Most of the women responded that the Easter bunny would indeed visit, and they would dye eggs with their children. They saw it as fun for themselves and their children, and certainly not a way of sneaking Christianity into their households since they could imagine no religious message connected with the Easter bunny. And yet their husbands' apparently nonsensical objections nagged at them. How could a visit from the Easter bunny persuade their children of the divinity of Jesus? Their husbands claimed that the boundary they wanted to preserve was theological, but it seemed as if the real issue was something else.

Like the Easter bunny, the Christmas tree, another source of marital conflict, could have been read as a secular symbol, part of an American cultural celebration that lit up an otherwise dreary winter, particularly considering many of the men's day-to-day secularism. Rarely did any of my Jewish informants say that the Christmas tree symbolized the divinity of Jesus for them. More often, they would point to its "original" meaning as a Christian symbol, even if they admitted that now it was more widely

viewed as secular. But the link between the Christmas tree's current usage and its theological origins did not seem to explain the marital acrimony that it inspired among many of my informants. Several Jewish husbands whom I interviewed expressed bitterness about having to "give in" to their wives about putting up a Christmas tree, saying that they did not want one but that it was so important to their wives that refusal would have caused too much tension.

To the Jewish husbands, the Christmas tree was a powerful symbol not of Jesus' birth, but of what the men themselves were *not*. Fishman (2004) found a similar concern about "what you are not" in both Jewish and Christian informants: each parent wanted their children to be like them, not like their spouse. Many of my Jewish male informants feared that the tree's presence in their home would alienate their children from their Jewish heritage. Having a Christmas tree in the home felt like a marker of being "non-Jewish" more than any lack of Jewish practice, because, as Alisa and Michael said, Jewishness is "what you are." Thus, it was not the tree's religious "original" meaning that troubled these men as much as that the tree symbolized a powerful assimilative majority culture.

Resistance to an assimilative majority culture constituted a measure of personal integrity for many of these Jews. Their sensitivity to the issue of assimilation, mirrored in discourses about intermarriage and definitions of Jewishness, is somewhat surprising since the more empirically observable issues of assimilation, such as entry to previously closed or limited professions, universities, and residential areas, have long since been resolved in Jews' favor. But feelings of difference from other Americans apparently remain important to some Jews, as evidenced by my informants, and emphatically

rejecting the Christmas tree has become a way to dramatize their subjective sense of difference and demonstrate unity with other Jews who also resist assimilation, albeit only subjectively.

But as my informants resisted participating in Christmas rituals because they felt it would signal their disloyalty to Judaism, they acted out an American script for moral self-assertion—in other words, their rejection of assimilation takes place in an entirely assimilated way. American individualist ideologies celebrate "authenticity" and "standing up for one's beliefs." Bellah et al. describe the American cultural "connection of moral courage and lonely individualism," represented by figures like the cowboy and the "hard-boiled detective" who embody special virtue and serve their communities even as they remain isolated from them. Society is identified with corruption, in this cultural construction of the heroic outsider (Bellah et al. 1985, 145–146). In their resistance to the Christmas tree, which their wives see as harmless and essentially secular, these Jewish male informants take an American moral stance of self-isolation that opposes dominant values and practices in American society.

My Mothers Circle informants and their husbands were enmeshed in conflicting discourses about religion and its role in their families' lives, with frequently self-contradictory results. Both choice and innate Jewishness simultaneously defined the families' religious lives. Some of the Mothers Circle women and other non-Jews married to Jews were delighted to choose to adopt Judaism's "strong traditions" without religious belief, which was one of the ways that religion as "what you are" could be manifest in lived experience. However, others were dismayed by their Jewish spouses' lack of "spiritual" involvement in their religion. At the very least, non-Jewish women often felt

confused by their husbands' ambivalence about Judaism, demonstrated in their resistance both to having any Christian symbols in their homes and to observing any Jewish ritual, all while insisting that their children be raised as Jews.

At one late November 2007 meeting of the Mothers Circle, another group of women met with Denise and her husband Joe to learn about Hanukkah. "Today I thought we could talk about the 'December Dilemma,'" Denise said as the women sank into the soft couches on a 70-degree November morning. "If there are any questions you have about Hanukkah, any problems you and your husband are having figuring out how to make it all work. What do you do in your house in December?"

The women looked around at one another to see who wanted to speak first. Michelle said in a strong voice, "I am a Christian and we have a Christmas tree. That's just the way it is and how it's gonna be. My husband participates in Christmas—I always say it's like he converts two days a year, once for Christmas Eve and once for Christmas Day, and then he converts back to Judaism for the rest of the year." This language of temporary conversion did not appear at the Dovetail conference because the conference participants assumed that no conversion was needed to participate in the rituals of another religion. But because the Mothers Circle women were by definition raising their children as Jews, they and their husbands were concerned about identifying and maintaining boundaries around Jewishness.

Yet without realizing it, Michelle had chosen words that struck at the heart of the American Jewish community's fear of assimilation, a worry that Jews might simply vanish into Christianity because they had failed to guard against it. The idea of "converting two days a year" implied that Jews could be religious chameleons at their

convenience, rather than their being committed to a long shared history and interdependence with fellow Jews. I wondered if Michelle's husband might strenuously object to this characterization of his participation in Christmas festivities. Jewish outreach professionals often encouraged intermarried Jews raising their children as Jews to teach their children that at Christmas, they could "help Grandma and Grandpa celebrate their holiday," just like they helped their friends celebrate their birthdays, without mistaking Christmas or their friends' birthdays for their own. This distinction might well be lost on the Christian grandparents, but it was an important mental boundary for the intermarried Jew, another way of demonstrating their subjective resistance to assimilation.

The other Mothers Circle members expressed their confusion about Jewish family members' objections to celebrating Christmas. Sheryl said in a perplexed tone, "My in-laws get really upset about our having Christmas at our house. It's weird. They see me doing all this Jewish stuff with the kids, but then just doing one thing that's Christian makes my in-laws start questioning my commitment to raising the kids Jewish."

Sandy agreed. "It's crazy that for this one day of the year, it's such a big deal that the kids to go to their Christian grandparents' house and open presents, even though for the other 364 days of the year they're completely Jewish. I don't get it."

Joe offered an "insider" perspective to the discussion, saying that Jews did not have to avoid Christmas altogether. "I grew up in a town that was very multi-cultural, so even as a Jew—and I had no question that I was a Jew—I still participated in Christmas stuff with my friends growing up. I went to Christmas Mass with my friends. It was impossible to insulate yourself from other cultures there; you were in contact with them all the time. My parents did Santa in our house, and we were Jewish."

Denise echoed this universalistic view. “I sang Christmas carols in school,” she said. “It wasn’t considered a big deal then. That’s just the way it was. Of course now, everyone freaks out about it.” Denise and Joe tried to soften the appearance of Jewish opposition to Christmas by offering a universalistic view like that of the Dovetail conference participants: religious rituals and celebrations could be shared by people who did not share beliefs. Celebrating Christmas could not make one a bad Jew if even observant Jewish educators could participate in Christmas. Living in a multicultural environment, to them, meant actively participating in a diverse community and its religious rituals without believing in them, if the need arose.

“So that’s what I don’t get,” Sheryl responded. “When both parents are Jewish, they can let their kids do Christian things, and they are comfortable with it and don’t worry that it makes them any less Jewish, because they’re just participating in someone else’s holiday. But if *I* do something Christian with my kids, suddenly it’s like I’m trying to make them Christian, even though I’ve made it clear that they are Jewish.” The Mothers Circle women and their husbands had agreed that their children’s religious lives would be strictly Jewish and would not be subject to the children’s preferences, but the husbands and their families appeared to be unsure that they could trust this agreement.

Sheryl’s comment rang true for the other women, who nodded in recognition. “Right!” Sandy said. “Like, we only do Christmas at my parents’ house; there is no question of having a Christmas tree in our house. My husband said, ‘Absolutely not.’ So we don’t have one. But I still don’t see what the big deal is.” She shrugged, resigned.

Joe explained, “The reason it’s such a big deal is that for so long, Jews have felt that Christians have been trying to make everyone Christian. Just last month Ann Coulter,

this big Republican, was on TV saying she thought everyone in America should be Christian. And they asked her what about Jews and she said they should become 'perfected Jews.' And Jews all over America were thinking, 'See, here we go again.' So it feels like with the Christmas tree, it's one step towards them getting us to become Christian. Like if they can get a Christmas tree in the house, then what could the next step be."

The incident Joe referred to had made headlines in the Jewish and secular media. Coulter, a right-wing conservative media personality already famous for making extreme comments about "liberals," had said on a cable news television show that Jews should be "perfected," Christians already were "perfected," and America should be entirely Christian (Holden 2007). Many felt that Coulter was not to be taken seriously since she espoused views so extreme that few people would openly agree with them—for example, criticizing widows of men who had died in the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, as Tim Rutten reported in the Los Angeles Times on October 13, 2007. Some in the Jewish press nevertheless felt that her comments reflected a latent antisemitism rampant in America, or at least brought to the surface the truth about Christian beliefs about Jews. Others commented that her remarks showed that interfaith dialogue could never successfully overcome the problem of religious beliefs that fundamentally conflicted, and wondered whether there was any point in interreligious conversation when there was disagreement on basic matters such as the divinity of Jesus (Wiener 2007; [Boston] *Jewish Advocate* 2007).

Joe was not trying to suggest to the Mothers Circle women that their husbands felt that they were secretly antisemitic, but he hoped to explain the context of Jews' feelings

about Christmas. It was not clear whether the women fully understood Joe's explanation since they did not share the feeling of being threatened that he described. The conversation turned instead to a practical discussion of how to celebrate Hanukkah. The Mothers Circle's mission was to teach non-Jewish women to create a Jewish home for their children. For these women, creating a Jewish home required understanding not just Jewish traditions but also the unspoken assumptions about Jewishness on which their husbands relied.

**The "Presiding Genius": Creating Jewishness through nostalgia and kinship**

With its emphasis on women's roles in Jewish home rituals, the Mothers Circle drew upon gender roles and traditions from both Judaism and American culture. In doing so, the Mothers Circle curriculum helped the women to feel comfortable with their religious leadership in their families and helped the Jewish institutions that supported the Mothers Circle financially and rhetorically to see themselves as perpetuating "Jewish continuity." For more than a century, women's efforts to shape their children's moral and emotional attachments to Judaism had been characterized by American Jews as vitally important for preventing their assimilation to American culture. Especially because of competition from Christian holidays, mid-20$^{th}$ century Jewish homemaking manuals advised Jewish mothers to found and repeatedly reinforce children's love for Jewish holidays, beginning in early childhood, in order to ensure their continuing loyalty to Judaism. Miriam Isaacs and Trude Weiss Rosmarin's 1941 book *What Every Jewish Woman Should Know* advised:

> If ever lavishness in gifts is appropriate it is on Hanukkah. Jewish children should be showered with gifts, Hanukkah gifts, as a perhaps primitive but most effective

> means of making them immune against envy of the Christian children and their Christmas presents (Isaacs and Weiss Rosmarin 1941 in Joselit 1994, 72, 235).

The 1959 *Guide for the Jewish Homemaker* also made the woman's power to create a Jewish home clear:

> For even before you open the door of the Jewish home, you see the mezuzah, a reminder that the home is intended to be a sanctuary, and that the job of its presiding genius, the wife and mother, is essentially a spiritual one (Levi and Kaplan 1964[1959]).

These ideas had had currency for at least a century in the United States and beyond (see also Greenberg 1981; Radcliffe 1991; Kitov 2000). German Jewish women in the mid-19th century had also held responsibility for the "informal transmission of religious feelings and identification through observance in the home" (Kaplan 1991, 205f). A large body of Jewish sociological and educational research explores how formative Jewish experiences in childhood and adolescence affect a Jew's affiliation with Jewish institutions or sense of "Jewish identity" as an adult (e.g., Beck 2005; Cohen 2005). Anthropologists working in both Jewish and non-Jewish communities have studied the ways in which women wield power in their families and their communities by presiding over meal preparation (Counihan 1988, Sered 1992). Through the Mothers Circle, these women were learning to assume the role of a Jewish mother in ensuring their children's love of Judaism, even though the women themselves were not Jewish.

On some level, this view of early experiences' role in shaping a child's religious sense of self most likely figures into the Mothers Circle women's husbands' opposition to Christian symbols in their homes. For the husbands, the presence of a Christmas tree seemed to violate the premise of a Jewishly identified family. But for the wives, vetoing the Christmas tree violated the premise of a marriage based in fairness and mutual

respect, an assumption embedded in universalist individualist discourses. Each spouse experienced his or her sense of the Christmas tree's meaning on a visceral level, the same level at which Isaacs and Weiss Rosmarin meant their readers to shape their children's religious identities. Its presence or lack thereof was a jolt, one rupture between the childhood of the parent and the present reality of their interfaith-Jewish child whose upbringing would differ from that of both parents. Christmas trees and religious life cycle ceremonies, as two centers of discomfort in interfaith families' lives, make this break clearest and bring it to the surface.

Intermarried spouses held this sense of rupture with the past alongside fond, idealized memories of their youth. Nostalgia, "a disorientating, fragmentary and incommunicable feeling" (Moran 2002), operates powerfully for both the Jewish and non-Jewish spouses. "Some women do feel like they are losing something" by raising their children as Jews, said Ellen, a Mothers Circle "alumna."

> The Christmas tree is a problem for a lot of women. They still want to have it, and even though they are totally committed to raising the children as Jews and have become very knowledgeable about Judaism, their husbands still won't let them have the Christmas tree.
>
> I really wanted to raise my kids Catholic. My reasons were aesthetic, or nostalgic; it was what I grew up with and what I knew. My husband wanted them to be Jewish but he couldn't say why. He couldn't answer one question about Judaism; all he knew was that he loved Camp Barney [a Jewish summer camp near Atlanta].

Though nostalgia plays a perhaps less intense role for Christian wives than for Jewish husbands, the Christmas tree remains wrapped up in it for them as well. Each spouse experienced a sense of loss brought about by the presence or absence of the Christmas tree.

However, some non-Jewish women, like Mothers Circle alumna Bonnie, said unsentimentally that their children need not relive their parents' childhoods, emphasizing the child's individuality. Bonnie explicitly rejected the nostalgic frame in favor of individuality seated in a strong connection to family:

> I have a wonderful memory of Christmas, when I was about 7 or 8, where I was with my parents, grandparents, and siblings, and they opened the door to the living room where there was the tree and all the Santa Claus stuff. It was a powerful memory and my son will never have one like that. But he is not me; he's his own person, and he will have his own powerful memories.

Other Jewish-Christian couples preserved the Christmas experience in the homes of Christian relatives, where they would "help Grandma celebrate her holiday" by having a festive meal and opening presents. Some Christian spouses found ways to have the Christmas tree in their homes, but marked it off as "not about Jesus," or "just for me" so that they could continue the traditions of their own families of origin while avoiding confusing their Jewishly-identified children with mixed religious messages. Some gave up Christmas entirely.

No matter the way in which the solution was framed, many of the women still felt uncomfortable because this way of doing it differed from their past and felt unnatural. Linda, a Catholic mother of two middle school-aged children, said,

> I wanted a huge Christmas tree and we do have one. The kids enjoy decorating it and having it. But my husband is uncomfortable with it because he didn't grow up with it. And then we have to question our core beliefs at that point. Easter too—we have Easter baskets, but I'm not sure if I should also insist on going to Easter services.

By "core beliefs," Linda seemed to mean something like "what we are," as Alisa and Michael had said, rather than theology. Her family's religious observances were not decided on the basis of how each member of the family felt about the divinity of Jesus

and whether he was really resurrected on Easter Sunday. Rather, they were decided according to what made the family feel most unified and mutually supportive. Holiday religious observances were "usually my issue," Linda said.

> I'm forced to think about it—like if I ask for days off for the High Holidays. I'm not used to it. Sometimes I don't take the whole day off, and then it's awkward when the rest of the family is at services without me. If everyone were the same religion it would be more automatic.

Her "core beliefs," as interpreted through these comments, seemed to have to do with her desire to feel connected with her family more than her wish to attend worship services out of her own religious belief or duty to God.

Despite these negotiations emphasizing mutual support, deeply personal anxieties emerged among my informants in Atlanta, starkly contrasting to the rational, intellectual discussions that I observed at the Dovetail conference. Intermarried Jews described feeling compelled to raise their children as Jews because they feared that their children would be different from them, unrecognizable, strange. As one Jewish father said, "I felt like I would be forever alienated from my kid if he was in the Savior mode and I wasn't." He and his wife, a practicing Catholic, agreed that they would raise their child as a Jew, but his wife said, "I made the decision lightly and spent the next seven years struggling with it." She wanted to share her own religious faith and traditions with her spouse and children, but she and her husband also wanted to demonstrate their respect for the American Jewish community by avoiding the mixing of Judaism and Christianity. Thus, she said, "My son has my spirituality under the guise of Jewish religion."

Ethnic familialist discourses reflect an attempt to avoid feelings of loss and disloyalty, concerns that did not appear prominently in universalist individualist discourses. The term "ethnic familialism" emphasizes the importance of my informants'

families and ethnic relationship with the Jewish people in their decisions about religion in their lives. I use "ethnic" here in the sense of an ethnic group's self-conception rooted in mythical shared ancestors (Porton 1994), which may be somewhat different than the way the term "ethnicity" is operationalized in sociological literature on that subject.

Ethnic familialists' conception of Jewishness intertwines race, mythic shared ancestry, and shared religious and cultural practices and beliefs. All of these elements of their conception of Jewishness have antecedents and analogues, often intertwined as well, in American history and culture. Some contemporary American Jews characterize Jewishness as "racial" or "tribal," finding support in genetic studies showing similarities among some Jews (Goldstein 2006, 223–224, 229; Tenenbaum and Davidman 2007). Jews and non-Jews both used racial language to describe Jewishness from the late 19th century until the end of World War II, though Jews did not easily fit into the black-white dichotomy in American understandings of race. This racial language helped Jews to explain their distinctiveness as a group as they attempted to fit into American society while also remaining separate, in part because of endogamy and residential patterns, and in part because of their nebulous sense of difference (Goldstein 2006, 1–7). Even with this racial language, Jews continued to struggle to understand what united them. Some early 20th century Yiddish-speaking Jews perceived a deep divide between those who identified themselves as "religious" and "secular." But even as these groups rejected each other's ideologies, they continued to use a common religious language to describe and analyze their lives and communities (Polland 2007). These tensions between and among racial, ethnic and religious understandings of Jewishness continue in my informants' experiences.

Jewishness as defined in both racial and religious terms dovetails with the middle class white American notions of kinship that anthropologist David Schneider identified, centered on the symbols of "blood," ties created by the circumstances of birth, and "love," ties created by choice (Schneider [1968]1980). In Schneider's view, "blood" kinship derives from a biogenetic link in which children receive 50% of their genes from each parent and are thus related to them "by birth" (Schneider [1968]1980, 23ff). Many of my informants extended this understanding of their genetic heritage to religious heritage as well. Just as an American couple might say that their children are half Irish, half German, many of my intermarried informants say that their children are half Jewish, half Christian, as if religion is passed on genetically and is "what you are" in a literal, physical sense. This model of kinship also appears to inform universalist individualists' sense that fairness requires that children should be taught each religious heritage equally. The idea of "fairness to both parents," as seen in the IFFP approach to religious education, follows this genetic model, requiring that the family celebrate an equal number of holidays from each religious tradition. Under the IFFP model, interfaith couples' children "inherit" traditions from both sides, because to observe only one parent's tradition would show a lack of respect to the parent whose traditions were not passed on.

Some of my Christian women informants did express feelings that their heritage was being disrespected, despite their choices to raise their children as Jews. They might have felt otherwise had their Jewish husbands been able to explain to them how they understood and felt about Judaism, but my ethnic familialist male informants were often unable to articulate in depth their reasons for wanting Jewish children. Their comments revealed their desire for their children to be like them and not to worship Jesus, and the

emotional basis of their own Jewish identity in fond memories of camp, friends and family. Some ethnic familialist men seemed to want Judaism for their children because they wanted to relive their own childhoods, or to simply have their children's experiences seem familiar to them and not to introduce strange elements from Christianity. They felt that their own religious loyalties and identities had been shaped more by the accretion of their experiences in the context of their families, across their lifetimes, than by instruction in religious school or formal religious rituals.

Religious norms influenced my informants' actions in the sense that they had internalized them as part of their deepest sense of who they were as individuals. To act in ways that did not comport with these internalized religious norms was to betray themselves. Thus, my Jewish informants' opposition to having a Christmas tree in their homes arose not from any Jewish legal prohibitions, but from their fear that having the Christmas tree would somehow make them less Jewish. While they remained individualistic, it was not in the intellectualized sense that universalist individualism tends to emphasize: universalist individualists find it easy to explain why they can and should celebrate multiple religious holidays at once. But such explanations fell flat for ethnic familialists because they were acting out religious emotions and norms that they internalized through early religious experiences. Women played a central role in perpetuating this internalization of religious norms even when the women were situated outside the boundaries of the religious institutions that embody and safeguard these norms.

