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Image of Queen Esther and King Achashverosh from an illuminated manuscript Called The North French Hebrew Miscellany written in 1431

## **OP-ED: Queen Esther, a new study puts intermarriage in perspective**

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WALTHAM, Mass. (JTA) -- Purim is a time to dull our senses with drink and cloak our identity by dressing in costume. We do so in order to confront a troubling part of our history and the threats to Jewish life and continuity in the Diaspora.

In our retelling of the Purim story, we sometimes forget that our heroine was intermarried. The Talmud teaches that she was forced to marry the king, but there is no doubt that Esther lived a wholly secular life, virtually cut off from her Jewish community. Her disengagement has much to tell us about not only the intermarried today but about the challenges of contemporary Jewish life.

In a study we recently completed at the Steinhardt Institute at Brandeis University, we examined the predictors of Jewish engagement. Our goal in part was to assess the claim that intermarriage was the greatest threat to American Jewish life.

Our focus was on those who said they were raised as Reform Jews. We tried to understand what would lead adults, as well as children, from both inmarried and intermarried families to be engaged in Jewish life, raise Jewish children and feel connected to Israel. We looked at various sources of data, including the National Jewish Population Study of 2000-2001 and more recent data from applicants for birthright Israel.

What is clear from each of our analyses is that the threat of intermarriage as the key cause of disengagement has been overstated. There are, to be sure, substantial differences in the way in which adult children of inmarried and intermarried households were raised. On a number of dimensions, those with intermarried parents had fewer formative Jewish experiences. But when one takes account of critical socializing experiences such as Jewish education, Jewish friends and exposure to home ritual, the impact of intermarriage is significantly reduced.

It is one's experiences of Jewish living, education and friendship that determine who lives a richly Jewish life, not just who one's parents are. Both for inmarried and intermarried individuals, their Jewish capital -- the storehouse of Jewish experiences -- is what centrally predicts engagement.

Some may interpret our conclusions as far too optimistic and perhaps think that the prospect of alcohol and revelry on Purim has dulled our abilities to perceive reality. In fact, our assessment is profoundly troubling rather than overly optimistic. It suggests that the dilemma for the majority of American Jews is the lack of meaningful Jewish experiences. Like Queen Esther, too many contemporary Jews, whether raised by one or two Jewish parents, have not been exposed fully to the riches their heritage has to offer.

If there is room for optimism, it is that the situation may be reversible. Our study also examined data from a sample of Taglit-birthright israel applicants. Since its inception, nearly 200,000 young American Jewish adults have applied to the program. Despite the fact that the program attracts those who are interested in Israel, most of the applicants have had impoverished Jewish backgrounds.

What is clear from our assessment of the program's impact on those young adults who participate is that the trajectory of Jewish engagement can be altered. As different as those from intermarried and inmarried households look at the start of the program, they look similar after the program.

The threat to Jewish life in the Diaspora is not the fact that Jews fall in love and marry non-Jews. Rather it is that the Jewish community has not created the kind of meaningful experiences needed for our traditions to be passed on to the next generation. Perhaps those who intermarry need special programs and services to encourage them to join the Jewish people, but our fundamental challenge is to engage all Jews.

The miracle we celebrate on Purim is that Esther eventually embraced her Jewish identity and convinced the king to spare her community, the Jewish people. In retrospect, it was fortunate that a Jew was married to a non-Jewish king. But the lesson is not that intermarriage is good. Rather we learn the importance of peoplehood and the fragility of life.

As contemporary Jews in America, we live as an accepted and highly successful minority. If our tradition is to be passed on to the next generation, we need to confront the very real threat of disengagement. Dealing with it is likely to be far more difficult, but also more rewarding, than simply telling our children whom they can marry.

*Leonard Saxe, Fern Chertok and Benjamin Phillips are researchers at the Steinhardt Social Research Institute of Brandeis University. A copy of their new report, "It's Not Just Who Stands Under the Chuppah: Intermarriage and Engagement," is available at [www.brandeis.edu/ssri](http://www.brandeis.edu/ssri).*