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Boston's Good News On Inter marriage

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Inter marriage is changing the face of the American Jewish community. National estimates suggest that about half of recently married Jews have partnered with non-Jews. If that rate is sustained through the next generation, two-thirds of American Jewish families will include non-Jewish members. Inter marriage is a sociological fact, not a value statement and, as social scientists, we try to understand this trend. Our findings regarding inter marriage in the recently completed 2005 Boston Jewish community study add a new dimension to this debate.

The study we have just completed in Boston, under the auspices of Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP), indicates that the Boston-area Jewish population has grown, spurred by an inter marriage rate of nearly 40 percent. What makes the growth particularly dramatic, however, is the fact that the majority of interfaith Jewish households — around 60 percent — are deciding to raise their children as Jews. The findings indicates that virtually all Jewish mothers in interfaith marriages are raising Jewish children, while many fewer Jewish men married to non-Jews are doing so.

The Boston study used somewhat different methods than other community studies, but if anything, the way the study was conducted makes the findings even more remarkable. The definition of Jewish identity used in the study was very broad, and extensive efforts were employed to gather a representative sample.

Do these findings yield lessons for other communities? Undoubtedly, Boston is a unique Jewish community. It has a far higher percentage of Jews than other communities, and Boston-area Jews are highly educated and well-off financially. Most importantly, they are highly engaged with Jewish life. Nearly half the community belongs to congregations, and nearly all Boston-area Jews participate in some way in Jewish life during the course of a year.

A community survey does not allow us to determine what causes high rates of engagement, but the findings and the characteristics of the community suggest a pattern. The study reveals that community members take advantage of a broad range of Jewish institutions that serve religious, cultural and educational needs.

Some of the programs that our respondents report taking part in are longstanding communal resources — the Boston area is particularly noteworthy for its network of synagogues, community centers and higher education programs. In addition, CJP has systematically experimented with providing support for different types of child and adult education and has provided explicit support for synagogues to expand their educational programs.

CJP's signature programs include Ikarim (Jewish education for preschool parents), Meah (Jewish education for adults) and Shaarim (family education in synagogues and day schools). The federation in each case worked with key educational institutions and synagogues to support and stimulate development of new types of programs. The goal of these programs has been to engage a broad range of Boston-area Jews in Jewish study and to use learning as a path towards involvement with the broader community.

Boston has also worked to forge unique ties with Israel. Through its partnership with Haifa, it has created

more than 100 separate people-to-people programs. Boston's philanthropic priorities in Israel have shifted towards programs that are jointly developed and run by Bostonians and Haifa residents. The survey estimates that half of Boston's Jewish adults have visited Israel and more than 7 percent in just the last 5 years.

The group of intermarried individuals in our Boston sample is not large enough to allow us to state conclusively why so many are Jewishly-connected. We know the ways in which their children are "raised Jewishly" is, for most of the families, similar to that for those who are inmarried. There are high rates of formal Jewish education for children, although the children of intermarried families appear to drop out of Jewish education at higher rates than children of inmarried families.

The debate about the impact of intermarriage has presumed that demographics are destiny and that the solution to ensuring a vibrant Jewish future is to create normative proscriptions against intermarriage. The findings of the Boston study suggest another possibility: Innovative educational offerings and opportunities for involvement can, perhaps, promote communal vibrancy and precipitate growth. It is not just that Boston is "welcoming" to diverse families; it is that it has created exciting opportunities for engagement.

The findings of the Boston study insert an optimistic note in what has been until now a predominately pessimistic debate. Our challenge is to continue to foster community efforts that engage all members of our community and ensure that our community is one with which anyone — whether born Jewish or not — would want to affiliate. n

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