Ethnic familialist men found themselves in a strange position. Their marriages occupied unnamed space within Jewish understandings of kinship, even as they dedicated

themselves to ensuring that their children would identify with Judaism. Ethnic familialists experienced a conflict between the claims of modernity and individualism and the claims of peoplehood. This fragmentation of values, desires and experiences can be called postmodern, but my informants do not necessarily see such fragmentation as desirable. Indeed, an urge to "return" to wholeness of experience and self-concept is evident among some elements of the American Jewish community, such as the previously secular recruits to a Lubavitcher community that sociologist Lynn Davidman describes (1991). In the case of my intermarried informants, non-Jewish wives enabled this tricky balance between nostalgia, race, and religious choice to exist.

The Mothers Circle participants handled tension between dissonant definitions of Jewishness by changing the "rules" of kinship to include non-Jewish wives and mothers. In this model, the halakhic definition of a Jew is usually cast out as outmoded and overly narrow, in favor of a model based on choice and emotion—"what's in your heart," as one non-Jewish woman in the Mothers Circle put it. By adopting this alternative model, the Mothers Circle attempts to meet the needs of non-Jewish women to feel accepted by the Jewish community as well as the Jewish community's desire for more Jewish children. One Mothers Circle leader, Rachel, explained:

> So "who is a Jew," to me, is what you're doing, it's your actions more than your lineage or your birth. That's my opinion. I know that's not the halakhic opinion. The halakhic opinion would be if you're born to a Jewish mother….. It does not matter to me at all if women convert … because I think you don't have to convert to be Jewish, but my husband thinks it's easier if you convert because there's no question. And there's some truth to that, but if [a] mother never converted and still raised her kids in Judaism, it makes absolutely no difference to me.

Rachel emphasizes that intermarriage is now a given, and that the kinship structure of Jewishness has to evolve to absorb non-Jews who are part of Jewish families.

> Like my rabbi says, biology is a stronger drive than theology. So people are going to intermarry, and it used to be the Jewish thing to do was just to write them off. But now that, especially in Atlanta, interfaith has a higher rate of marriage than in-faith marriage in the Jewish community—we feel those people can bring strength to our people, and the non-Jewish mothers that I work with make great Jewish moms even though they're not Jewish, and they sometimes do a better job of raising Jewish kids than Jewish moms do.

This model provides no clear way to tell where Jewishness begins and ends: if all the members of an interfaith family can be considered fully Jewish, are the Christian in-laws who participate in Jewish rituals also Jewish? If formal conversion continues to exist once the definition of Jewishness has been expanded past the traditional boundaries, does conversion take on some other meaning besides entry into the Jewish people? Rachel's viewpoint suggests that for her, Jewish kinship is no longer standardized and non-Jews can hold different places in Jewish community and kinship depending on the community to which they belong.

At the same time that the Jewish community struggles to understand how to place non-Jews within its kinship structure, intermarried non-Jewish women do not passively accept the Jewish community's decisions about their status. Some actively resist pressure to formally convert to Judaism, still actively participating in Jewish family and community life but within the context of their own individual histories and experiences. Rachel explains that their resistance to conversion is rooted in respect for their own kin.

> [N]umber one, they were treated badly and why would [they] want to join these people who are not nice to outsiders. And the second common thing is that a lot of the women don't want to hurt their own families of origin by leaving the faith that they were brought up in, and I've heard many women say, "I feel Jewish, I live Jewish, I'm raising a Jewish kid, but by actually converting, that's rejecting my own family." And some of them actually do convert years later when their parents are no longer living. I know several people in that scenario... what better way to insult your mother or your father [than] by saying, "What you gave me I'm rejecting."

Rachel observed that the non-Jewish women's experiences with their Jewish in-laws and Jewish organizations were the basis for their feelings of kinship, or lack thereof, with the Jewish people. Yet even when such women rejected conversion to Judaism, they continued to serve as "presiding geniuses" of their families' Jewish homes.

**"He wouldn't know anything": Non-Jewish women as Jewish religious leaders**

Despite their own complex feelings about Judaism, many of my non-Jewish women informants assumed Jewish leadership roles within their families, whether they chose these roles or not. At another Mothers Circle meeting, I joined Denise, her mother, and a culturally Christian Mothers Circle member named Sandy to bake *hamantaschen*, cookies for the Purim holiday. Now halfway through the year-long Mothers Circle course, Sandy had been introduced to Jewish traditions associated with naming, life cycle ceremonies and holidays, and the stories of Hanukkah and Purim. Despite her feeling like a newcomer to Judaism, she said that her mother-in-law, Ellen, was already urging her to assume leadership of the family's Jewish celebrations. "Every time I learn how to do a new Jewish thing, she tells me that now I get to take over it for the family," Sandy commented as she rolled out the cookie dough.

"Why doesn't she say that to your husband instead?" I asked her as I cut out circles of dough with the rim of a drinking glass. "He's the one who grew up with Judaism." Sandy had said that her husband, Josh, had made it clear that their home was to be strictly Jewish, and he refused to allow a Christmas tree or any Christian celebrations in their home.

"Oh, he wouldn't know anything," Denise said dismissively.

Sandy agreed. “He doesn’t know anything. He probably won’t know what these *hamantaschen* are when I bring them home.”

Joe, Denise’s husband, stood by the oven waiting for the poppyseed *hamantaschen* to come out of the oven. Poppyseed was a traditional *hamantaschen* filling, but no one else in the room wanted to eat it, Jewish or not. “He’ll know what *hamantaschen* are,” Joe said. “That’s one of the things you remember from being a Jewish kid. He’ll know.” Joe’s comment reflected exactly the kind of sensory childhood memory that the mid-20th century Jewish homemaking manuals had urged Jewish women to create. These sensory experiences were to create children’s ongoing allegiance to and love for Judaism, more than any articulated intellectual or ethical commitment—in essence, it would instill in the children an instinctive sense of “what they are” as Jews. To that end, the Mothers Circle included instruction in the preparation of holiday foods and activities, emphasizing ways to make them “fun” for children as well as their parents.

As we concluded our baking, Denise explained to Sandy and me that our next session would cover preparations for Passover—how to clean, cook, kasher, buy kosher-for-Passover products and put away other foods. “My mother-in-law wants me to host all our family seders from now on too,” Sandy remarked. Denise nodded encouragingly.

“That’s going to be a lot of work!” I said. “Is Josh going to help you with it?”

“No, he wouldn’t be able to help with that,” Sandy said.

Denise agreed, telling me, “He wouldn’t know.” She turned to Sandy. “But your mother-in-law can tell you what to do and what family traditions you can incorporate! You should ask her.”

Two women who had been in the Jewish homemaker role longer than Sandy had were not only happily taking on a leadership role in their families' religious lives, but had converted to Judaism after essentially living as Jews for several years. One summer day in 2007, in a bright, modern suburban Atlanta home, I sat at the kitchen table with Janice and Marie, two women who had converted to Judaism in the Reform Movement and who were married to men who were born Jewish. They had become friends through the Mothers Circle. Both were in their 30s, from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds, and were raising their young children as Jews. Attractive, intelligent, and educated, these women were like many of the Mothers Circle women who had left behind careers to become stay-at-home mothers. Janice and Marie enjoyed doing traditional home-making activities and crafts together and had even started a mah-jongg group with some other women who lived nearby.[1] Their Mothers Circle leader often laughed about it admiringly.

Janice had spent the morning teaching Marie and me how to bake challah, the traditional Shabbat[2] bread. We had mixed and kneaded the dough. As we waited for it to rise, the conversation turned to the subject of celebrating Shabbat. "Have you done Shabbat lately?" Janice asked Marie.

"Did you see the screensaver on the laptop?" Marie asked, laughing. "Did you see 'NO ENTERTAINING FOR A WHILE!' scrolling across the screen? My husband put that there because he got so stressed out the last time we had people over. He wants everything to be perfect. *I* don't worry about it—I know people aren't going to notice if the kitchen isn't sparkling; they just remember if they had a good time."

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[1] Mah-jongg is a Chinese game popular with American Jewish women starting in the 1920s. See Olsen 2008.
[2] Jewish Sabbath.

"I'm the total opposite—I want everything to be perfect and my husband doesn't care," Janice replied. "So we don't do Shabbat as often."

"You haven't made it a ritual. You have to just do it every week," Marie said emphatically. "Sometimes we order pizza and we say the crust is the challah, and we light candles and do the blessing over the wine. Once in a while we remember that it's Friday night after we've already started eating, and Steve will go, 'Oh well,' and I'll say, 'No! Not "oh well"!' And I bring out the candles and the wine. It doesn't have to be hard. And the kids get so excited. I'll tell them on Friday mornings—" her voice dropped to a theatrical whisper— "'Cassie and Nate, it's Shabbat tonight!' And Cassie will run around shrieking, 'Shabbat Shabbat Shabbat!' They love it!"

"One time, before I decided to convert, I brought up to Jon that we need to do Shabbat every week, and he said, 'Why? *You're* not Jewish.'" Janice shot us a look of outrage. "I said, 'No, but my *children* are Jewish!' Unbelievable! Because if he's going to say that, then fine, I can just take the kids to church with me this Sunday! How about *that*?"

"Why do you think he said that?" I asked her.

"Because he was being lazy." Janice explained that since she had begun the process of converting to Judaism, he had become more interested in Jewish rituals. "He grew up Orthodox, and he thought Shabbat was basically a bunch of meaningless technicalities—you wash your hands a certain way, you say certain things," she said. "But now because he's doing it with me, he's starting to see it as more spiritual. We're learning the reasons behind the rituals."

The challah had risen. Marie went upstairs to tend to three-year-old Nate, who had woken up from his nap, and Janice and I divided the dough into five balls and worked them into long snakes. I showed her how to braid five strands into one loaf, which I had learned recently from Amanda, a Christian woman raising Jewish children. Amanda prided herself on her bread-baking expertise, and felt that making challah was a way for her to connect to Jewish tradition while she remained deeply committed to her own blend of Catholic and Episcopalian Christianity. She and her husband belonged to a social group at her church for Episcopalian-Jewish intermarried couples. When I interviewed her about her experiences in her interfaith marriage, I happened to mention that my recent attempts to bake challah had ended in miserable failure, and she offered to teach me to do it well. Amanda also invited Teresa, a Christian woman who worked at her church and was engaged to marry a Jewish man. The three of us, and Amanda's and my young children, gathered around the kitchen island to mix and knead and wait.

Amanda had started several loaves in advance so that Teresa and I could see how it was supposed to look at different stages of the process. One braided loaf was ready to go in the oven, another rested under a towel as it rose, a lump of dough was waiting to be divided and braided, and raw ingredients were ready to be measured and mixed in large bowls. Teresa and I each mixed our own dough, and Amanda coached us through kneading and turning it until it was finally smooth enough to rise. "Keep going," she told me when I prematurely claimed to be finished kneading. When the first loaf came out of the oven, Amanda and her kindergarten-aged daughter sang the *ha-motzi* song in English and Hebrew and we ate the hot bread, with some salmon salad, chèvre, and pear slices for lunch.

While we ate and waited for the remaining dough to rise, Teresa told us about her upcoming wedding. She described her fiancé's Jewish friends' and relatives' reactions to her entry into their family. Her deep connection to Christianity was not what her fiancé's family had hoped for. Her own family was very committed to the church, and she had left law school to work in church ministry. She did not plan to convert to Judaism, and her fiancé did not expect her to, but his friends and family had been quietly waiting for her to change her mind. Her new job at the church, she told us, seemed to disappoint them. One of her husband's friends commented, "Now she'll never want to convert!" Despite his strong Jewish upbringing, complete with Jewish day school attendance, Teresa's fiancé did not share their attitude toward conversion. That morning, when she told him that she was going to learn to make challah, he had said, "Oh, you don't have to do that!" as if she were troubling herself out of a misplaced sense of obligation.

Teresa and Amanda held strongly to their Christian faith, but they both felt a responsibility to the Jewish people to make sure their own children and future children knew their Jewish heritage, not out of a sense of obligation but out of appreciation. Amanda taught Judaism to her three children, along with Christianity. She enrolled them in Jewish religious school, insisted on family synagogue attendance, and planned for their *b'nai mitzvah*. Yet she admitted to being less than forthright with the rabbi of their synagogue about the fact that the children were not learning only about Judaism. That level of detail, she felt, was none of his business, especially since she suspected that he would use it to judge their Jewish commitment deficient.

However, Amanda did not expect her children to make an informed choice about religion. She saw Judaism as well as Christianity as inherent in them and not as a choice.

Amanda said that she prepared her children for encounters with people who disagreed with their family's understanding of its religious identity.

> I tell my kids, people are going to say you can't be both [Jewish and Christian]. Jewish people are going to say that, Christian people are going to say that. That's okay. I'll just say they're going to say that you can't be both. That's okay. You can't make everyone happy. What are you going to do?

Amanda describes the world that the children have been born into as simply including different Jews who have different definitions of Jewishness. In this respect, her view resembles universalist individualism's way of resolving disagreement with religious norms by redefining religious boundaries to be more inclusive.

My women informants sometimes spoke of their husbands' spiritual lives almost as if they were talking about their children. Amanda described her role as caretaker of her family's spirituality. She saw her spirituality as a wellspring for her entire family, and felt that she possessed more insight into her husband's spirituality than he did, recognizing a latent spiritual desire in him that he could not or would not admit in the fact that "he's Jewish, kind of agnostic-bordering-atheist and he decided to marry this very religious or spiritual Christian." By choosing to marry her, so different from himself on the surface, she felt that her husband revealed that he wanted spirituality in his life, even though his behavior suggested that he was not especially interested in religion or spirituality.

While her husband did not accompany her to church, she said,

> He wants me to go to temple when they go to temple. And I usually do, and I mainly do it for him because he's not there yet, and I do it for them [the children] because they need to be supported in their Judaism.

She remained anchored in Christianity, but did not begrudge her husband his need to see his children as Jewish. Indeed, she urged more Jewish observance in their household,

despite her own religious difference, feeling that her children deserved to experience Judaism.

> I said to [my husband], "Honey we can't not do this, this is too beautiful for them, it's too *old* and *long* and *rich* and *beautiful*. We can't not do that…."
>
> But he is a sexist, a little bit. It's his *son* he wants to be bar mitzvahed. He doesn't care if his daughter is bat mitzvahed. So that's when I said, "We're not doing that. We're not having a son do it but not our daughter. I mean, that's just not –" and he's like, "But the males have been doing it for thousands of years." And I said, "Good. We had infant baptisms for thousands of years; we didn't do that with our children."

While she encouraged her husband's efforts to perform Jewish traditions, she also felt that it was her role to instruct and correct him. Performing tradition in a thoughtless, rote manner disrespected the tradition as well as its adherents, in Amanda's view, and all of her children, boys and girls, deserved to experience the fullness of their traditions as a source of emotional and spiritual strength.

She also felt that she had greater spiritual understanding than her husband in her sense of the artificiality of religious boundaries. To Amanda, having children of a different religion from herself was not a problem, as long as her children found religious meaning.

> I would be sobbing crying if any of our children were ordained a rabbi. I would be so happy. And there would only be one little thing in the back of my mind that they weren't choosing my tradition. That would make me a little sad, but it would make me mostly happy that they had chosen a life of— they had turned toward the power of the divine. The belief in the divine in people's lives. That would make me happy. It's choosing the positive, in my view. And everybody gets there in different ways. So that's why I can be married to a Jewish person. It doesn't matter to me.

Amanda understands "the divine" to transcend particular religious rituals and symbols, as the universalist individualist discourses emphasized. For her husband, it appeared that the

symbols and rituals themselves were important, but they lacked the content that Amanda saw as so important.

My women informants often talked about spirituality—both Jewish and Christian—more easily and readily than their husbands did. At a Mothers Circle "Couples' *Havdalah*"[3] and discussion over desserts and wine, this difference became clear. On a warm spring evening, several intermarried couples, three Mothers Circle leaders, two of their husbands who were also Jewish educators, and the Mothers Circle rabbi stood in a wide circle on the patio of Joe and Denise's home. Two couples gingerly held ritual objects—a braided candle, a spice box, and a cup of wine—with which both the Jewish men and non-Jewish women appeared to be equally unfamiliar. Joe and another Jewish educator spent five minutes tuning their banjo and guitar while everyone waited. When they were satisfied with their sound, they played a contemporary Jewish melody while the rabbi read the blessings in English and Hebrew from a handout. The educators sang along quietly, and the intermarried couples stood awkwardly silent.

At the ceremony's conclusion, the rabbi directed us to choose our desserts and carry them into the next room. When all were seated, he said, "I would like each of us to talk about our spiritual journeys. What has that been like in the context of your relationship with your spouse?"

For a few seconds, there was silence as everyone glanced around nervously. Then one Mothers Circle leader's husband, Sam, volunteered. Sam and his wife, Rachel, described a long period of being uninvolved with Judaism early in their marriage. Their interest in Judaism was revived when their first son was born. They had debated whether to circumcise him and had settled on doing it in the hospital. But Rachel's father begged

[3] *Havdalah* is the brief ceremony marking the end of Shabbat on Saturday evening.

them to have a bris and offered to pay for it. Rachel had been raised Orthodox and later rejected it because she felt that it was too focused on boys and only treated girls as an afterthought. The combination of her children's births and her brother's conversion to Christianity for his Christian wife had spurred her to embrace Reform Judaism.

The rabbi pointed to Daniel, who was sitting next to Rachel, to prompt him and his wife, Lydia, to speak next. Daniel and Lydia explained that Lydia was Catholic and was considering conversion to Judaism. They were going to raise their child Jewish so he would have "one coherent identity." They had met adults without one coherent identity and they seemed confused, a fate that they hoped their child would avoid.

Next came Mike and Karen. Like all the other couples present, they planned to raise their child as a Jew. Karen had been raised in Catholicism, and she had found it "rigid, strict and not appealing. It turned me off from religion." She had no immediate plans to convert to Judaism, saying that to her, being Jewish is more like being Italian than spiritual, so her involvement in Judaism extends to making *hamantaschen* and giving her son "strong traditions." She emphasized that the traditions were the most important thing to her.

Alan and Barbara spoke next. Raised Episcopalian, Barbara said that her feelings about religion were the opposite of Karen's: she loved Jewish "prayers and spirituality," but was not interested in the "cultural stuff." "The *havdalah* prayers really touched me," she said. Like Karen, she also had no plans to convert to Judaism, but her parents were learning about Judaism along with her.

The rabbi asked these women to reflect on their relationship to the Jewish community. The women offered their thoughts on what they wanted for themselves and

their children: a sense of cultural belonging and tradition, spirituality, belief in God. Their husbands, in contrast, sheepishly articulated their Jewish experiences in stereotyped ways—they went to summer camp, had bar mitzvahs, and never thought about what it meant. As the women described attending support groups and classes to learn the basics of Judaism and work through difficulties with their own religious backgrounds, extended family members, and the wider Jewish community, the men seemed to fade into the background.

When the discussion concluded, the rabbi offered humble and heartfelt thanks to the women: “On behalf of the Jewish people, I want to thank you for what you are doing for us.”

The contrast between the women’s intentionality and men’s apparent passivity was striking. The Mothers Circle women often mentioned that their husbands seemed to hope that Jewishness would be transmitted to their children with no sustained ritual practice on their part, and they even resisted their wives’ ritual efforts. The men relied on their non-Jewish wives to perpetuate Judaism in their families, and apparently did not question whether their children were “really” Jewish.

In contrast to the women’s openness about the spirituality they found in home-centered religious practices, several rabbis whom I interviewed said that they observed that men found it difficult to talk about spirituality. These rabbis argued that intermarried men were intimidated by their “entrenched Jewish illiteracy” that prevented the men from articulating what matters to them about Judaism for themselves and their families and filled them with anxiety about appearing incompetent. Some of my informants’ stories suggest this anxiety. Marie described her husband’s anxiety about impressing Shabbat

guests, while she relaxed and enjoyed their company, and Sandy's husband had worried about feeling incompetent while Sandy was open to learning about Judaism. One Jewish man I interviewed, David, described the discomfort he felt when his young son demonstrated Jewish knowledge unfamiliar to David himself:

> I felt an obligation to add more Jews because six million were lost in the Holocaust. So we're raising our son Jewish, and he attends the Jewish day school just because it's convenient and has the best services for him, but now he's becoming too religious. It's awkward for us when he sings Hebrew songs that we have never heard of, or non-Jewish friends are over and he is doing religious Jewish things that they don't understand and we can't explain. I would like him to be more mainstream.

David also explained that he was very sensitive to antisemitism, and he and his wife both described having conflicts over the presence of a Christmas tree in their home. David's comments suggest that while Jewishness is important to him, he is unable to articulate it other than in emotional terms.

While the men maintained their connection to Judaism through inarticulate emotion, their wives connected to it sometimes in that way and sometimes through the ideas of universalism and individualism. The Mothers Circle rabbi articulated these ideas for the Mothers Circle's purposes, saying that Judaism is committed to the idea of one humanity under one God and the practice of Judaism is open to all. This was a universalist Judaism, involving the beliefs that Judaism is open to all members of a Jewish family, even if not all the members are Jews; that Jewish practice should come from the heart rather than from laws; and that it should be meaningful to the individual. In this way, it echoes some aspects of the Dovetail conference discussions, but it emphasizes the unity of the family and Jewish identity for the children and family. By espousing this view, the rabbi gives the non-Jewish women a language with which to

perpetuate Judaism on behalf of their entire families, since the rabbi sees Jewish norms as inclusive of the women and their children.

These ethnic familialist discourses embody contradictions between American, Protestant Christian, and traditional Jewish thought. Ethnic familialists choose to practice Judaism, a minority religion in America that makes particularistic demands on its adherents, while simultaneously ignoring its centuries-long norm of endogamy. They do so instead of adopting universalist individualism, whose emphasis on personal satisfaction offers a more straightforward and less dissonant way to organize individual religious practice. In the ethnic familialist approach to intermarriage, families create a Jewishly-identified lifeworld in which the straightforward mixing of Judaism with Christianity is forbidden. Yet Christianity does enter ethnic familialist households within carefully marked boundaries, as when a mother said that her children manifested her Christian inner "spirituality" through the external form of Judaism, or when the family decorates its Christmas tree with the assertion that the tree is "just for Mom," not for the entire family. This Christian symbol's power in the household is quarantined verbally to dispel any suspicions about the family's religious allegiance.

At the same time, this ethnic familialist solution to the problem of religious mixing leaves room for ambiguity by valuing religious experience through ritual, whose practice is often spearheaded by Christian or secular non-Jewish women. While universalist individualists personalized religion according to their conscious choices, ethnic familialists like Janice and Marie and Amanda "made it their own" simply by performing Jewish rituals, experiencing them without intellectualizing their meaning. Non-Jewish and converted Jewish ethnic familialist women initiated the observance of

Jewish ritual often entirely on their own, without help from their Jewish husbands. The non-Jewish women thus legitimized themselves as Jews, even if only subjectively, on behalf of their entire families, and despite the often drastic differences between their own religious upbringings and the Jewish one that they taught their children. As many of my women informants demonstrated, ethnic familialists adopted Jewish rituals centered on children, home, and food to anchor their participation in Judaism.

Like the universalist individualists, ethnic familialists held a conception of Jewishness within their families that strongly featured American and Protestant Christian values of fairness, individualism, and universalism. But ethnic familialist discourses also included commitment to Jewish peoplehood and religious continuity, bonds that operate outside the language or practice of individualism. Conscious of Jewish discourses insisting on marriage and mutual obligation between Jews, as well as American ones emphasizing autonomy and tolerance, my informants who emphasize ethnic familialist discourses live with dissonance and ambivalence. They manage a subcurrent of anxiety that never quite subsides as they attempt to merge American, Protestant and Jewish cultural values in their lives. Rather than dismissing the traditional Jewish emphasis on endogamy as ill-founded and outdated, as the universalist individualists did, ethnic familialists took it to heart. They compensated for the portrayal of them as "bad Jews" in normative Jewish discourses on intermarriage by taking on Jewish ritual practices and setting religious boundaries within the family that situated them as otherwise normative Jewish families.

Yet these families relied upon non-Jewish wives and mothers to enact these Jewish practices that allied them with the goal of "Jewish continuity." While such an

arrangement does not align with Jewish norms, it does reflect streams of American discourses about gender roles that encourage women to see themselves as taking care of men's spirituality, a view inherited from 19th century Victorian middle class gender ideology. In this view, men worked outside the home and relied on women to uphold "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" on their behalf. In this system, "religion belonged to women by divine right, a gift of God and nature," and with their special talent women were to improve men and the world (Welter 1966). As Jewish women assimilated to Christian middle-class societies, they adopted this role as well (Hyman 1991; Hyman 1995). Read against the backdrop of American religious history, the shift of religious authority toward women in intermarried, Jewishly-identified families extends an existing cultural trajectory. In American religion, women have always been the majority of participants and at the center of religious practices. Recent studies such as the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life U.S. Religious Landscape Survey have found that this pattern continues (2009a). Despite their enthusiasm for and commitment to religion, women have not historically had much official power in it, as historian Ann Braude argues:

> The willingness of women to participate in the institution that enforces their subordination and provides the cosmological justification for it requires explanation, but women have done more than participate. They have embraced the churches and the belief systems they teach, finding special meaning there for their lives as women and defending them against a variety of threats from without…. (Braude 1997, 90–91).

Thus, Braude argues, American women have historically participated in and sustained religious institutions that do not reward them with official power within the religions'

authority structures. As agents of "Jewish continuity," the Mothers Circle women follow this pattern closely.

The Mothers Circle women do not seek official power within the religious community, though. Rather, their interest lies in their families' religious experiences. The Jewish rituals that the ethnic familialists emphasize, and that the women especially enjoy, are domestic. The wives, as homemakers, are comfortable with the domestic and spiritual realms, see them as naturally complementary, and feel that women are naturally more spiritually attuned than men are. Yet the obvious departure from Jewish tradition is that in many cases, ethnic familialist, non-Jewish women assume responsibility for the Jewish domestic realm without actually becoming Jewish themselves.

Centered on domestic ritual items the Jewish Sabbath bread, rich with the symbolism of family and tradition, their stories suggest that these women see passing on religious and ethnic tradition in their families as primarily based in religious and familial experience. They draw their children into the process of mixing, kneading, braiding and baking the challah that they will bless and eat at their family's Shabbat dinner. Even though this tradition is not the one in which they were raised, they emphasize the sensory and spiritual experiences of repetitive ritual and prayer as they strive to pass it on to their children and to live it themselves. The women's stories also show a complicated relationship to religious authority: they both respect and ignore it. Religious authority is found not in texts but in ritual itself and its power to evoke feelings and a sense of connection to generations of ancestors and God. Such feelings of connectedness are central to the ethnic familialist approach.

Beyond these discourses of women's spirituality and Jewish universalism, non-Jewish women's leadership of Jewish practices in their homes is further supported by gendered patterns of household and emotional labor. Routine domestic labor in American households is carried out by women, argues Hochschild (2003[1989], 8–10), in contrast to men's intermittently performed chores such as yard work or home repairs. Further, women typically provide men with more "behind-the-scenes" support than they receive, an imbalanced arrangement that men often claim that the women choose (Hochschild 2003[1989], 210–11, 265f, 272). Sociologists continue to find that women perform the majority of domestic labor and that such labor is largely invisible to men (Shelton and John 1996). Such gendered patterns of household labor are clearly reflected in non-Jewish women's cleaning and cooking to create the home-centered Jewish rituals that take place as part of a routine, such as the weekly and yearly cycle of Sabbaths and holidays. But because it is religious labor, the women claim it as their own and allow the men to avoid participating or contributing. When Denise and Sandy claimed that the men "wouldn't know anything about it," they upheld the Victorian gendered division of labor for religion and replicated American gendered patterns of household labor.

These gendered patterns distinguish universalist individualist and ethnic familialist discourses, and each set of discourses hinges on its interpretation of gender roles. Where ethnic familialists tended to follow these traditional gendered patterns, universalist individualists chose a more consciously plotted course. Jude and Tabitha talked about living their two religions in their household as a shared responsibility, as did Mary Heléne and Ned Rosenbaum in *Celebrating Our Differences*. Jude commented that he had to be more active in practicing and teaching his children about Judaism since

Tabitha remained committed to Catholicism. If he'd married a Jew, he said, he could have been more "lazy" about it, presumably because he could assume Jewishness to automatically go to his children, but also because he could expect his Jewish wife to manage the children's religious education and observance. Since his actual wife practices Catholicism with their children, he had to take responsibility for practicing Judaism with them. Jude's comments cut in two opposing directions: on one side, he took an egalitarian view of religious responsibilities in the household, but on the other side, his wife made him do so. By insisting on "fairness" to both religious traditions, universalist individualism demands more religious participation from men. Yet Jude's comments suggest that he would have found ethnic familialism equally attractive if his wife had been willing to give up Christianity. Universalist individualist women insisted on having two equal religions in their marriage, understanding themselves to be "prophetic outcasts" who took an unconventional and unpopular road. But like their pride in being "prophetic outcasts," their pride in their egalitarianism points to what they purposely reject—the traditional gender role in which the woman runs the domestic-religious realm on behalf of the entire family. Universalist individualism requires family members to integrate their religious lives as individuals rather than expecting the wife and mother of the family to do it for them.

Despite the attractiveness of the rhetoric of "fairness" to Americans steeped in a culture that emphasizes egalitarianism, Hochschild documents tension in couples whose egalitarian practices outpaced husbands' beliefs. These men claimed to believe in egalitarianism but evidenced awkwardness about it because they actually preferred a more traditional household arrangement (Hochschild 2003[1989], 216–17). Because the

gendered division of labor opposes the American cultural value of fairness, marriages that rely on assumed traditionalist roles either come to understand themselves as "fair," or they experience an imbalance in what Hochschild calls an "economy of gratitude." Hochschild documented a great deal of conflict when spouses disagreed about the amount of gratitude they owed or were due from each other. Her women informants often felt more grateful to their husbands than vice versa because they felt that the stakes for women in marriage were higher than for men: divorce would leave them and their children in an economically precarious situation while it would be unlikely to have this effect on their husbands (Hochschild 2003[1989], 19, 212–217). Perhaps recognizing the potential for such imbalance in marriages like that of Sandy and Josh, the Mothers Circle rabbi urged the Mothers Circle women's husbands to recognize the importance of their wives' "gift" to them and the Jewish people in raising their children as Jews. He said that in the Fathers Circle, in which these Jewish husbands met a few times a year, the men did express their gratitude. In other couples whom I interviewed, however, there was at least as much resentment as gratitude. When the non-Jewish wives who gave up their own traditions, such as celebrating Christmas with decorations and festivities, in order to participate in a Jewish community that they felt rejected them, they were very bitter, feeling that their husbands did not recognize the sacrifices that they were making. The men often seemed oblivious to their wives' feelings.

Women's default role as formers of religious identity gave them a great deal of power over their families' experience of Judaism. Through their own efforts and over their husbands' resistance, they shaped their families' practices and habits. As a group, non-Jewish intermarried women hold some power to help shape the composition of the

Jewish people itself, not with the traditional textual sources of authority that rabbis use, but with culture and patterns that continue through mimesis and emotion. Through their participation in the Mothers Circle, the women learn about Jewish traditions more formally and find themselves teaching their husbands what they have learned, so that they informally perform the teaching work that religious institutions and leaders also do. This raises the question of the meaning of Jewish religious authority when it is held by a non-Jew. Leadership in American Judaism has gradually become "feminized" along with other American religious groups (Fishman and Parmer 2008), echoing the "feminization of American religion" which had already been largely female-driven (Braude 1997).

Like universalist individualism, ethnic familialism often does include the belief that all religions express the same values, and choice plays a part in religious belief and practice. But where universalist individualism radically redefines Judaism and Christianity out of their historical specificity to make them continuous with American cultural values and to create a rational religious system for themselves, ethnic familialists choose instead to ignore contradictions between these religions and experience conflict as they attempt to merge incompatible values. Ethnic familialists choose Judaism for their children, ignoring their own use of Christian symbols and practices for the purpose of family identity. Often, in response to questions about what Jewish values they wanted to pass on to their children, my Jewish male informants listed items such as the Ten Commandments, "do unto others," and "be a good person," which are either shared with Christianity or part of a diffuse American civil religion. Rarely did they place these items in a particularistic Jewish or even religious context. The spoken and unspoken awkwardness about Hebrew names, lack of Jewish knowledge, and distaste for Christian

holiday symbols are as much a part of ethnic familialism as Shabbat celebrations and challah baking. This model of interfaith family life involves a visceral kind of religious experience that is tightly bound up with family, ethnicity, and ambivalence. The experiential approach of ethnic familialism requires both less and more effort than universalist individualism. While ethnic familialist parents do not have to teach their children the values and history of multiple religions so that children can make rational, informed choices, they do have to consciously inculcate Judaism into their lives in order to make it "what you are."

Ethnic familialism entangles American and Jewish cultural values, starting with values particular to Judaism, but insisting on their being acted out in a way particular to the American setting. Yet the American setting itself is the source of much of the ambivalence in this variety of religious experience. The freedom of religion that has enabled Jews to integrate into American society has also rendered them prone to religious indifference. Before the 1940s, Jewishness could be a state of being for Jews who lived in close-knit Jewish neighborhoods and were surrounded by Jewish friends and family members (Moore 1981, 19–58). But with American Jews' movement to the suburbs, Jewishness became located in synagogues and Jewish community centers. In the suburbs, Jews had to actively put themselves in the context of Jewish referents. The experiential ethnic familialism model is a self-conscious effort to create the sensory and spiritual experiences that in earlier generations might have happened as a matter of course. Intermarried ethnic familialist Jews rely on nostalgia as their guide for what they try to create, using memories of their own Jewish childhoods, or lacking that, imagination of

their parents' or grandparents' Jewish childhoods. They also receive professional guidance on these questions from the Mothers Circle leaders.

In light of the different, sometimes contradictory definitions of religion operational in the lives of my intermarried informants, marriage between Jews and Christians is not as simple an issue as discourses on intermarriage have suggested. The broad American definition of religion, seated in the deep and wide-ranging legacy of Protestantism in American culture, clearly does influence ethnic familialists, but so does their sense of Judaism as "what you are"—not necessarily belief or ritual performance.

# Chapter 5

## Balancing Families, Individuals, Covenant and Community

For rabbis across the denominational spectrum, the languages of ethnic familialism and universalist individualism presented challenges. My intermarried informants understood Jewishness in the context of their individual and familial commitments. In contrast, the rabbis and Jewish educators whom I interviewed and among whom I did participant observation interacted with and thought about intermarried couples in a broader context of covenant and community. In their efforts to preserve Jewishness, they had to define it as well as determine its ritual application. Some of the rabbis felt that they had to resist the encroachment of individualism and insist upon the inviolability of Jewish communal boundaries. Others felt that Jewish communal boundaries had to acknowledge the legitimacy of individuals' own judgments and perspectives. The rabbis' contrasting perspectives highlight the conflict among Jewish leaders concerning non-Orthodox denominations' departure from Orthodox understandings of Jewish law and covenant, and demonstrate that the tensions of universalist individualism and ethnic familialism are not limited to intermarried couples, but exist in rabbis' deliberations as well.

I interviewed thirteen Atlanta rabbis, who described their interactions with intermarried couples concerning life cycle rituals, such as weddings and baby namings, and their perspectives on Jewishness more generally. I also observed the interactions of some rabbis and Jewish educators with each other and with intermarried non-Jewish women around the topic of intermarriage. I asked the rabbis about their experiences and

the sources from which they draw as they work with intermarried couples in everyday life in order to understand what "Jewish continuity" means to them. I interviewed four Orthodox, four Conservative, one Reconstructionist and four Reform rabbis in the Atlanta area, along with two educators who work with the Mothers Circle, and several rabbis and educators outside the Atlanta area. Because I promised them anonymity, as far as possible, I will identify them only by their movement affiliation and a randomly selected initial.[1] While the rabbis used a common vocabulary to articulate their views on intermarriage—God, the Jewish people, and covenant, for example—their use of that common vocabulary did not reflect a shared understanding of these terms' meaning or of the goal of "Jewish continuity."

**The clash of universalist individualism and ethnic familialism in Jewish outreach**

In their public representation of themselves and their approach to intermarried couples, some rabbis and Jewish educators whom I observed used language very similar to universalist individualism. Their public self-representation was part of their "outreach" to intermarried Jews, with the short-term goal of securing intermarried Jews' participation in and affiliation with Jewish organizations and the long-term goal of ensuring "Jewish continuity." Concern for Jewish continuity, broadly understood to mean the continued existence of the Jewish people as a distinct group, drove outreach efforts, but debate had been going on for decades over whether Jewish continuity efforts should emphasize individuals' choices to be Jewish or their kinship obligation to other Jews (Berman 2009, 139–142). The outreach events that I attended reflected this tension with

[1] For further interview data on rabbis' views on intermarriage, see Tobin and Simon 1999.

their public use of individualist universalist language, and private, more informal use of ethnic familialist language.

One of the outreach events that I attended in Atlanta was a panel discussion in February 2007 called “Raising Your Children as Jews When You Are Not Jewish.” Several Jewish educators and representatives of Jewish organizations were present to promote their offerings. A representative from the local Reform Jewish day school handed out literature, seeking to enroll the children of intermarried couples. A program officer from the Jewish Outreach Institute had flown in from New York for the event. Mothers Circle leaders from Atlanta were on hand. About 25 people, more women than men, sat in the audience, including couples who had not yet married but were exploring how to join two religions, and married couples with young children. One intermarried man told me that he had come because he was concerned about his infant son eventually choosing something other than Judaism and he wanted to know how prevent that. A woman pointed out the irony of his concern, saying that his parents probably had thought something similar when he was a child about preventing him from intermarrying.

Rabbi G, as I will call him, who had retired from leadership of his Reform congregation but continued to work closely with the Mothers Circle, led the panel discussion with four “alumnae” of the Mothers Circle. In 2002, these women had taken part in the pilot Mothers Circle course in Atlanta, an 8-month, 16-session course that covered the basic “how to” of having a Jewish home, “Ask the Rabbi” sessions, havdalah and Shabbat services, and Fathers Circle programs. “What has been your experience coming into the Jewish community and what were your reactions to it?” he asked them.

Two of the women described negative experiences. “My husband’s family had reservations about his dating a non-Jew. I didn’t like feeling like an outsider. Once I felt that way I kept looking for more evidence or confirmation that that’s how they felt about me,” said Ellen, a Minnesotan Catholic who said that she had never known any Jews before meeting her husband.

“My parents were less accepting than my husband’s were. His weren’t completely accepting either at first. Our parents had stereotyped views of each other at first,” said Katherine, who also was raised Catholic.

Two of the women said that they had had positive experiences. “I always felt welcomed,” said Bonnie.

“My husband’s family accepted me with open arms. I had an easier time because his sister had already intermarried. My first experience with the Jewish community has been the Mothers Circle and it is wonderful!” said Ann, who said that she was raised Baptist, Presbyterian and “sorta secular.”

“No two cases are alike,” commented Rabbi G. “Ann, why is it wonderful?”

**“**People are so appreciative that we non-Jewish women are raising our kids Jewish. The mother sets the tone in the home for the religious experience and upbringing, and we are creating new Jewish experiences,” said Ann.

“A non-Jewish mother or spouse sometimes brings more Jewishness into the home than would be the case with a Jewish-Jewish couple,” observed Rabbi G.

Bonnie agreed. “My husband is more involved than he would be otherwise because I’m not Jewish. I can’t raise the kids Jewish all on my own. Our Jewish friends

are impressed that it's not a hassle for me to get him to go to the synagogue with us. They call me up to ask Jewish questions—I don't always know the answers but they ask."

"You are becoming like a human Jew Google," Rabbi G quipped. "Are there stereotypes or stumbling blocks you have encountered coming into the Jewish community?"

"Once my mom sent an email to several family members and she wrote 'G-d' [the spelling of "God" used by some Jews to show reverence toward God's name] instead of 'God,'" said Ellen. "My aunt asked why she wrote that, and my mom said it was out of respect for our Jewish family members. So my aunt said, 'I didn't know Jews didn't believe in God!'" The audience laughed.

Rabbi G continued with an open-ended question that he framed to emphasize his respect for the women's individual choices, and to allow the women to tell their own stories. "How did you come to make the decision to be at least co-responsible for raising Jewish children?"

"I've been married for 20 years," Katherine said. "When my husband and I got married—we were living in New York then—we had both a rabbi and a priest for our interfaith wedding ceremony. We planned to raise our children in both religions. We thought of ourselves as smart and urban and marveled at how rich our lives would be! But when our older son was in kindergarten, he said, 'I feel more Jewish than Christian.' And I was struggling with my own religion as well, so I moved away from it and toward Judaism. My journey has evolved. Our whole family considers ourselves Jewish now, and our home has become more Jewish than anything my husband knew growing up."

Ann said, “We decided to raise the children Jewish when we were seriously dating. My experience with my husband’s family was that they had strong traditions and I felt that whatever traditions my family would practice, I wanted them to be strong. Also my husband’s father is a Holocaust survivor and I wanted to add to the Jewish population, not take away from it. My own background was not strongly religious so I wasn’t losing anything—my family celebrated the major holidays, but secularly, not religiously.”

Bonnie said, “My husband’s family wasn’t religious—“

“They’re H2O Jews—Holidays, 2 Only,” Rabbi G joked.

“—and Christianity never resonated with me,” she continued. “The idea that you had to take ‘Jesus as savior’ on faith alone didn’t make sense. I like that Judaism is based on what you do rather than only belief. That makes more sense to me. I was trying to be sensitive with my own family so that it would be clear I hadn’t actually converted to Judaism but then my father thought I already was Jewish so I don’t know what I was trying to hide or be careful about.”

“Is there anything you feel that you’ve lost by agreeing to raise the kids Jewish?” he asked.

Katherine said, “It’s an extension of my own religion—Jesus celebrated Passover—so no.”

Ann said, “I thought I was losing something until I started making it my own, rather than thinking about what I grew up with.”

“Everyone’s spiritual journey is completely unique,” said Rabbi G. “There is no one story that everyone will share. And not to sound like I think you should convert or

should already have converted, because people should only convert if they feel profoundly and deeply that they should do it, but what has prevented you from converting?"

"I don't know," said Bonnie.

"I don't feel a personal connection to Judaism," said Ellen. "I didn't receive a welcome in the beginning, and I'm a stubborn person. Plus there are the language and cultural barriers."

Katherine said, "I am on a journey toward that step. But it has taken twenty years."

Ann said, "I am just starting to learn what Judaism is about."

"What traditions have become your favorites?" asked Rabbi G.

Bonnie said, "Shabbat." All the other women nodded and smiled knowingly. They clearly knew that Bonnie would say Shabbat was her favorite. "It's the best way to end the week. I am making my own challah every Friday morning!"

Ellen said, "I like the home-based stuff. I never liked going to church so I like this much better."

Katherine said, "It just makes more sense that it should be home based."

Rabbi G agreed. "Shabbat is a relief from the rat race."

Katherine turned to the audience and said, "I want to point out that the Mothers Circle has no agenda. There is no pressure to convert."

"My mother-in-law sent me an article from *Reform Judaism* magazine from a year or two ago honoring non-Jewish women who raise Jewish kids. It made me think that I was really accepted now," said Bonnie.

"The Reform movement has recognized them for decades," acknowledged Rabbi G. "It does no good to hide your head in the sand about it." Audience members had been invited to write questions for the panelists on index cards, which were collected and handed to Rabbi G several times during the evening. He read the first question from an audience member. "What has been your most overwhelming experience with raising Jewish children?"

Bonnie answered. "When we adopted our son. We were there for his birth and took him home from the hospital, and then we had to convert him. There was a *bris*, a baby-naming, and the *mikveh* [immersion]. It felt like there were so many different things we had to do, and my parents were in town. Then when he was two years old he went in the *mikveh* with his father. He didn't like being dunked under the water, but he had to be three times, and when he came up the last time the rabbi and the cantor started singing a wonderful song, I don't know what it was, and there was this naked little kid and it was very powerful. I tear up just thinking about it."

Ann said that she had had no overwhelming experiences yet.

Ellen said, "A close friend was killed in a car wreck and I chose her name as the basis of my child's Hebrew name. I was kind of amazed that I was able to come up with the Hebrew name."

Katherine said, "Getting the date of my son's *bar mitzvah* was overwhelming!"

The rabbi read the next audience question. "'What is your favorite holiday?' We did that one already. Next one: 'Are the Jewish spouses involved in the activities of the Mothers Circle?' I can answer that one. The daddies have meaningful interactions there too. They say their wives have done so much for them and their faith."

In their use of the language of spiritual or Jewish "journeys," Rabbi G and the panelists employed universalist individualist discourses, suggesting that each person will find a unique but equally valid way to participate in religious life. With the use of language like "daddies," Rabbi G evoked ethnic familialism, emphasizing the parental roles as primary in the families' Jewishness. The Mothers Circle facilitators also used this language, referring to the Mothers Circle members as "moms," rarely as "women," emphasizing family ties over particular beliefs. Jewish law or other forms of obligation between Jews did not enter the conversation, other than in Ann's comment about her wish to add to the Jewish population because of her father-in-law's survival of the Holocaust.

Rabbi G concluded by expressing his gratitude to non-Jewish women raising their children as Jews, because "they are doing something so important for Judaism." The discussion implied that the perceived peril addressed by "Jewish continuity" efforts had been largely solved because these non-Jewish women were showing that they could raise their children as Jews. No one spoke about whether the children would remain Jews as adults or raise their own children as Jews, and it was not clear whether it was because they felt sure that the children would continue to be Jewish because they had been raised that way, or because they felt that the children could ultimately choose their own religious paths for themselves when they were adults. In this way, the panel discussion used both ethnic familialist and universalist individualist ideas simultaneously. Certain configurations of these discourses enabled a version of Jewish continuity, even as they sidestepped the issue of what kind of Jewishness would be continued.

I observed a reiteration of this panel discussion on a national scale at a 2007 conference held by the Jewish Outreach Institute (JOI) in Washington, D.C. Founded in 1988, JOI creates and promotes outreach programming, and it is funded by a number of philanthropies and Jewish community organizations. Jewish organizations and educators turn to JOI for help in creating "opportunities for including the intermarried in the Jewish community," according to the organization's Web site (Jewish Outreach Institute 2008). JOI promotes welcoming people into Jewish communities regardless of their individual religious affiliations and emphasizes the inclusion of not only intermarried Jews but also converts and non-white Jews who experience social rather than halakhic exclusion. By deemphasizing traditionally normative views of intermarriage and Jewishness, the rabbis and Jewish educators involved with JOI say that they are recognizing the reality of contemporary Jews' lives. The JOI Web site explains it this way:

> The fact is, less than half of all Jews---intermarried or otherwise---are actually participating in Jewish institutions. In order to bridge the growing divide between the minority of Jews engaged with the organized community and the majority who are not, JOI advocates the creation of programs and events where the two can meet on neutral ground. Instead of asking people to cross our threshold we must go out and meet them first, to welcome them in (Jewish Outreach Institute 2008).

This organization responds to a change in how many Jews view Jewishness in a way that they hope will enable Jewish institutions to survive. But as they do so, other voices in the Jewish community resist, saying that changing Jewish institutions to mirror the views of secular Jews undermines the integrity of the Jewish community as a whole.

At JOI's national conference in Washington, D.C., Jewish Outreach Institute leader Rabbi Kerry Olitzky described JOI's goal as to "grow the [big] tent through the methodology of outreach." A year and a half earlier, JOI's conference in Atlanta drew 125 people. For this conference, a waiting list had grown beyond the 250 participants it

could accommodate. Participants had traveled from as far away as Australia. The agenda of this conference was to showcase "Big Tent Judaism." As JOI's Web site describes it,

> Big Tent Judaism is an approach to Jewish community that takes its lead from the values and vision of our Biblical forbearers Abraham and Sarah's tent, which was open on four sides to welcome all who approach. Individuals and organizations that practice a Big Tent Judaism seek to engage, support and advocate for all those who would cast their lot with the Jewish people, regardless of prior knowledge or background (Jewish Outreach Institute 2008).

To illustrate how "Big Tent Judaism" should look, a gospel-style choir from an African-American synagogue called Congregation Temple Beth'El in Philadelphia was slated to perform, and the stories of converts and the intermarried would be featured throughout the conference. The programming was meant to emphasize the variety of individuals who would be included in "Big Tent Judaism."

A panel discussion took place in which Rabbi G interviewed the same Mothers Circle alumnae who had participated in the panel discussion in Atlanta. The purpose of the session in Atlanta had appeared to be to market the Mothers Circle program to potential participants. The purpose of the panel at the JOI conference was to market it to outreach professionals.

"Mothers Circle undergirds and exemplifies what Big Tent Judaism is all about," said Rabbi G, "and Mothers Circle deepens the engagement of the families with synagogues, allowing them to become access points." Reflecting on more than thirty-five years as a rabbi, he said, "Of all the work that I've done, none has been more sacred to me than what the Mothers Circle has done and continues to do." Turning to the panelists, he asked, "What has been your reception into and experience with the Jewish community?"

Katherine elaborated on the story she had told at the Atlanta panel discussion. She commented that it had been hard to find a rabbi to perform their dual-faith wedding ceremony, even when they had looked in neighboring states. Out of their initial intentions to raise their children in both Catholicism and Judaism, their two sons each had a *bris* and a baptism. Her Jewish mother-in-law and father-in-law had always been "generous and supporting," and had even attended the children's baptisms.

Bonnie said, "My in-laws were not delighted that I was older, divorced, and not Jewish, but we eventually forged a good relationship. Recently my mother-in-law said to me, 'There is something I have wanted to say to you for a long time. We are so sorry about the way our relationship got started when you and Michael started dating. You are a wonderful daughter-in-law.' I almost fell out of my chair! So in our relationship now, I just let her be who she is and she lets me be who I am. And now I've been taking Jewish classes for about seven years, and my in-laws can't believe how much Jewish stuff I do!"

"That is what it's all about," Rabbi G agreed. "We let you be who you are." Letting people be who they were was the implicit principle of JOI's Big Tent Judaism as well.

Ann had agreed to raise her children, now four and six years old, Jewish. "One of the reasons I chose to raise my child Jewish was how open they [Jewish people] were to me. Even my husband's Orthodox relatives were open. When I didn't know what was going on, they taught me the different customs and explained things."

"What led you to decide to bring up Jewish kids?" Rabbi G asked the panelists.

Katherine answered, "It was a long process, because we expected to raise them in both. My feelings changed about my religion for a variety of reasons. I did more learning

about Judaism over time, and Mothers Circle helped open it up. Your husband may be Jewish, but he doesn't necessarily have the background or knowledge about how to celebrate the holidays, or even on a daily basis. Children need to hear that we want them to make the world better here and now. I was raised in a very strong Catholic family. For a variety of reasons, I have moved away from that, and I was searching and searching. My involvement in the synagogue over the last ten years helped me decide to convert. Judaism is how I want to live my life."

Ann added, "I wanted to raise my children in a home that had a strong religious identity. I saw that in his family. My husband's father is a Holocaust survivor so that went into it too."

"What keeps you doing this?" Rabbi G asked.

"The tradition. The memories," she replied. "My husband's relatives have so many memories of all the holidays. I have to admit, the last few weeks, it felt like a marathon. My children learned so many Jewish values from the holidays. They've had a blast!"

"What has been your husband's role?" Rabbi G asked.

Ann said, "Hebrew pronunciation. And I ask my husband when I'm preparing for a holiday, 'How did you do it?' And he remembers maybe a third of how they did it. But we always incorporate that into our practice."

"The wife is the one who carries the spiritual piece," Bonnie said. "But I'm not the Jew! Every time I tell my husband we're going to the temple, he's been right there. Mothers Circle gave us a place to bring the Judaism into my home. It's really created like a hav—is it *havurah* [circle of friends]?—for us." She laughed. "I was making challah the

other day and I called Rachel and said"–she assumed a terrified voice and facial expression—"'It's not going to rise!' And Rachel told me she makes hers in a bread machine."

Rachel added, "Sometimes the husbands are more ambivalent and it takes the women to bring them back to Judaism. So I think the Mothers Circle empowers these women to go home and say, 'We're a Jewish family and this is what we're doing.'"

"I had never seriously considered converting," Bonnie said, laughing again, "because I didn't want to disappoint my aunts, who were very Christian, wonderfully so! And my mother had just died. But my father thinks I'm Jewish already! He said, 'Well, now that you're a Jew…' so all that worry was for naught!"

Ann agreed. "Mothers Circle enabled me to do the synagogue shopping that my husband neglected to do. I asked him a number of times to choose a synagogue for our family, and he kept never getting around to it, so once I had taken part in Mothers Circle, I felt like I knew enough to choose one on my own."

Reflecting on her experiences as a Mothers Circle facilitator, Rachel told the audience, "If you tear your clothes and mourn when people intermarry—well, that strategy isn't working, and I wanted to know if there were other ways of dealing with intermarriage. The moms in the Mothers Circle bring so much joy to our people. They are really a blessing to us."

The rabbi turned to the panelists and said, "There's no way we can ever thank you enough for what you are doing for our people."

Audience members began to stand up and pass around a microphone, into which they asked their questions. "What makes it so accessible?" one woman asked.

Rachel said, “The Mothers Circle is free. There’s no cost. And we have multiple locations so it’s convenient.”

Bonnie added, “And there’s no push to convert.”

“That’s right,” Katherine affirmed. “No judgment whatsoever. And the support the women give each other. We’re all there for the same reasons. We all have the same fears.”

Another audience member asked, “How do you handle comments that your children aren’t Jewish?”

Bonnie said, “I don’t really get those questions. My child was converted. I wanted to have all the ritual aspects of conversion for him, so he went to the *mikvah*, had a *bris*. But a friend of mine was talking about someone else once, and she made some comments implied that the person wasn’t *really* Jewish. Then she realized who she was talking to, and sort of made a left turn and tried to make it sound otherwise. But it’s like racism—you don’t always know what people are saying about you. All you can do is live your own life and not worry about what other people think of your choices.”

Another audience member asked, “What do your parents or family think about this?”

Katherine responded, “We always include our Christian family in our holiday celebrations. My father respects it but he does wish it was a different way. We go to their house for Christmas; Santa doesn’t come. I don’t miss anything about my past religious life per se—it’s more the traditions, Christmas and Easter. We go help my mother celebrate Christmas and Easter. We are creating traditions for our own children and they

are Jewish. I keep saying, 'now that my children are Jewish,' and that's wrong, because they were Jewish the day they were born!"

Bonnie said, "I think my father and my family are glad that I have a spiritual path. I do have a friend who has sent me books about Jesus, and I have had straight-on conversations with her about belief."

Another audience member asked, "Now that you've been *mishpocha* [family] for so long, is there anything about the Jewish community that still mystifies you?"

Bonnie said, "Hebrew. Going to services. Everything."

Ann ventured, "When I went to my first synagogue service, I was almost in tears. That the traditions and the service keeps going and going and going—" The audience roared with laughter, thinking that Ann was commenting on how long and boring the service was. But Ann was not trying to make a joke. She waited a moment for the laughter to die down, and then continued, "It has kept going over all these years; it's amazing." She had been trying to convey her awe at the longevity of Jewish tradition.

The audience's misunderstanding of what Ann meant suggested that they assumed that non-Jews would find Jewish religious practices alienating and boring rather than awe-inspiring. In discourses about intermarriage, such ideas had already been circulating for decades, both explicitly in the ways in which intermarried Jews were portrayed as religiously illiterate and implicitly in the ways in which rabbis appealed to sociological rather than religious arguments against intermarriage. This misunderstanding, in combination with the questions about what the women's families thought of their raising their children as Jews and in what ways the women felt themselves to be outsiders, suggested that the dramatically inclusive concept of the "Big Tent" would have to replace

ingrained feelings of difference between Jews and non-Jews even among these outreach professionals. The women on this panel approached their families' religious lives in a matter of fact way, and the audience in Atlanta, who were potential Mothers Circle members, had asked questions that were primarily pragmatic, with the goal of understanding how they could incorporate the Mothers Circle insights into their own lives. In contrast, the audience members at this conference asked questions that suggested their struggle to understand a lifestyle that they felt was completely foreign to them. Yet the Mothers Circle women's comments suggested that they felt that Jewishness had become relatively accessible to them, similar to the sentiments of universalist individualism in which religious practices are open to all. But to the audience, this idea seemed implausible, as if the difference between non-Jews and Jews was assumed to extend to the cellular level.

Later that evening, an energetic keynote speaker, a member of a prominent philanthropic Jewish family, took the stage to argue that the "insider/outsider distinction" that he sensed in Jewish communities should be erased. For him, the concept of "Big Tent" meant that people could self-identify as Jews and that there should be no threshold that they should have to meet for communal recognition as Jews. He described his experiences with his wife, who was not originally Jewish but eventually converted, and their four children. Rabbis welcomed them into their congregations, he said, but it was because of his family name. The audience laughed uproariously, but they had misunderstood his meaning, just as they had mistaken Ann's meaning about the longevity of Jewish traditions. "I didn't think that was funny," he said gravely. "But you did. That says something. I just thought these people cared about me and my wife and our

children." Implicitly, the speaker suggested that rabbis' responses to his intermarriage were at least partially motivated by their desire to have the prestige and potential philanthropic benefits of his membership in their congregation.

"A lot of the time, we get all excited about outreach and keep saying we're ready to go, and we're waiting and preparing but nothing happens. It's like a Samuel Beckett play." He urged the audience to reach out to "people who want to bring meaning into their lives and want to do it Jewishly. Our best days are ahead of us if we open our doors and don't create a litmus test. People will want to become Jewish."

Despite the rhetoric of openness, not everyone at the conference was convinced. A small group of conference participants mused about the meaning of openness.

"We had a situation where a synagogue employee wanted the rabbis to perform an interfaith wedding ceremony. But our community doesn't allow that and we can't provide that. We feel like we need to be able to refer them somewhere where they can get their needs met, so they don't feel alienated from Judaism entirely," said Aliza, a non-denominational Jewish educator.

"Let's be real. We're not doing this just so people don't feel alienated," said Andrea, another Jewish educator. "We have to admit that it's not all about being nice. There's a selfish reason too. We want there to be Jews in the world! We are all about growing Jewish children."

"Yes, there's the continuity aspect of outreach," said Jon, a Conservative rabbi. "That's what it's all about."

"We don't want to die," said Aliza.

"But how do you communicate boundaries without being judgmental?" asked Jon. "We're hearing this message that there should be no litmus test and anyone who says they're Jewish should be considered Jewish. But there's only so far the boundary extends, and only so far I can go." Referring to the gospel-style choir that had performed earlier that evening, he said, "They should have explained who the people in the choir were and what the story with that synagogue was. I would not consider them Jewish. They started out in the '50s with a charismatic leader who was reading the scriptures and thought it led her to Judaism, and she brought people with her. She had a church to start with and then they gradually went toward Judaism."

This conversation suggested that for some, the ideals of universalism and individualism were only the public representation of an open, welcoming form of Jewishness, while more ambivalent ethnic familialist feelings laid underneath it. Having this conversation in an open session among hundreds of conference participants would have made the conference appear to be trumpeting the same negative messages about intermarriage that it decried. But the fact that it was not conveying these messages publicly did not mean that the ambivalence had subsided. Rather, the public message was adaptive to the American cultural context, framing Jewish community membership in a way that was thought to appeal to intermarried couples, and strategically avoiding the instrumentalizing language of conversion for the sake of Jewish continuity that often turned intermarried couples off from Jewish institutions.

The next morning, I had a conversation over breakfast with Katherine and her husband and two middle school aged sons. I told her husband about the people I'd met at the Dovetail conference who raised their children in both parents' religions. The older

son looked up from the text message he was sending on his cell phone and piped up, "I think you should raise your kids in both religions and then let the kid decide when they are old enough." I asked him if he would want to have two religions until he decided. "Probably not," he said. "Most kids would probably choose nothing."

**Religious mixing and Jewish continuity**

In my interviews with Atlanta rabbis, I found a great deal of disagreement about the nature of Jewishness and the meaning of Jewish continuity. Several self-help books on intermarriage written by rabbis suggest such disagreement about Jewish continuity: *It All Begins with a Date* (Silverstein 1995a), *Preserving Jewishness in Your Family after Intermarriage Has Occurred* (Silverstein 1995b), and *Making a Successful Jewish Interfaith Marriage* (Olitzky 2003). In some cases, "continuity" means preventing intermarriage or treating it as a type of malady within a family, and in other cases, "continuity" entails emphasizing Judaism regardless of the religious backgrounds of the individuals within the family.

The ways in which rabbis whom I interviewed conceive of the boundaries of Jewish community help them to define Jewish continuity. In some Jewish communities, *halakhah* sets the rules, and non-Jews are not included in Jewish ritual. In communities that adhere more loosely to Jewish law, rabbis often make determinations about the boundaries between Jews and non-Jews on a more individualistic basis. These rabbis decide how to accommodate non-Jewish partners, spouses or parents of Jewish members at life cycle ceremonies, without any sustained, formal discussion of intermarriage with other Atlanta rabbis or official knowledge about other rabbis' practices. They rely on "the

grapevine" when referring couples to rabbis with different approaches to intermarriage, said one Reform rabbi in Atlanta. Two Atlanta rabbis told me that few local rabbis officiate at interfaith weddings.

But the rabbis did agree that Jewish continuity required that Jewish and Christian religious practices not be mixed. Universalist individualists such as my informants at the Dovetail conference would be quite unhappy with their view, but it placed the rabbis squarely among normative religious voices in discourses about intermarriage. These rabbis arrived at their agreement under divergent assumptions about Jewishness. Broadly speaking, non-Orthodox rabbis whom I interviewed assumed that God was comfortable with Jews' having a high degree of personal autonomy. In this view, the Jewish people maintain a permanent covenantal relationship with God, as set out in and through the Torah. This relationship is not necessarily an exclusive "chosen" status separate from other peoples, and its manifestation in daily life can change in response to historical context. Personal meaning and choice are seen to have a legitimate place in Jews' relationship to God given their prominence in contemporary American culture.

Reform and Reconstructionist theologies incorporate the assumption of personal autonomy. Reform Judaism casts the observance of individual *mitzvot* (commandments) as a matter of choice. Individual Jews may determine their own observance depending on whether they find a particular *mitzvah* to be a meaningful way to connect to God and community (Borowitz 1983, 267–72; Borowitz 1984). Reconstructionist Judaism sees itself as "post-halakhic," meaning that while it honors the tradition that *halakhah* embodies, it emphasizes the autonomy of individuals to understand the relationship of Jewish teachings to particular circumstances of their own lives (Alpert and Staub 1985,

31–32). Conservative Judaism finds itself in an awkward intermediate position in that it officially regards *halakhah* as binding, but many individual Conservative Jews exercise a high degree of personal autonomy (Borowitz 1983, 262–63). Thus, the Conservative movement's leadership is forced to contend with many laypeople's assumption of personal autonomy even as it regards *halakhah* as binding. Conservative Rabbi Neil Gillman, a faculty member at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, argued at the 2007 United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism Biennial Convention that because of this divide between rabbis' and laypeople's view of the authority of *halakhah*, the Conservative Movement should stop considering itself a halakhic movement (Tigay 2008; Fishkoff 2007).

The contrasting group holds the Torah to have been revealed by God at Mount Sinai, as described in the Torah, and the Jewish people as responsible for living up to God's commandments, as set out in the Torah and later interpreted within the appropriate framework. The meaning of the *mitzvot* is to be found in their observance, wrote Orthodox rabbi Norman Lamm (*Commentary* 1966, 110–12). The Torah is both of God and "Godly," meaning that to study and observe Torah, especially *mitzvot* that do not have clear "rational or ethical or nationalistic" significance, is to experience communion with God. To observe *mitzvot*, whether ritual or ethical, is to practice holiness, in Lamm's view. As a "chosen" people, Lamm explains, Jews are to separate themselves from non-Jews, observe *halakhah* in order to cultivate holiness individually and collectively, and teach spirituality via example to the other nations of the world. Thus, according to several of my informants, concern for personal autonomy is misplaced because the Jewish

people's role is to submit to God's will in order to show other peoples how to live in communion with God.

Despite their different conceptions of Jewishness, many of the rabbis agreed that mixing religions would be worse than losing Jews to Christianity altogether. They said that they preferred intermarried couples to choose Christianity for their children than to raise them in both Judaism and Christianity. In contrast, Christian denominations oppose intermarriage less stringently than most rabbis do. Roman Catholic canon law restricts clergy from performing religious wedding ceremonies jointly with clergy of different religions (Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2003, Can. 1127), and establishes official procedures for intermarriage that resemble in many respects what liberal rabbis have set up in more informal, local ways. Both Protestants and Catholics express concern for the religious upbringing of children of intermarriage, focusing on the importance of building a "Christian home."

> [N]o marriage can be fully and securely Christian in spirit or in purpose unless both partners are committed to a common Christian faith and to a deeply shared intention of building a Christian home. Evangelical Christians should seek as partners in marriage only persons who hold in common a sound basis of evangelical faith (Evangelical Presbyterian Church 2009).

Evangelicals avoid marriages in which spouses are "unequally yoked," a reference to Paul's admonition against being "yoked" to "unbelievers" (2 Cor 6:14ff). The leadership in the Catholic Church and in Reconstructionist and Reform Judaism relaxed their earlier emphasis on spousal conversion as the Catholic Church made fewer demands on non-Catholic partners with Vatican II and these movements of Judaism allowed patrilineal descent. Hence, in more recent decades, the idea that spouses could belong to separate religions has become more prevalent (Rose 2001).

The idea of adults practicing multiple religions was less disturbing to my rabbinic informants than the idea that their children might do so because the children would have dual or conflicting allegiances. Just as rabbis who officiate at interfaith weddings often strictly forbid any representation of Jesus, Conservative Rabbi "E" said that he saw the mixing of Judaism and Christianity as out of bounds.

> [If an intermarried couple says] that the child is going to be raised Jewish, I say, "Okay." If they say that the way the child is going to be raised as a Christian, I'm reluctant, but say, "Good, okay, you've made a choice."
>
> If they have the foolishness to tell me what they're going to do is expose their children to both religions, then I tell them that they're very foolish parents, and that this is terrible, terrible parenting, and that what they are doing is telling their child that on Monday they're a vegetarian. On Tuesday, they're a carnivore; on Wednesday they're a vegetarian; on Thursday they're a carnivore. I said, "You're dealing with two contradictory concepts, and what you are forcing the child to do is pick not a religion, but a parent."
>
> And I said, "Better you should pick Christianity than screw up your child," but you have a lot of these pseudo-intellectual people who think that they're doing something very noble, and I try to explain to them that, "Not only isn't it noble to do it that way," I said, "but it's hypocrisy."
>
> [They say,] "We don't want to impose a religion on our child."
>
> I said, "You impose politics on your child. You impose values on your child. You impose religion on your child. You impose everything else on your children, so all of a sudden religion you're not going to impose on them." I said, "That's nonsense." But, again, rarely do I have cases such as that where I have to get that nasty. Either they're smart enough not to come to see me, or they're smart enough not to say anything about that.

Many of the rabbis I interviewed cast the dangers of mixing Judaism and Christianity as pragmatic, psychological concerns—that the children might not know who they are, that they might be confused. They were more comfortable, though disappointed, with a child of intermarried parents being raised as a Christian than as "both," even though a child who was "both" might still have some allegiance to Judaism. Mixing Christianity and

Judaism within the individual child, the home, and the Jewish people was the most disturbing part of intermarriage to Rabbi E and many of my other rabbinic informants.

The problem of mixing "two contradictory concepts" recalls the Mothers Circle women's conversation with Joe about their husbands' apparently inexplicable opposition to having Christmas trees in their homes. By choosing intermarriage under the framework of personal autonomy, these husbands had committed themselves to living under "two contradictory concepts." The rabbis remained within only the Jewish framework, but to them as well as the intermarried husbands, mixing Judaism and Christianity in the home felt like a "slippery slope." The boundaries of Judaism could only become blurrier if they included people who have dual allegiances to Judaism and Christianity. While the rabbis were not literally afraid that Jews would begin worshipping Jesus, they do appear to be worried that dual allegiances can only contribute to greater confusion about what is Jewish and what is not. The boundaries clearly mattered, and the clarity of the boundaries mattered.

Rabbi E said that his views on conversion have changed, for the sake of maintaining clear boundaries around Judaism. Where in the past he expected prospective converts to meet high standards of spiritual commitment to Judaism, he now accepted less spiritually committed intermarried non-Jews as candidates for conversion for the sake of rooting out Christian influences in the family.

> So in the old days, unless I had a feeling that there was true devotion and commitment on the part of the potential convert to convert to Judaism— with or without a Jewish partner— unless there was that fiery passion, I would not participate in the process. I have changed in recent years and the reason I have changed is… Most of the people that I deal with anyway are very passionate about the conversion, but those that are maybe lukewarm, I will say to them, "Is there going to be anything Christian in the home?" The answer is no.

> "If you don't want Christmas, if you're not going to have a Christmas tree, and you're not going to have an Easter egg roll, and you're not going to have any of that kind of stuff, but it's basically going to be a home with a menorah and the mezuzah on the door and so forth, even though you yourself are not passionately into Judaism. You don't drive Hebrew school carpool, but you're not going out of your way to do very much," I said, "I will convert you."
>
> And the reason I have changed my policy is if I get a commitment and a promise that, that person will be, shall we say, an inactive Jew… and very passive in their Jewish commitment, I say, "That's fine, as long as you are not proactive in any way with Christianity or any other faith." So under those circumstances, I will do it, even though it's lukewarm, compared to years ago when I wanted fiery passion, and the reason is very simple. My concern is the children. If the children are raised in an environment where both parents are Jewish—even though one is not enthusiastic about it—it doesn't matter. At least those kids are going to be Jewish. I've come to understand I want to save the next generation and I can do that by not having the standard as demanding as I might have had before.

Clearly, this "passive" Jewishness is an unwelcome compromise for Rabbi E, but it is also his way of reaching beyond despair for future generations' loyalty to Judaism.

Even the most liberal of the rabbis I interviewed clearly distinguished between Jews, as participants in the particular Jewish covenant with God, and non-Jews, who could be wonderful people but were not part of that particular covenant. Reform Rabbi M said that he explains this separation to couples who approach him about officiating at a "baby naming," as a Jewish counterpart to a planned baptism in a church for the same child.

> There's no such thing, really, as a baby naming. For me, it's entering a child into the covenant, and once you enter a child into the Jewish covenant, you're making a commitment to have a particular kind of a relationship with this community and with God.

Religious membership is more than just "heritage," Rabbi M explains; it is a commitment to a holistic framework for living. Rabbi M sees it as rooted in personal meaning, located in symbols and rituals. Thus, intermarried couples who raise their children as "both"

Christian and Jewish because they are "half" of each, according to the folk understanding of kinship, are attempting something that is impossible, in Rabbi M's view.

> I have a mother and I have a father. I'm not half a woman. I don't know what a half of a Jew is. If you have a Jewish father and a mother who's Christian, then there's a choice. I don't think "both" works.

While "choice" plays into Jewishness in the Reform understanding of it, it is the choice to seriously be part of a Jewish community that Rabbi M wants people to make. He reads the attempt to straddle boundaries and holistic frameworks as misguided at best.

"Both," or the mixing of Judaism and Christianity, is an evasion of commitment to the Jewish framework and a betrayal of its authenticity, for Rabbi M. As Reform Rabbi Maurice Davis points out in his article "Why I Won't Perform an Intermarriage," while the integrity of *halakhah* per se is not a Reform rabbi's concern, authenticity is—meaning concern for the integrity of the religious community's symbols and the common history that it evokes (Davis 1988, 20). Rabbi M said that intermarrying or already intermarried couples who wish to practice both Christianity and Judaism must think about what it means to participate in a religious community in the first place. In other words, Rabbi M said that if the intermarrying couple believes that he is rejecting or condemning them by refusing to officiate at their wedding or other interfaith ceremony, they are using the wrong frame of reference to understand it. In Rabbi M's view, when a couple decides to marry across religious boundaries, the couple steps into a secular American framework. His job is to point out that the Jewish and secular frameworks are two separate things, which is not the same as condemnation or rejection, in Rabbi M's view.

Rabbi M recognizes that in some cases, intermarried couples try to do "both" to satisfy their parents. But, he argues, to be a serious and authentic member of a religious

community, a person must seek out meaning for themselves and not just out of filial loyalty. Trying to satisfy parents is not an authentic or responsible way to connect to Judaism, he argues:

> I believe in the covenants of membership, that the synagogue has responsibilities and the folks have responsibilities. It's more than just paying your bill on time. Because that's for country clubs or other associations. I'm interesting in supporting a Jewish community. For folks that are looking to rent a rabbi, I'm not really interested. If they are interested in developing a relationship and figuring out where we're going to journey and what path to choose, I'm in. But, I think to be authentic also means that Jewish tradition isn't just hoops to jump through. It means something. Symbolic language matters, and most of us don't know how to read symbolic language.

Symbolic language requires the individual to take responsibility for interpreting it and using it with integrity. Because this language in Judaism so heavily emphasizes covenant, choosing symbols without attention to their covenantal context is an inauthentic use of them, in Rabbi M's reading.

At the same time, some rabbis felt that communal boundaries could be redefined to enable non-Jews to participate without being part of the Jewish covenant. Reconstructionist Rabbi R, who led the LGBT congregation described in Chapter 4, used universalist individualist language to talk about his way of including non-Jews while avoiding mixing religions. Many members of his congregation chose to belong to it because they felt that it honored their right to private judgment and their experiences as individuals, without pressing upon them a normative vision of Jewishness that would leave them feeling inadequate. Rabbi R takes an individualized view of spirituality, framing his synagogue community as having room for members of all stripes, with distinctions between them carefully balanced between honoring Jewish tradition and individuals. He maintains distinctions between Jews and non-Jews in synagogue ritual,

creating opportunities for non-Jewish members to participate in rituals that are not linked to the particular relationship of the Jewish people to Torah. He feels that it is appropriate and honest to acknowledge non-Jews as such, rather than having them participate equally as if they were Jews. He described a blessing for parents of *b'nai mitzvah* he created to include a special group *aliyah,* the honor of being called up to the Torah as it is read during services, for each of three groups: children as "partners in creation"; Jewish adults as "partners in Torah"; and non-Jews as "partners in creating Jewish community." In this way, he expands the boundaries of the community to include non-Jewish members, but he preserves the exclusivity of the particular Jewish covenant with God. The non-Jewish members expressed to Rabbi R that they found great personal meaning in this public acknowledgement of their part in the community, he said.

Rabbi R favors open acknowledgement that both Jews and non-Jews have a place in his synagogue. As one of only a handful of rabbis in Atlanta, and one of a limited number of rabbis in the United States, who officiates at interfaith wedding ceremonies, Rabbi R finds himself at odds with more conservative colleagues.

> This is going to be heretical, but it's on the record now: I so deeply hope that people can connect to Judaism and I see the beauty in it and it's the set of rituals and symbols and stories that inform who I am as a spiritual person. But I am okay, at the end of the day, if somebody is spiritually happy and that's not a Jewish home, for them. So if a child grows up as a result of an interfaith relationship, there certainly is a sadness. But I don't see it as the same kind of loss, if they're a good person. And so, I feel like, I could be perceived as, and I've been accused, actually, I've had an Orthodox rabbi accuse, that I'm helping destroy the Jewish people by doing interfaith ceremonies. A very public thing, and I very publicly responded back to him. I said, "No, you've given up on the people that I work with. And so I'm not destroying what you've already let go of."

The Orthodox rabbis whom I interviewed would frame their stance on intermarriage and inclusiveness differently from how Rabbi R portrays it, because each side understands the

stakes in drastically different ways. The Orthodox rabbis see intermarriage as endangering Jews' ability to continue to observe Jewish law with integrity as a group. But for the more liberal rabbis, the Jewish mission can be upheld by a broader contingent, because Judaism is a rich set of "rituals and symbols and stories" that help to define people's spirituality. For them, this set of symbols can be used and appreciated by both Jews and non-Jews for positive and affirming spiritual ends. While the mixing of Judaism and Christianity in the way that some Dovetail conference participants advocated was clearly out of bounds for the rabbis, there could be room for inclusion of non-Jews in Jewish communities.

**Individualism, Covenant and Community**

In individual interviews with rabbis, they frequently used the language of "covenant," which did not appear in the panel discussions and conversations that I observed at the Federation and JOI events. The rabbis I interviewed integrated their understanding of Jews' relationship with God with their communities' needs and the actual intermarried Jews who seek their guidance or assistance. Rabbis who chose to officiate at intermarriages saw personal autonomy as clearly reconcilable with an authentic understanding of Judaism. Rabbis who flatly opposed intermarriage and would not accommodate it in any way similarly held their own clear understandings of Judaism's boundaries. But those in the middle, who opposed intermarriage but also tried to reconcile Judaism with personal autonomy, faced difficult challenges both practically and in terms of defining "Jewish continuity."

When rabbis consider the meaning of Jewishness, they refer to their understanding of their responsibilities to God and the Jewish people. Rabbi R felt that as a Jewish leader, he was responsible to honor both the Jewish people's particular relationship with God and the value of individual persons, Jewish or not. At the beginning of his rabbinic career, he decided to officiate at interfaith wedding ceremonies. "I felt like, in my heart, I felt it was the right thing to do," he said. He explained that he relied on "instinct" to make this decision, since he received a request to officiate at an interfaith wedding before he even started his first job, pressing the issue upon him earlier than he anticipated.

Rabbi R explained his approach to intermarriage as welcoming non-Jews without pressuring them to eventually convert to Judaism. This approach honors non-Jews as persons, rather than treating them as outsiders, he said.

> This is what I said to this couple that was just sitting here. I said, "Look, I'm a rabbi, but I'm a spiritual leader and I want to connect with the human being that is sitting in front of me." And so, to not welcome or to like act from this fear that Jewish people aren't going to survive totally diminishes the humanity of the other person.

Reform Rabbi G also officiates at interfaith weddings and abides by a similar policy. He speaks of welcoming non-Jews as members of the "universal human family." Rabbi G sees his approach as rooted in the Bible, noting that above the door of his synagogue is "a quote from Isaiah, 'my house shall be called the house of prayer for all peoples.' I take that very, very literally." Emphasizing the unity of all humanity, he avoids strong distinctions between Jews and non-Jews, and thus does not see conversion as an outright necessity for intermarried couples. For him, conversion is a concrete manifestation of a newly Jewish heart formed by a deeply personal spiritual transformation. "I think the

only thing [conversion] does, it formalizes in the mind of … the person undergoing that it's something they feel they need to do," said Rabbi G.

Rabbi R sees conversion to Judaism as necessary if a non-Jew wishes to participate in the covenant between God and the Jewish people, but not in order for them to be part of his community. He allows people to approach conversion or not at their own pace.

> I never pressure anybody. In fact, anybody who comes to my office who's exploring conversion, I say to them, "I think you're fine just the way that you are, and I have no investment in you becoming Jewish. My only investment is you find a path that makes more sense to you." So, I just let them know that so that we can work very freely and they can make whatever decisions honor them.

For Rabbi R, and for most of the rabbis I interviewed, conversion to Judaism was to be undertaken only out of deep personal commitment and not due to any other factors, such as concern for family unity or the continuity of the Jewish people. This approach largely agrees with *halakhah* regarding conversion, according to my Orthodox rabbinic informants. But it is at odds with some aspects of intermarriage discourse that emphasize conversion of non-Jewish spouses in intermarried couples, such as the Conservative Movement's 2005 document making conversion of non-Jewish spouses a priority (Edelstein 2005). Indeed, some of my intermarried informants agreed with the rabbis' view of conversion, but for different reasons, feeling that pressure to convert was illegitimate because it did not acknowledge them as individuals. Rabbi R agreed:

> If there's an attachment to someone becoming Jewish, then you aren't encountering them as a human being. So like from a Buberian perspective, you're actually seeing a more utilitarian side…and so to me [welcoming intermarried couples with the hope of conversion] is slightly a sham.

Rather than emphasizing formal membership in Judaism as the overriding concern for his community members, Rabbi R hopes that each individual will find the path to being a good person that is right for them, an approach to religious meaning shared by the informants of Cohen and Eisen (2000) and Bellah et al. (1985). While Rabbi R sees Judaism as one important spiritual path, he recognizes other ones as valid as well.

Rabbi R feels that welcoming interfaith couples is a spiritual responsibility, especially because these couples often have experienced painful rejection from other aspects of the Jewish community. Having grown up in a traditional Jewish home, Rabbi R explicitly rejects the claim that intermarriage is destroying the Jewish people, on the basis of the intersection of his personal experiences with his understanding of Jewish texts and values.

> I grew up with lots of pressure to only have Jewish partners…that I was going to dishonor the memories of all of the Holocaust victims if I did x, y or z. Those weren't messages that were going to keep me Jewish. Luckily, I got enough of the other positive messages that did hook me, but I floated away for a little while too because of our community's... disgusting, gross messages.
>
> At the end of the day, for me, triumphalism of any faith needs to be excised. And the Jewish triumphalism is a little sneakier, I think, because it's not that we're the *only* way, but there is a chauvinism within our tradition. "We are the best way." That's how it was totally hammered into my brain. "We're the best way."
>
> So there's this elitism, and non-Jewish people who come into our community are made to feel like they are an enemy, or at very best that we have to put up with them.

Rabbi R has these messages in mind when he works with interfaith couples and non-Jews in his community, and he hopes to make up for these negative messages by being even more welcoming to non-Jews.

When he works with non-Jews, Rabbi R emphasizes:

> I'm an ambassador… for and to the Jewish community. And so I'm like, "Let me welcome you. Let me explain to you how this community works. And at this point, you've probably experienced a little bit of the nuttiness and I hope that I can help you see that as endearing, rather than offensive."

Just before I met with Rabbi R in his office, he had met with an interfaith couple to talk about their wedding ceremony. They deeply appreciated his diplomatic approach, he said:

> This man who is in the military and I thought literally he was going to cry because of how he'd been treated. And when I said, "I just want to connect you as a person," he was shocked. And the fact that he was shocked—and in the last nine years I have at least twelve to fifteen stories like that. So it is still happening….
>
> I know it's not a Jewish value to humiliate people. The Talmud says humiliating somebody is like murdering them. So, what makes it okay in these instances? Our fear and our elitism makes us show the worst of our tradition and not the best. Ultimately, I think that's a failing solution for how we're going to handle continuity from here on out….

Several other rabbis told me that they did not believe that rabbis any longer rejected intermarried couples. One Orthodox rabbi even felt that the tide had turned so completely in favor of welcoming the intermarried that no one was even trying to make a case for endogamy anymore. However, Rabbi R's stories of couples he had met with and those of many of the intermarried couples I interviewed suggested the opposite. This gap in perception may have to do with their different sets of experiences both in daily life and in the way they perceive discourses on intermarriage.

Rabbi R's approach to intermarried couples, and more broadly to Judaism itself, is rooted in a combination of his own instincts and experiences, selected Jewish textual sources, and the harmony of the Reconstructionist movement's philosophy with his own views.

> [In the Torah] you have these texts of unity [with outsiders] and these texts of separation [from outsiders]. So, I'm an out gay rabbi. I understand what it feels like to be separated. So, that's where, I mean it

> comes from instinct. It really comes from this place of both saying … I am valid, and that nobody can give me that validity, and nobody can take it away. And I had to get to that point. And so, that voice is the inner voice that informs me … it's the small, still voice that our text talks about.[2]
>
> So for me, there's always this inner godly piece that connects with the external godly piece of the text. And that there's a dialogue. Text is less important to me than probably a lot of other rabbis because I don't see the text as God speaking. I really see the text as humanity's struggle to hear God's voice….
>
> I'm from a movement that believes that Judaism continues to evolve and so… I'm hoping [what] continues is the flourishing of a Jewish vision and ideal of a just world. So again, for me, it comes from that social justice place. So that's the piece that continues, and that I'm most connected to… So I'm just as concerned about peoplehood continuing as the next rabbi, I just so think that they're doing it wrong.

As Rabbi R explains, his view of Judaism focuses particularly on ideals and values that can be translated into action by Jews and non-Jews alike. Authenticity and validity are located within the individual, in this view, and individuals pursue relationship with God in ways that resonate with their own instincts and experiences.

Rabbi R and Reform Rabbi G, who spoke of the "universal human family," along with two other Reform rabbis, were the most liberal of the 13 Atlanta rabbis I interviewed. These four rabbis officiate at interfaith weddings, though they do not co-officiate with Christian clergy, and while they distinguish between Jews and non-Jews for ritual purposes, they do so in the most welcoming ways they can. An intermediate, more "moderate" group of rabbis, included one "traditionalist" Reform rabbi and four Conservative rabbis (ranging from self-described "liberal" to "Conservadox"), who do not officiate at interfaith weddings. The Conservative rabbis are in this group because, as my Conservative informants told me, the Conservative Movement's Rabbinical Assembly does not permit its members to officiate at interfaith weddings. This policy

[2] 1 Kings 19:11–12

reflected the rabbis' own views. The Reform Movement's rabbinical organization, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, opposes rabbinic officiation but permits individual rabbis to come to their own decisions, according to a 1909 decision affirmed in 1973 (McGinity 2009, 127).

Reform Rabbi "M" decided against officiating because he felt it was inconsistent with his responsibility to the Jewish people and their particular covenant with God. He was careful to add that this decision did not constitute rejection or condemnation of intermarried people as individuals.

> This is one of the things that keeps me up at night, because when you have a lovely couple, you want to help them and support them. I don't feel like I can officiate…. [But] it's not really rejection in my eyes. Some people say it is, but I want folks to understand that Jewish liturgy and Christian liturgy, there's integrity to it and there's authenticity to it. Nobody in the Catholic church, for example, or in the Jewish community wants me as a rabbi to go to a church as a guest and receive communion, because the symbolic language is so strong…. So when I use our liturgy, even as a Reform rabbi, where I might make certain modifications, reforms, the liturgy is designed for folks who engage in a particular covenant with the Jewish people and with God within the Jewish framework, and that's the part that I don't feel like I can participate in or officiate.

Rabbi M frames the issue of officiating at an intermarriage as being about symbolism and boundaries. As a rabbi, he represents both the Jewish community and Judaism, and as such he does not want to give the impression that the boundaries of the Jewish community and Judaism are completely porous. In other words, he wants to preserve the exclusivity of the Jewish covenant with God. Another Reform rabbi, who does officiate at intermarriages, was similarly concerned with boundaries, specifying that any weddings at which he officiated had to be strictly Jewish and could not involve participation from Christian clergy or mention Jesus.

In "Why I Won't Perform an Intermarriage," Reform Rabbi Davis (1988, 20–21) explains his refusal to officiate similarly. The Jewish wedding ceremony assumes that the bride and groom are both Jews and that their commitment to one another takes place in the context of "the faith of Moses and of Israel," Davis writes. But in an intermarriage, either the non-Jewish partner or the rabbi has to "pretend" that the situation is otherwise, which would be "inauthentic," Davis writes. Further, Davis sees his resistance as helping to channel more non-Jewish partners of Jews toward conversion to Judaism, which he sees as a desirable end. Thus, Rabbi M and Rabbi Davis both make a simultaneously pragmatic and symbolic argument against officiating at an intermarriage.

> [I]t's more than me officiating, and I'm not responsible only to the couple. I'm responsible to the covenant with the Jewish people and with God. And that's what makes it that much harder for me…I am responsible for the individuals as well and nobody likes to be told no; …in our world that's just rejection or condemnation. But if anybody ever sits with me, they're not going to ever hear that unless they have decided beforehand.

All the rabbis I interviewed shared concern for setting the boundaries of the community and its practices. While some of the intermarried couples may have been able to understand or sympathize with Rabbi M's distinction, many of them did not. Because rabbis had refused to officiate at their weddings, they were sure that they would be rejected and shunned by Conservative and Orthodox rabbis and their congregations. But Conservative and Orthodox rabbis that I interviewed turned the judgment back on the couples themselves. One Conservative rabbi said, "People come in, they have a chip on their shoulder, somebody blinked at them, and they say, 'Oh, they shunned me.' Nobody shunned you." An Orthodox rabbi said, "People with psychological issues, or any issue, when they don't feel like they're a part of things, they project that onto the people who are there." While the rabbis feel that they are welcoming as a rule, they see intermarried

couples as sometimes perceiving them to be unwelcoming because the rabbi asserts the boundaries of the religious community.

The couples and the rabbis appear to have different ideas of what it means to be welcomed. The rabbis feel that it is not only within their purview, but actually their job, to set and gently enforce the community's boundaries, allowing laypeople to make their own judgments about whether they want to participate in the community. But in some cases, the laypeople seem to feel that it is unreasonable for the rabbis to set limits on their religious lives and participation at all. The couples feel that welcoming should mean that no strings are attached, a view similar to what Rabbi R said above, and to the Jewish Outreach Institute's approach. For example, JOI's mission statement discusses engaging intermarried couples but never mentions conversion. This suggests that the couples' religious framework does not distinguish between the covenant of the Jewish people and the individualism of American culture. Especially for people who are attempting to practice both Judaism and Christianity, whether as religion or "heritage" in their families, American and Jewish frameworks are not separate.

All of my rabbinic informants felt that the Jewish covenant entails mutual responsibilities with and toward other Jews. Rabbi M understands this covenant differently than the Orthodox rabbis whom I interviewed. Rabbi M said:

> Being part of the covenant, and clearly you can cite a text in Jewish tradition that says you can only marry somebody who's Jewish, but that's not the defining part for me. Some people will say there's a line in that oath that says according to the laws of Moses. Well, that's not exactly it for me either, because as a Reform Jew, as a Reform rabbi, there are times when I will challenge. [e.g. egalitarianism and with same-sex marriages:] that's clearly against classic understandings of Jewish law and tradition and yet I'm able to look at sources to say, they were wrong. For me it is the grander idea in Jewish thought about what are our Jewish responsibilities in covenantal relationships.

Rabbi M's view is non-halakhic, somewhat non-linear, and concerned with symbols and narratives of the Jewish people. Intermarried couples can fit into this symbolic language, but only if they choose to operate within only this system and agree not to mix it with others. Rabbi M sees the Jewish people as bound to each other by symbols, narratives and history rather than through the seamless whole of *halakhah* and theology that binds Jews to each other.

The Conservative rabbis that I interviewed had a more difficult task in articulating a sense of Jewish mission that also accounted for autonomy. While the Conservative Movement considers itself bound by halakhah, it contends with lay people's commitment to their own personal autonomy in religious matters. Lay autonomy is evidenced not least by an increasing intermarriage rate among Conservative Jews, as Rabbi J pointed out (Fishkoff 2007, Tigay 2008). In this sense, Conservative lay people's views line up with the official philosophy of the Reform Movement, which holds that personal autonomy is perfectly compatible with non-halakhic practice (Borowitz 1983). Conservative rabbis' challenge, then, is to reconcile their commitment to halakhah and a relatively traditional sense of Jewish mission with their congregants' commitment to religious personal autonomy.

The Conservative rabbis that I interviewed managed the gap between their own philosophies and their congregants' needs or wishes in different ways. The most liberal of them, Rabbi J, proactively sought congregants' ideas for how to "embrace" intermarried couples in congregational life while remaining within the bounds of *halakhah*. Rabbi J attempts to meet intermarried congregants' felt needs to affirm their membership in the Jewish people through Jewish ritual, but he resists their requests to change Jewish ritual

to suit their personal wishes. For example, a Jewish woman married to a non-Jewish man wanted Rabbi J to officiate at a "naming ceremony" for her infant son, whom she chose not to circumcise, Rabbi J said. *Halakhah* requires circumcision as part of entering a male Jew into the covenant, either as an infant or as a convert, and the custom of doing a "naming ceremony" for female Jewish infants is a recent, extra-halakhic practice—it is not against halakhah, it is simply not conceived or addressed by it. Rabbi J said that he ultimately would like to help the woman affirm her and her son's Jewishness, but he was unable to do so publicly and was uncomfortable doing so privately in his office because she wanted him to officiate at a ritual that did not exist in Jewish tradition instead of performing the appropriate existing ritual. While *halakhah* made the limits on Rabbi J's "embrace" of intermarried couples clear to him, these clear limits did not prevent intermarried Jews from asking him to officiate at rituals beyond his limits.

Conservative rabbis K and L did not report any such requests from intermarried Jews, but they also did not "embrace" intermarried couples. Rabbi L's approach was to lead his congregation in an egalitarian but otherwise traditional observance of Judaism, making clear distinctions between Jews and non-Jews in ritual. Rabbi L did not feel that "outreach" was part of his personal work, though he did work with serious candidates for conversion. "We try to create a place in which the non-Jewish spouse wants to come over naturally, experiences and grows into the feeling of, from a short sojourn into a dwelling," he said. In this view, conversion of the non-Jewish spouse would be the ideal end, but Rabbi L did not push for conversion of non-Jewish spouses because he felt it was pointless from a pragmatic standpoint.

Likewise, he did not feel that preaching against intermarriage was a useful expenditure of energy.

> I don't preach anti-intermarriage ever. I don't ever. What's the point? I counsel, I work with people, it's a personal thing. What am I going to stand up and say—"Rabbi's against intermarriage," right? I mean, give me a break. This is a stupid sermon topic. Anybody who it actually applies to, you only run the risk of alienating them, and everyone else, it's like apple pie. Who could be against it? Who could be against, "Marry Jewish and raise a Jewish family." That's like, you know, I'm for lower taxes too.

Rabbi L felt that pushing for conversion and preaching against intermarriage were pointless because both of these efforts would only fail against laypeople's claims to personal autonomy.

Rabbi L sees the Jewish people's mission as a particularistic method of achieving a universalistic goal:

> [O]ur message [is] that in some future day, what defines the idealized future Jewishly, is that all the nations of the world will recognize God. Isn't that what we want? And don't we believe that, at least for the Jewish people, any who really want to join them, that Judaism actually offers a way to do your small part to make that reality come true? To make a world which all recognizes the kingship of God and the ethical imperative that that implies.

He hopes to inspire people to take part in this mission, but he says that the Jewish community is not sure how the social fact of personal autonomy fits with this mission. Viewing Judaism as a choice, Rabbi L acknowledges that the relationship between this mission and individuals' ability to choose whether to be obligated to carry it out is still unclear. This lack of clarity may be the reason that so many of the rabbis in this middle category focus on the more limited area of the practical aspects of intermarriage: not because only the practical aspects of it are relevant to Judaism, but because they are the only ones that can be dealt with easily. The individualism of Jews who insist on religious

personal autonomy ultimately implies universalism. The challenge for Rabbi L and other Conservative rabbis is to translate this particularistic Jewish mission into lay people's language of personal autonomy and universalism.

The murkiness of a Jewishness that is always determined by choice even as it is also "what you are" reads as a sense of hopelessness and betrayal in the experiences of Conservative Rabbi E.

> There are [intermarried Jews] that just disappear and it breaks my heart. Breaks my heart. You pour so much into people. You have thousands of years of tradition behind every one of these children and every one of these young adults and then they go to college. They fall in love, I don't want to say the wrong person, but they fall in love with somebody that doesn't share their same spiritual history and vision and thousands of years are done. That's how fragile it is….

What's at stake for Rabbi E is a sense of peoplehood and mission. Rabbi E feels that personal autonomy has already overwhelmingly won over loyalty to Judaism. With a sort of sad nostalgia, he told me the following anecdote to demonstrate that there was no going back to the days when people were automatically loyal to Judaism.

> A fairly traditional couple from the synagogue … caught me at the beginning of services a couple of years ago. Their son went to day school and yeshiva and everything, and was living with a non-Jewish woman, and it was a serious relationship, though marriage was not imminent. What they said to me was that, had they belonged to the synagogue when their son was younger and [he] would have been exposed to me, I would have redirected his life, given him the proper priorities, and they said, "He wouldn't be with that shiksa." That was the line, "wouldn't be with that shiksa."
>
> I looked at them and I said to them, "Let me explain something to you. In the early days of the synagogue, I taught every bar and bat mitzvah. I went to their birthday parties. I took the kids to Six Flags. I did everything with them and today, fifty percent of the weddings I can participate and do, perform, fifty percent I cannot go to." I said, "So sociology is bigger than all of us," and that's an anecdote to explain the reality of our world.

Rabbi E does not believe that sociology *should* be more powerful than covenant, but he feels that it is the reality that matters to intermarried Jews. But it's not only the intermarried Jews themselves who allow their personal autonomy—or "sociology"—to overrule the loyalty that Rabbi E wishes they felt to Judaism. The intermarried Jews' parents also misunderstand the problem: they blame themselves or the lack of proper influences on their child for their child's intermarriage, but in reality, Rabbi E says, there was nothing they could have done differently.

The parents' and rabbi's efforts have made no difference, Rabbi E says, because Jews who intermarry are basically speaking a different language than the parents and rabbis. When he discusses with such couples why intermarriage is wrong, "I try to explain it to them in their terms," said Rabbi E. The argument that the Torah prohibits intermarriage is not "going to wash with these couples," he said, because if it did, they would not be interested in intermarrying in the first place. So he attempts to evoke some feelings of loyalty to family or the Jewish people by conveying to them that their children probably will not have an enduring Jewish identity.

> I said, "Imagine a country of three hundred million people, in which two hundred and seventy million or two hundred eighty million of them are Jewish. Then, it's a whole different perspective, and the whole notion of intermarriage would be that the chances are pretty darn good that those kids would be exposed to the culture of Judaism and, therefore, be Jewish. And so maybe my resistance [to intermarriage] would not be as strong under those circumstances. But where we are now, clearly the statistics are that when there's an intermarriage, the chances are that one out of ten, maybe, that the kids will be Jewish." So that's the way I try to explain it to them also without being nasty and I always offer to counsel and to help and so forth.

Given the language of personal autonomy that intermarrying Jews use, rather than the language of innate, immutable Jewishness that Rabbi E and the parents he described above use, Rabbi E hopes that the pragmatic approach can cross the language barrier.

Rabbi E conveys deep sadness and frustration at the changes in the American Jewish population that have fractured the wholeness of the community.

> There is a great effort underway now by federations and others to try and bring in interfaith couples, take them on trips to Israel, do outreach… to if not get the non-Jewish partner to convert, to at least get a guarantee in some fashion that the children will be raised as Jews. I'm ambivalent about that. I understand you have to be realistic. On the other hand … there's a limited dollar that you have to distribute. Should it be used to bring people back who have betrayed, have done something that clearly puts them outside the pale of the future? Is it worth the investment?
>
> You know, maybe it is. What is different about this generation of converts [out of Judaism] from the past is that in the past when people used to convert, very often it was to spite their parents, they hated their religion and this was their path to get out. … Marrying somebody not Jewish, the blonde goddess …. Today there's no anger necessarily or no spite or no nastiness. … Their religion has become America. It's not their own religion…. I mean to me, it's just the fact that there's no loyalty anymore in anything. It's got nothing to do with religion alone. It's with sports, it's with politics, it's everything. Everybody's just into whatever they want to do.

Rabbi E is thus stuck between his deep desire to continue the Jewish people's existence, free of Christian influence, and the apparent inevitability of American influence. These influences inspire self-focus to the point of disloyalty, in Rabbi E's view, and his view corresponds to sociological research on the decline of American communal life in general (Bellah et al., 1985 and 1991; Putnam 2000). Despite the clear connections of the phenomenon of intermarriage with broader American cultural trends, Rabbi E is unwilling to deal with the language of personal autonomy that other Conservative rabbis struggle with, because to him it is so far outside of, and indeed a betrayal of, his understanding of Judaism as a covenant relationship of a people with a particular mission.

Orthodox rabbis sidestep some of these issues created by the centrality of personal autonomy because they use a frame that emphasizes the obligations of Jews to God and each other.

Like Rabbi E and my other rabbinic informants, my Orthodox informants felt that no Jewish people can exist without the Jews' covenant with God and the attendant obligations that Jews owe to God. Rabbi E seems to assume these obligations exist, but feels that the language of personal autonomy is so overwhelmingly strong in the people with whom he works that it is hopeless to even bring up these obligations to God with them.

In contrast, my Orthodox informants make these obligations the centerpiece of their approach to intermarried couples. Orthodox Rabbi Z explained his understanding of Jews' mission and what it means for individual Jews' daily lives. His hope is to inspire less-observant Jews to embrace their mission.

> In the biggest picture, the Jewish people are really here to serve non-Jews, and in doing so it's serving God's purpose. The basic idea being that God didn't create the Jewish people to start out with. He created Adam and Eve, and the Torah describes it. And there was long period of history without Jews, and the idea was, he created a world where there would be a spiritual brotherhood of man, so to speak, and people would recognize God and live well. … It didn't work out twice, so as the Torah describes it, God shifted gears and said, "Okay, one exemplar nation will be the teachers, and a different way of going about educating people." So the Jewish people came out of that. So really the whole purpose of our being here is to teach…. So the element of holiness comes into that. Each individual has to maintain their own holiness, their own connection to God, that's the first step in maintaining nationhood…. You don't have to do anything other than that; it just happens. So we fail in that mission when each individual is not connected and each individual is not learned, educated and engaged in daily Jewish life.

In Rabbi Z's view, the Jewish people's holiness is maintained both by individual Jews and by the nation of Jews as a whole. Thus, individual Jews' actions affect the ability of

the entire Jewish people to meet its obligations to God. The language of personal autonomy is conspicuously absent from this formulation, as is hopelessness or worry about speaking to less observant Jews "in their terms." The relevant terms, for Rabbi Z, are the obligations of the Jewish people to God and the world.

Rabbi X articulated the Jewish mission similarly, but used the language of "family." The Jewish people, he said, is

> a family that's devoted exclusively to testifying that there is a creator of the universe. That's what we're here for. … It's like we're brought into being only because there's a God, and the world itself was created only to know God. And that's our job. Other than that, I think the continuity discussion is a joke. It's a waste of time—who the hell cares if there are Jews in the room, let's just be good people.
>
> [A halakhically observant life is] like a model of what it's like to be in a close, intimate relationship with the creator of the universe, and that's why Judaism is unique in its refusal to assert that everybody should live this way and this is the only way to live. This is the way that we live because we have a special role to play, and you are not part of us … Watch us, learn from us, be inspired by us and we're responsible for you. … What it is to be a Jew is to be responsible for the whole world, and we're only Jewish for the world, and we're not chosen elevated over the world; we're chosen to bear responsibility for the world. And if we can't impact the world, we have no reason to exist.

The danger of intermarriage, then, is that it is perceived to endanger this mission, as Rabbi X explained:

> We're going to dilute our message, we're going to dilute our identity, we're going to reduce the likelihood of having children grow up and be committed Jews on any level, and we're just going to disappear. That's really, I think, the universal Jewish concern.

Being religious for self-satisfaction or only for the sake of other religious Jews is wrong, says Rabbi X. Rather, outreach to non-observant Jews to help them become more observant and connected to their Jewish heritage is work toward testifying to the Creator.

Orthodox rabbis did outreach to unaffiliated Jews because they felt it was their duty to the Jewish people and to God to bring other Jews closer to Jewish observance. Creating a fully Jewishly-identified family would be part of that aim, then, because the nuclear family was a microcosm of the Jewish family. Intermarriage, like low affiliation with Jewish organizations, was a symptom of the failure of an earlier generation of Jews to inculcate Jewishness in their children. Parents must demonstrate what it means to be Jewish to their children or they have no right to expect that their children will understand themselves as Jews or marry other Jews, said a third Orthodox rabbi, Rabbi Y:

> The problem … is if you allow [intermarried couples to participate publicly in Jewish life], then are you somehow, some way, covertly encouraging [intermarriage]? … So if you make it so comfortable, then the next generation of this one says, "Okay, no, no, no, Mom and Dad, I won't do it." The next generation says, "What's the reason?"
>
> And so you have the four children at the seder [the Passover ritual meal]. Right, you know that. So they represent four generations. *Chacham* is the first generation that came in the old country and they knew exactly what was right, what was wrong.
>
> What's next? The *rashah*. *Rashah* is not evil in that sense, it just doesn't know. *Rashah* says, "Why this, why that?" It was never taught because the first generation came, they were so keen on earning a living they didn't have time to teach.
>
> The next child is the *tam*. The simple one. The simple one remembers the grandfather and then is confused. Granddad was religious but dad is not. "What's going on? What's happening? Who am I?"
>
> The fourth generation is, can't even ask the question. Can't even ask. You know the *sh'ayno yodea lishoal*? Can't even ask, "What is this, what's going on?"
>
> So the same issue is, you and I are talking now and so we have a common language. Do we not? There's a common language, a common value system. Down the line, there may not be. I'm not talking about your children, I'm talking about for people that have a common language like us down the line. So that's the fear. So the fear is if you're going to make it so easy, not for conversion but acceptance without conversion, then what?

This interpretation of the four sons derives from Samson Raphael Hirsch, the founder of modern Orthodoxy in 19th century Germany. His point was, according to Elie Wiesel (*A Passover Haggadah* 1993), that "there is regression and loss. The more removed each generation is from Sinai, the less it knows, the more complacent it becomes." Rabbi Y uses this story to point out that the current widespread non-observance of Jewish law is not due to Jews' purposeful resistance but to ignorance. Thus, outreach and education can overcome this ignorance and bring Jews back to religious observance.

The proper way to work with intermarried Jews is under the umbrella of more general outreach, the Orthodox rabbis told me. This might seem like splitting hairs to people who see intermarried and unaffiliated Jews as essentially the same group, but framing of it matters to my Orthodox informants because the distinction reflects the boundaries around acceptable Jewish behaviors. Thus, Orthodox Rabbi Z argues that unaffiliated Jews, who he says are happy to be Jewish according to surveys, are unaffiliated only because they have not found satisfactory ways into the Jewish community. They also misunderstand synagogues, expecting to find spiritual fulfillment in them when really Jewish spirituality is centered in the home, said Rabbi Z. It happens that many of the unaffiliated Jews are indeed intermarried, but Rabbi Z and Rabbi X see these Jews' ignorance of Judaism as the cause of their intermarriage, rather than their having pursued intermarriage out of spite toward their Jewish heritage. Thus, Rabbi X and Rabbi Z focus on outreach to the unaffiliated as remedy for the heart of the problem of non-observant Jews. But in doing so they consciously resist "welcoming" the intermarried.

Non-Orthodox groups like JOI and the Reform Movement emphasize welcoming non-Jewish partners of Jews into the Jewish community, sometimes with the hope that a warm reception will persuade the non-Jew to eventually convert. For example, the Union of Reform Judaism describes its commitment to helping non-Jews convert to Judaism on its Web site: "Asking someone you care about to consider conversion is simply an invitation. It is not coercion or pressure. It is an expression of valuing the individual and a desire to share a tradition that you consider precious" (Union for Reform Judaism 2005). Rabbis X, Y and Z see this as completely wrong-headed, and likely to worsen the problem of intermarriage rather than leading to more conversions. Rabbi Z said:

> Recognition of a couple that are intermarried is fine. I mean, it's reality. But [Mothers Circle and JOI] take it a step further…. In the acceptance [of intermarriage] they are promoting it. [Those who emphasize welcoming] talk about interfaith dating. And as soon as you talk about interfaith dating positively, and how to get along while you're dating, and determining if you're going to get married, that tells me you're promoting—at least accepting—intermarriage, and that is such a disaster in our community.

In other words, treating intermarriage as a social fact that has to be approached pragmatically is ultimately a self-fulfilling prophecy. As the community works to become more welcoming, it will only increase the number of intermarriages because people will feel comfortable with intermarriage. Where the increase in intermarriage would inhibit the Jewish people's ability to fulfill its mission to be a holy nation because it would no longer be a separate people that could model a close relationship with God through an observant life, actively contributing to this increase would amount to betraying God.

Orthodox rabbis X, Y and Z said that they address issues caused by intermarriage in individual people's lives on a case-by-case basis, welcoming individual intermarried Jews into their communities if those Jews are sincerely interested in learning more about

Judaism and becoming more observant. However, they will not publicly discuss intermarriage in "welcoming" terms because that might lessen the stigma that they feel intermarriage deserves. This delicate balance was lost on many of the intermarried couples that these rabbis might have worked with, as Rabbi X acknowledged.

> We do have an image problem out there. The problem is that many couples who are involved in a proposed intermarriage have some voice in their head that's condemning them. Somebody in their family, could be their parents, are condemning them and therefore the level of guilt they have with that voice is such that they expect the Orthodox guy to come down hard on them. So they already know what we're going to say. Most of the time the traditional relative in a Jewish family does such a horrible job in representing the three dimensional approach of an Orthodox cleric that [the intermarried Jew doesn't] even get to the Orthodox guy. They assume that I am their aunt times ten, I'm absolutely the wrath of God will be brought upon you; that kind of thing, and I'm going to sit there and talk to them about you're going to go to hell if you marry this girl. That's what they think I'm going to say, which I'll never say.

Between couples' family experiences and the public rhetoric that they hear in intermarriage discourse, many of these couples reflexively avoid Orthodox rabbis and communities. The rabbis take issue with the couples' assumption that they would be unwelcome because, they argue, the couples do not understand the full context of their disapproval of intermarriage, just as Reform Rabbi M described in his own experiences. But couples are unlikely to approach the rabbis for a fuller explanation of the condemning language they have heard in intermarriage discourse, particularly when they are starting with the assumption of personal autonomy rather than of obligation. In other words, if Orthodox rabbis cannot or will not discuss their more nuanced view of intermarriage in public, how would intermarried couples know that this nuanced view exists?

Orthodox rabbis interested in outreach to the intermarried are in a bind. How can they reach the intermarried for the purposes of conversion and teaching if the intermarried remain scared of them because of the public face they have to put on for the sake of discouraging further intermarriage? JOI welcomes intermarried couples and avoids discouraging further intermarriage. But to the Orthodox rabbis, this approach fails to convey the seriousness of intermarriage. What is worse than intermarrying Jews' assumptions about Orthodox rabbis' presumed condemnation is that in trying to make intermarried people feel accepted, Rabbi Z says, more liberal outreach groups spread what Rabbi Z sees as misinformation about Jewish tradition.

> They take examples from the Bible of people who seem to have intermarried and say look at, for example, Joseph or look at, for example, Moses, who married women who were not Jewish. But it's really disingenuous, because there was a period historically when it was pre-Judaism, [before] Mount Sinai with the revelation. … So they were pre-Jews, they weren't Jews, they were Israelites. So there were all sorts of things that happened that are different than what Judaism taught as of Moses and Mount Sinai. So … then I have to go back to sources and explain it's not exactly true, first of all, and secondly the Torah doesn't spell it out, but based on the character of Joseph and Moses it's really homiletically inconceivable.… [When I explain this to them] their eyes are widened and they find it very interesting. It unfortunately, or fortunately, undermines the credibility of the sources they heard it from.

Rabbi Z not only fights against the language of personal autonomy and the problem of Jewish illiteracy, then. He also combats what he sees as false interpretations of Jewish tradition that may be well-intentioned, but lack integrity with Jewish textual sources, the source of Jewish religious authority.

If my Orthodox rabbinic informants have an opportunity to teach intermarried couples on the subject of intermarriage, the "open agenda" is for conversion of the non-

Jewish spouse to Judaism, with the explicit explanation of how the conversion serves the Jewish people's mission. As Rabbi X said:

> We actually believe, according to Jewish law, and we believe the Jewish law is an expression of God's will, so we actually believe that Jews should not be married to non-Jews. Particularly, our greatest concern of course is when a Jewish woman is married to a non-Jewish man, the children are Jewish and therefore we have actual extant Jewish children at risk so to speak because they are the product of an intermarriage and therefore we say that our goal would be to inspire the non-Jewish spouse to convert. Now we don't do this publicly because we don't want to de-stigmatize intermarriage. We don't want to tell people, go ahead and intermarry, later on we'll deal with your non-Jewish spouse, because the likelihood of that happening is relatively low. But when we're presented with a case like this which happens relatively often, we do have this form of outreach so to speak to the non-Jewish spouse. So we're very overt about the fact that we don't believe that intermarriage is a good thing. On the other hand, we don't condemn them. We try to reserve judgment and not really make them feel immorally assessed. Most people didn't make a moral decision to intermarry against some moral standard, they just got intermarried….
>
> So the particular circumstances will determine to a significant degree how I will go about guiding them but always with the background that this particular relationship is prohibited by Jewish law, and secondly that the phenomenon called intermarriage is one of the core phenomena that's decaying and eroding the Jewish people and its strength and the integrity of the Jewish people, and when I mean integrity I don't mean racial integrity, I'm talking about moral integrity and halakhic integrity of the Jewish people. So I've got that in the background but then I've got the particular couple I'm dealing with and their own emotional needs.

Conversion is not always appropriate for interfaith couples, however. When a couple is already married, conversion is appropriate, but if the couple has not yet married, the more appropriate move would be to end the relationship. *Halakhah* forbids conversion for the sake of marriage, but an existing marriage presents a different situation.

> It depends on the stage of the relationship. Here's where text does inform. Jewish law says very specifically one is not allowed to convert somebody for the sake of marriage. Not only that, the law says it's a very clear, classic Mishnaic source that one who converts for the sake of marriage is not allowed to marry that person they intended to marry. So the conversion is valid but they're not allowed to marry them, they have to

> marry somebody else. … So generally we understand that when a[n intermarried] couple had access to each other and were living fine with each other as man and wife, and have nothing to gain by him or her converting because they already have each other, they have children, they're accepted as Mr. and Mrs. So-and-so, so that's not considered a conversion for the sake of marriage because they're already married. Whereas if a couple comes and their parents are saying, Rabbi, do something; or the groom doesn't want to oppose his parents and so he's coming as a last resort with his non-Jewish spouse and he wants you to convert, that's a different story.

These distinctions are not reflected in the broader discourses on intermarriage, perhaps partly because of the Orthodox refusal to discuss intermarriage publicly except to forbid it, and partly because these distinctions might not mean much outside the framework of *halakhah*. In other words, if the audience listening to an argument about halakhic distinctions does not share the assumptions of the halakhic framework, such as that *halakhah* is authoritative and obligatory, that audience may not find these arguments at all persuasive.

While the rabbis use the same vocabulary to talk about intermarriage, this vocabulary does not reside in a shared framework. Intermarriage within a context of personal meaning and symbolism carries different consequences than it does in a context of obligations to God that must be fulfilled both individually and as a people. Rabbinic informants rarely cited specific Jewish texts as the basis for their thoughts about intermarriage; rather, they cited their own experiences and their individual moral compasses. Their views on intermarriage were shaped by both their sense that Judaism is "what you are" and their conscious, explicit commitment to covenant, beliefs and practices. Their understandings of Jewishness were certainly more sophisticated than my intermarried informants', but the same conceptual tensions of universalist individualism and ethnic familialism were present in them.

# Chapter 6

## The Adaptation of Jewishness to Modernity

From the Dovetail conference to the Mothers Circle, intermarried couples drew on universalist individualist and ethnic familialist discourses to frame their families' religious lives. These discourses departed from halakhic understandings of Jewishness and incorporated American cultural understandings of individualism, kinship, and religion. In the Mothers Circle, universalist individualism and ethnic familialism contributed to the goal of "Jewish continuity"; in the Dovetail context, they more often contributed to "tolerance" and "respect" within the family. While my intermarried informants experienced some clerical and communal disapproval of their marital choices, this disapproval did not prevent them from marrying whom they chose. Yet religious institutions and norms continued to be relevant to their lives, in that they continued to argue with them, as the Dovetail conference participants did in their frustration with the "old, irrelevant boxes" that they thought traditional notions imposed upon them. They sought religious experiences and connections with religious communities, but resisted norms with which they did not personally identify.

For universalist individualists, "what you choose" and "what's in your heart" were the determining idioms for religious experience. Having Jewishly-identified children was a matter of personal choice and negotiation between spouses, perhaps out of allegiance to one spouse's "heritage," or perhaps out of religious conviction. In this view, Jewish traditionalists' claims that Jewishness must follow halakhic rules were irrelevant, because these rules were externally imposed. Instead, "what's in your heart" mattered to

universalist individualists. Nevertheless, they regarded their claim to their Jewish "heritage" as entirely legitimate and even saw themselves as having a special understanding of it, as "prophetic outcasts." The universalist individualists strongly privileged personal autonomy, and understood Jewishness through that lens.

Ethnic familialists valued personal autonomy, but their loyalty to the Jewish people was also important to them. They expressed this loyalty not as a set of religious beliefs, but as an inchoate sense of "what you are." Their choices to raise Jewishly-identified children were rooted in felt needs for their children to be Jews. Ethnic familialist intermarried Jews felt that if their children were to identify with Jesus and Christianity, they would be foreign to them. These ethnic familialists' self-definition as Jews and as Americans uneasily coexisted as they attempted to balance personal autonomy and mutual obligation.

Jewishness was internalized by individuals, according to my ethnic familialist informants, through emotional attachments developed through religious experiences. For many, these experiences occurred in childhood, but for some of the Mothers Circle women, they also occurred through their own experiences as parents. These experiences led them to their own versions of Jewishness even when they did not enjoy formal membership in the Jewish community. They found their way into these religious experiences using universalist individualist discourses that allowed them to participate in Jewish rituals without sharing Jewish beliefs, and some eventually came to experience these rituals in the more visceral sense that their husbands did as well.

Whether or not they could "make Judaism their own," the Mothers Circle women's universalist individualism enabled their husbands to contribute to the agenda of

"Jewish continuity." Relying on both the universalist individualist and ethnic familialist discourses, the women developed their own way of understanding their participation in their Jewish families that emphasized religious similarities and women's religious leadership in the home. At the same time, their husbands often identified with Jewishness through ethnic familialism, unable to articulate their attachments to Judaism in rational language. Because their Jewishness was primarily familial and ethnic, these men might not have been motivated or able to create the experiences needed to foster their children's emotional attachments to Judaism. But their wives took on this task themselves, enabling their children to experience a "Jewish home." Thus, because American gender norms aligned with these couples' experiences of Jewishness, the non-Jewish women enabled their husbands' wish to create Jewish families and the rabbis' and Jewish educators' wish for Jewish continuity.

Despite the fears that many of my rabbinic informants expressed about the mixing of Judaism and Christianity in intermarriages, in some ways they have found success in attracting intermarried Jews to Jewish institutions because of this mixing. Ethnic familialism and universalist individualism could both result in the upbringing of children who identify only as secular, having no particular or consistent religious background of their own. The American cultural values of individualism and egalitarianism opened a space for Christian women to intervene in ethnic and familial Jewishness so that these religious experiences could be created for their children. The Christian women served as catalysts for Jewish practice within their families and for their families' involvement with the Jewish community.

In intermarriage discourse, some rabbis raised the question of whether resources ought to be directed toward interfaith couples when they could instead be directed at endogamous couples, since they felt that intermarried Jews' marriage choices clearly showed their lack of loyalty to Judaism (e.g. Wertheimer 2001 and Conservative Rabbi E). But there exist endogamous Jews who are otherwise quite similar to my intermarried informants. One Jewish woman named Karen, whom I met at an event for interfaith families, was incensed at the assumption on the part of Jewish organizations that she perceived that endogamous Jewish families did not need guidance to create a Jewish home. "It's outrageous. We want to learn and do Shabbat activities too, and we're not supposed to come because we're both Jewish!" Karen told me over her shoulder as she encouraged her toddler to imitate a Shabbat song leader's hand motions. Karen and her Jewish husband had brought their two small children to this Shabbat afternoon event for interfaith families at the Atlanta JCC. As she filled out the sign-in sheet, Karen informed the event organizer, a veteran Jewish educator of interfaith families, in no uncertain terms that she was displeased. She did not begrudge interfaith families their event; it was just that she wanted to be included. "We need to learn too!" Karen insisted. As she vented to me, I nodded sympathetically, and the loud music prevented us from having further conversation. I heard her reiterate her frustration to another couple later.

Karen's frustration with this line drawn around intermarried Jews, with the idea that they alone need special help getting past their individualism, illustrates my contention that drawing a stark line between intermarried and endogamous couples overlooks the more central issue that American Jews' experience of Jewishness is often self-contradictory. Misleading discursive distinctions continue to be made, equating

Jewish loyalty with endogamy and apostasy or indifference with intermarriage, and emphasizing the difference between intermarried and endogamous Jews. But Cohen and Eisen (2000) found that, like my intermarried informants, "moderately affiliated" Jews looked to the "sovereign self" as their religious authority. Both Cohen and Eisen's informants and mine also spoke of their sense of Jewishness as being innate. Wertheimer (2001) particularly laments the apparent lack of concern among individualistic intermarried Jews for the future of Judaism. But the language of individualism has deeply penetrated American Jews' consciousness so that, at least for non-Orthodox Jews, it is inextricable from their conception of their own Jewishness. This discursive division between intermarried and endogamous Jews does not reflect sociological reality.

Contrary to this discursive division, religious norms still exert some control over the actions of my intermarried Jewish informants, paradoxically, through the cultural idiom of individualism. The discourses on intermarriage that we have explored suggest that intermarried Jews have rejected Judaism's basic premises of the authority of *halakhah* and peoplehood. My fieldwork shows that they have not rejected it, but rather have revised it in complicated and often self-contradictory ways. My informants feel that they should conform to religious rules and traditions in their own ways, but for reasons having to do with family and self rather than God. For them, religious tradition may hold the shape that it held in previous generations but it is filled with a content that is drastically different: it now holds a new focus on the self as the main arbiter of Jewishness, even when there is a heartfelt claim of deference to tradition.

**Adaptation to Modernity and Unintended Consequences**

Sociologist Lynn Davidman (1991) describes two groups of secular Jewish women who join Modern Orthodox and Lubavitcher communities, in which the acceptance of traditional notions of religious authority was a requirement for full belonging. She asks why people who appear to be successful in the secular world might choose "traditional" religion: if secularization undermines religion's hold on people's minds and habits, why would people who are already highly secularized reverse course and become religious? She concludes that the women felt internal conflict with modern conditions of secularization, arguing that the condition of secularization does not obviate individuals' need for religious meaning and structure. These secular women became Orthodox because they sought the structure and meaning that they felt this way of life provided them. Davidman concludes that modernity need not entail the decline of religion, but that the availability of religious choices and options could strengthen individuals' commitment to the choices that they make.

Some of my intermarried informants, in contrast, seek structure and meaning without regular ritual practices or clearly articulated beliefs, and with a tenuous attachment to religious communities and adherence to religious norms. These informants are completely ensconced in the modern world and have no desire to detach from it or to have their lives transformed. They want religion to enrich their lives but not to govern their lives, and they use religion to tell themselves and their children how they connect to their parents and a larger story and community in the world. Religion serves as an orientation: one Jewish informant told me that she wanted her children to understand their Jewishness as "one notch below that they're American." In some ways they appear to be the kind of modern, rationalized individuals for whom religious authority has

indeed declined, but they resist that notion. Rather than embracing only the secular, differentiated, rationalized world, they insist on straddling secularity and religion. Like Davidman's informants, my informants also seek structure and meaning for their lives, and religion provides this.

My ethnic familialist informants sought the structure and meaning provided by religious traditions and norms, adapting tradition to suit themselves while claiming that they conformed to it, by intermarrying but raising their children in Judaism. Yet this way of perpetuating and experiencing Jewishness as a matter of limitless personal choice does not officially exist in Jewish law or traditional understandings of Jewishness. As a result, non-Jewish wives of Jewish men find themselves in a position that does not officially exist in Judaism: they are not Jews, but they are the mothers of children who some consider Jewish, and they are sometimes part of a Jewish community

As these individualistic patterns became established, rabbis, Jewish educators, and Jewish institutions responded with programs like the Mothers Circle. Women in the Mothers Circle voluntarily, ambivalently and fearfully stepped into a leadership role for their families' Jewish religious lives. They were worried about others' claim that they were illegitimate, angry about being judged, curious about Judaism, open to "spiritual" connection to it, and anxious and confused about their husbands' ambivalence. This set of emotions did not govern their entire lives; it mostly emerged in the context of life cycle ceremonies and holidays that took place a few times a year. Some rabbis have called for a community-wide recognition of these women under the biblical category of the *ger toshav*, "a gentile who live[s] among the Jewish people, happy to be part of the Jewish world and supportive of the religious and social frames of Jewish life" (e.g., Greenberg

2001). However, this idea has not taken hold, perhaps because, as the Orthodox rabbis I interviewed said, recognition would imply approval. These women chose to raise their children as Jews, but the women themselves were invisible within the religious authority structures of Judaism. Yet they were essential to the Jewish community's goal of continuity, as the strands of the discourses on intermarriage clearly recognize in their efforts to "welcome" and include the women in the Jewish community.

The unintended consequence of these women's training in creating a Jewish home is that non-Jewish intermarried women in many ways have become more empowered than their Jewish husbands in their religious family lives, and by extension in the religious communities of which they are not officially members. The traditional role of Jewish women as creators of Jewish children's emotional ties to Judaism implicitly gives Jewish women an informal religious authority. While this is not religious authority in the formal sense that Chaves (1994) describes, involving control over others' actions, the ability to form a child's emotions and experiences, particularly on behalf of religion, is as much a kind of power as is the authority to administer sacraments or excommunicate. Women's informal authority in traditional Judaism complements men's more formal authority. But among my informants, this complementary system had become lopsided in response to American adaptations. Within these families, Jewish religious authority became the province of non-Jewish women, yet another form of Jewish adaptation to historical American Christian patterns: in this case, that of men's rejection of religious power and reliance on women to perform religious labor (Braude 1997).

**The discursive construction of authority**

Among my informants, individuals embrace and reject converging and contradictory cultural patterns in order to make sense of their own experience and to formulate their own responses to discourses on intermarriage that either embrace or condemn them. The universalist individualists, ethnic familialists, and rabbis I spoke with wove together elements of social and individual experience to form their own answers to questions about the meaning of having Jewishly-identified children and carrying on Jewish tradition in ways that some other Jews do not recognize. The partial nature of each of the sources of religious authority allowed space for informants to articulate the boundaries between secular and religious that existed in their own experience. Universalist individualism and ethnic familialism are models of understanding religious authority that invoke various kinds of authority, e.g., God, the individual and his or her authenticity, universalism, the family, obligation. God and the individual and family might comprise religious authority together rather than one of these elements alone holding religious authority.

Even the views of the non-Orthodox rabbis that I interviewed held some ambiguity and ambivalence about religious authority, though less so than among my lay informants. The discourses on intermarriage assume that the participants in these discourses are at least all arguing about one thing: Judaism. But they do not share an understanding of religious authority in Judaism, so they are not really a shared dialogue about a common topic. In Durkheim's thought, religion divides the world into opposite and separate categories of sacred and profane and defines a community based on that group's agreement about what is sacred and what is profane (Durkheim 1995[1912], 34, 44). My rabbinic informants agree on fundamental symbols and meanings in Judaism, but

Orthodox and non-Orthodox rabbis use such drastically different frameworks of religious authority that the symbols are not performing the same functions.

Even though all of the rabbis I interviewed agreed that Jewish in-marriage was preferable to intermarriage, their worldviews were in deep conflict, reflecting the challenges presented to Jews by modernity itself. The Orthodox rabbis I interviewed maintained their belief in the authority of halakhah and the reality of the Jewish people's covenant with God. This worldview governed their approach to intermarriage, so that they oriented every action toward bringing intermarried couples into closer connection with this worldview and the observant lifestyle that goes with it. They interpreted intermarriage as either a mistake made out of ignorance or a purposeful rejection of "what you are." "What you choose" was always subordinate to "what you are," because individual choice was always to be aimed toward serving God and the world. In contrast, the non-Orthodox rabbis struggled to articulate a view of religious authority that encompassed both personal autonomy, which they saw as given in the modern world, and the mutual obligation of Jews to one another. They often had to rely on persuasion, hoping that intermarried Jews would "choose" Judaism, whether out of loyalty to "what they are" or as part of their personal spiritual "journey." They regarded intermarriage as an unfortunate, ineluctable sociological fact, but one that required a response that attempted to preserve Jewish tradition at least to the extent that it not be mixed with Christianity. Modernity and tradition constantly test one another, for this group. They recognized choice as ultimately central to modern religious experience, while the Orthodox rabbis aimed to help intermarried and/or non-observant Jews recognize "what they are" and thereby to lead them to full observance.

Secularization theory helps us to understand that discourses on intermarriage reflect disagreement and anxiety about the definition of Jewishness. These discourses occupy themselves with intermarriage because it is an issue about which there is still some illusion of control, in that communities can set boundaries that exclude intermarriage and the intermarried, as my Orthodox rabbi informants explained. In contrast, the condition of modernity itself cannot be changed by discourse or persuasion. The discourses about intermarriage serve as a proxy or outlet for a discussion of the anxieties about the decline of religious authority and the ambiguity of religion in the modern western world.

The terms of modernity have mandated struggle over the definitions of Jewishness and Judaism. While the forces of secularization have deeply affected the religious lives of all western Europeans and North Americans for several centuries, they have had special impact on the lives of Jews. Intermarriage has symbolized for Jews the tensions within the religious and secular elements of themselves, with one another as they attempt to balance autonomy and historic, sacred mutual obligation, and between the Jewish people and Protestant Christian society. Where American Christians barely register the fact of Jewish-Christian intermarriage, American Jews regard intermarriage as a central problem. As the recent history of discourses on intermarriage shows, Jews have taken conflicting approaches to these tensions, emphasizing Jewish endogamy, ostracizing intermarried Jews, welcoming non-Jewish spouses into the Jewish community and/or seeking their conversion, and using statistical data to triangulate “outreach” efforts. But underlying all these approaches, as my ethnographic research has shown, is a divide between competing responses to modernity.

Jews have been subject to the claims of modernity and American culture at the same time as they have sought to reject or accommodate them. Attending to religious authority in this context raises questions about the modern western conception of religion itself. The definition of religion in sociological discourses and in American culture generally is based on a Protestant Christian model that emphasizes belief and private judgment. As my informants demonstrated, this model only partially fits the experience of non-Protestants, and even though Christianity shapes the terms of modernity and Protestantism shapes the definition of religion in modernity, they have not fully infiltrated the definition of Jewishness for modern Jews. My informants' experiences raise questions about whether non-Protestants must always shift their religious discourses and individual identifications, and whether this Protestant religious definition even fits the lived experiences of Protestants themselves. In other words, they raise the question of whether the Protestant notion of modern religion is an ideology but not lived experience, much like the gap between ideology and experience I found in discourses on intermarriage.

However, Judaism's adaptation to the American context has been vexed by the Protestant Christian cultural framework into which Jews have assimilated. While Judaism traditionally has emphasized principles of mutual obligation, the Protestant cultural framework emphasizes autonomy. Despite cultural emphases, these values are necessarily held in tension in individual people's lives. Psychologist Carol Gilligan (1993[1982]) argues that what she characterizes as the female "ethic of care" and the male ethic of autonomy ideally should be complementary, and that neither is sufficient on its own. Similarly, while the majority of American Jews who affiliate with any movement

choose ones that, either by default or in ideology, assume individual Jews have the right to religious self-determination, normative Judaism still assumes mutual obligation to dominate Jews' moral responsibilities.

The issue of intermarriage crystallizes the problem of balancing autonomy and obligation, but discourses typically cast intermarriage as the problem itself, rather than its being an extreme, if common, version of the problem of modernity for all American Jews. Endogamous Jews may have found a balance between autonomy and obligation that meets the norms of traditional Judaism, but endogamy may mask the same issue of ambivalent religious commitment that is more clearly visible in intermarried couples. By focusing on intermarriage rather than the larger issues of modernity and secularization that it represents, American Jews avoid grappling with the central issue that has plagued Jews since Emancipation: how to balance autonomy and obligation.

**Race, Religion, and Experience**

The fact of intermarriage has forced Jews to ask questions about what Judaism is, but discourses' framing of intermarriage as a problem of individual Jews diverts attention from this basic issue. American Jews desire the continued existence of Judaism and mutual recognition among Jews, but arriving at a shared understanding of what is being continued is significantly complicated by the complex interplay of American and Jewish concepts and definitions of religion, race and ethnicity. The struggle for a détente in this debate has turned into each side's drawing lines in the sand over and over, trying to mark the outermost boundaries of tolerance for non-Jews within Judaism and of deviance from an ideal of Judaism. A holistic Jewishness is nostalgically imagined as past generations'

experience. Myerhoff (1978) describes this holistic sense in her informants, old Jews who represent to her a past in which Jewishness was authentic and organic, and when they die it will be extinct, with only a pale reflection, American temple Judaism, in its stead. Myerhoff repeatedly mentions her informants' "neglectful" children, one man's description of her as a "shiksa," his prefacing of comments with phrases like, "you wouldn't know about this, but…" to communicate a sense that this holism is lost to later generations of Jews. Myerhoff shows the effects of the breakdown of the autonomous Jewish community in which her informants grew up: the "old people" in *Number Our Days* were dysfunctionally interdependent because they were displaced from this organic world into one where their children no longer understood *yiddishkeit,* Jewishness.

This holism of experience has been transposed into an American language offering only partial categories. The categories of analysis—ethnicity, religion, nation, race, culture—that the discourses on intermarriage use to talk about both intermarriage and Judaism all fall short because none of them captures the holistic sense of "what you are" that the ethnic familialists described. While the language of modern America calls Judaism a religion, in the lived experience of actual Jews, and the non-Jews who marry some of them, Judaism is also kinship, blood, relatedness, looking alike, genes. But despite the physically grounded way that Jews think of their relatedness, the language of racial identity also fails to fully capture their experience. My intermarried informants assume their Jewishness to be innate, but they also want the religious aspects of Jewishness to be present in their lives as well. Lacking a clear language to describe these complex feelings, American Jews grasp at many different ways of defining Jewishness, and they often come into conflict over it. Those at the periphery of Jewishness—converts,

Jews by patrilineal descent, non-Jews married to Jews—find themselves mired in this uneasiness about the language and definition of Jewishness.

The languages of race and ethnicity have been bound to sociological descriptions of assimilation of minority groups. A double process of assimilation and integration is at work for some minority cultures in America, so that over time they become "white" and their difference is elided. Over time, differences that were once cast as racial come to be viewed as ethnic, a lower barrier to integration (Waters 1998). Yet racial views of Jewishness persist, however implicitly. Although most Jews say Judaism is a religion, many stereotypes about Jews are about their supposed physical appearance (Fishman 2004, 110). In its 2000 Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion, the American Jewish Committee asked survey responders to say whether opposing intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews was "racist" (American Jewish Committee 2000). The language of "race" points to the problem of categorizing Judaism as a religion, defined in American culture as primarily a matter of individual belief, when many Jews feel it to be innate. Limiting marriage within the borders of a minority racial group for the sake of group survival is a language that has legitimacy in American culture. In contrast, Judaism as "ethnicity" may not merit a special moral status that allows it a legitimate aversion to intermarriage. The category of "peoplehood" does not exist in American culture, even though it is an important concept for Judaism; it translates in American culture into something more like food preferences and traditions that lack the weight of religious law or belief. But peoplehood does not translate into race either, so a genetic lineage argument for the Jewish people rings hollow while also echoing antisemitic claims about Jews and ignoring the fact that being "white" carries hard-won advantages in American

society.

Sociological conceptions of ethnicity likewise fail to capture the deeply felt sense among my informants that individualism and Jewishness are not simply choices that they freely make, but rather are cultural values that are part of "what they are." Alba (2005) seems to see Jewish religion as a subset of ethnicity and identifies modern Jewish religious changes as part of the assimilation process. As Jews assimilated to American society, boundaries between Jews and non-Jews grew blurry due to the rapid increase in intermarriage, but Jews maintained connections to Jewish practices, Alba (2005) says. Thus, religious practices change with ethnic assimilation. This conception of ethnicity can help explain social relationships between groups, but it contributes little to an understanding of how individuals experience these ethnic and religious changes and relationships. Somewhat closer to the individual level, Waters's (1998) concept of symbolic ethnicity is more helpful in explaining some of my informants' experiences. Symbolic ethnicity entails belonging to an ethnic community, but emphasizes individuals' "choice" to do so. However, this concept does not encompass my informants' sense that their religious belonging is given at the same time that it is a choice. If religious or ethnic membership were really a free choice, my informants could choose to do the easy parts and ignore the difficult parts, but they do not do this. My informants' sense of "what you are" cannot be explained as an instance of symbolic ethnicity, or the bio-genetic sense of Jewishness that Tenenbaum and Davidman's (2007) interviewees claimed to have. Having a Christmas tree, for example, does not change their genetic makeup or ethnicity. But it does symbolize a choice to have it in one's house, contradicting the mutual obligation framework.

Genetics, ethnicity, race and religion each offer only partial answers as to the experience of Jewishness in my informants' lives. Ethnography has helped to reveal how people experience Jewishness across all of these categories, as individuals within communities. My informants' experiences show that they have internalized a kind of religious authority, communicated by way of communal discourses that establish norms, even though these norms do not always map directly onto their individual experiences. My informants interact with these communal discourses through their choices about religious practices and affiliations and the ways that they explain these choices. Communal discourses gradually take note of individuals' choices and respond, so that there is multi-directional influence between the individuals, families, communities, and their discourses. This multi-directional influence is evident as my informants struggle to articulate why they commit themselves to religious practices about which they are ambivalent. Even rabbis, who are religious authorities themselves, struggle with the meaning of Jewishness.

As people engage in discourses about intermarriage, they also engage in a proxy discourse about being religious and being a Jew in the modern world. But because intermarriage is a social and normative phenomenon that has the appearance of being a controllable choice, whereas being a part of the modern world largely does not, that discussion of the condition of being a Jew in the modern world rarely emerges openly. Rather, it is restricted to intellectual discourses that do not generally make it into the popular and lay sphere. People can continue to have arguments about whether intermarriage is good or bad and what making the choice to intermarry means about one's commitment to Judaism, but having an argument about being part of the modern world

does not make sense. Observant Jews frequently revisit the question of *how* to be part of the modern world by discussing the requirements of halakhic observance. But it is not an argument about *whether* to be part of the modern world.

Contemporary discourses on intermarriage have successfully persuaded people to practice Judaism mainly when they adopt the language of choice. The language of choice is in some ways all that people have available to them: it's the American cultural idiom that allows people to depict themselves as individual agents, self-made to the core. This emphasis on choice allows people to put together contradictory religious elements in their lives: "choice" is what makes it coherent, as if "choice" solved all contradictions.

But this language of choice does not acknowledge authority or binding mutual obligation or community. People do not necessarily understand or examine their every action or thought as a deliberated choice, especially in contexts as emotionally fraught as religion, family and gender. The theory of secularization as a decline in the scope of religious authority implicitly suggests that choice is the alternative to an overarching "sacred canopy" of religious authority. At the same time, there is no way around putting these contradictory systems together in lived experience, because the language of choice organizes the modern world. Hence ethnic familialist discourses contain much more ambivalence than universalist individualist ones. Universalist individualist ones have embraced choice so that the contradictions are smoothed over. Ethnic familialist ones are ambivalent about choice, so they are faced with paradox. Thus, despite the language of individualism, I argue that "choice" is the most salient feature of people's religious experience in a secularized world only in that it is privileged in the language of American culture.

Based on my informants' experiences, I propose that as the traditional, "supernatural" sources of religious authority decline in favor of a more individualized authority, new and unconventional additional sources of religious authority develop within families and communities, broadening the ways in which people have access to religious authority. The rabbis in my study indicated that they saw religious authority as located in both Jewish tradition and individuals' consciences, but if individual conscience and Jewish tradition hold equal weight, then the place and function of religious institutions and norms in Jewish communities is unclear. This arrangement would define Jewish community as the overlap of a group of individuals' conscience and commitment to Judaism. But in the discourses that I have described in this dissertation, there is little consensus on the definition of Judaism itself, though there is a shared vocabulary of Jewish concepts. The ideology of individualism supports my informants' idiosyncratic interpretations of tradition. Individuals may have autonomy to choose their religious membership, but without a shared understanding of that commitment, what is its content?

In ethnic familialism and universalist individualism, as paradigms of religious belonging in contemporary America, gender norms more strongly shape religious life than do religious norms. Even with the lopsided balance of religious authority within these families, my non-Jewish women informants' efforts to "create Jewish homes," in the language of the Mothers Circle, contradicts the conventional wisdom that Jews opt out of the Jewish community by intermarrying. But at the same time, this form of Jewish living does not continue widely recognized forms of Jewish traditions, and despite their outreach efforts, Jewish educators and rabbis do see a need to set boundaries. I asked Rachel, a Mothers Circle leader, whether Mothers Circle women ought to be officially

recognized as Jews without undergoing conversion, given their commitment to and practice of raising Jewish children. “That would be going too far,” Rachel said. “There needs to be a formal commitment.” Two Reform rabbis said that a “spiritual transformation” occurs in conversion that they see as necessary for official recognition of Jewishness. But an endogamous woman who was born Jewish objected to this idea, saying that it was “unfair” that she could be officially recognized as Jewish by accident of birth, regardless of her spiritual state, while people who were not born Jewish but were active participants in the Jewish community and indeed were “Jewish in their hearts,” as Rachel had called them, were denied this recognition. This language is contradictory and points to the problem of conflicting loci of religious authority: how can someone be Jewish in her heart but not Jewish because she has not made a formal commitment?

My informants’ individualism interacts with tradition so that they follow a traditional pattern in a way that would make no sense in its original context and that cannot rely on canonical textual sources of religious authority. Authoritative Jewish texts do not conceive of a non-Jewish woman in charge of a Jewish home. But since textual and clerical sources of religious authority have been upstaged by the individual’s private judgment, non-Jewish women not only can but do run Jewish households. These women’s new religious authority gradually becomes accepted so that the sources of religious authority expand to encompass more, previously unimagined options.

**Conclusion**

This study shows that individual experiences of religious membership and authority differ from their depiction in discourses and institutions. In studying religion as

culture, this point is particularly salient since religious institutions are often taken to enshrine normative religious beliefs, but individuals may experience such beliefs in unconventional and unexpected ways. My informants show that individuals can maintain relationships with religious institutions while making choices at odds with the norms of those institutions, or they may create their own religious institutions to establish their own norms if they determine that existing institutions exclude them. Further, as my rabbinic informants showed, the discourses on intermarriage meant for public consumption differ substantially from the content of interactions between rabbis and individuals.

American cultural understandings of individualism provide cultural permission for my informants to intermarry in the first place, and religious voluntarism provides a cultural script allowing them to assume that they can raise Jewish children in families that are not entirely Jewish. Universalist individualist discourses encourage people to rely on their own judgment as the highest value, aligning with secularization theorists' view of the contraction of religious authority to a private individual sphere. But "tradition" compelled my Jewish male informants to insist, however ambivalently, on having Jewish children. Ethnic familialist discourses encouraged following traditional patterns out of an assumption that this was what loyalty to Jewish tradition required. Yet both ethnic familialists and universalist individualists transformed assumed patterns by bringing to bear other sources of religious authority as well. For example, universalist individualists pointed to the "universal truths" of their beliefs as attested to by multiple world religions, and ethnic familialists combined traditionalism with individualist interpretations. The combination of gender roles and individualism creates new and unconventional kinds of

religious authority that establish important roles for non-Jewish women in religious communities of which they are not officially members. This development offers religious communities opportunities to grow while also raising questions about how these communities should, and do, define themselves.

In presenting and analyzing the self-understandings and experiences of intermarried Jews and their non-Jewish spouses, I hope to portray Jews who do not make normative Jewish choices as nevertheless serious about Jewishness, along with their other compelling concerns. This is meant to be a corrective to the flat portrayals of them that have dominated discourses about intermarriage, and to be helpful to rabbis and Jewish educators who want to better understand the people whom they wish to reach, to scholars of American Judaism who wish to look critically at the ideological portrayals of intermarriage in contemporary discourses, and to scholars of American religion and morality. By starting from the compelling concerns of intermarried Jews and their spouses, I hope that I have treated them with greater fairness than they have received in some of the existing literature.

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