

MARGINAL NO MORE: JEWISH AND SINGLE IN THE 1980S

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DEMOGRAPHY

Popular images of the American Jewish family run the gamut from nostalgic memories of the struggling immigrant clan to sarcastic vignettes, a la Philip Roth or Woody Allen, of affluent suburbanites enamored of Chinese food. But whatever the accoutrements, for most of us the American Jewish family means mother (a "Jewish" mother, of course), father, and two-plus children. Although we or our close friends may be unmarried or divorced, although we may be just thinking about yet unborn families, we often assume that the stereotypical American Jewish family continues on unchanged.

Recent studies of twenty cities in the United States, however, indicate that American Jewish households have changed dramatically in the past fifteen years.¹ In-

deed, as we head into the 1990s, in terms of marital status the contemporary American Jewish community resembles the contemporary non-Jewish community far more than it resembles the American

Population Study of the Jewish Community of Greater Baltimore, 1986; Sherry Israel, *Boston's Jewish Community: The 1983 GJP Demographic Study*; Population Research Committee, *Survey of Cleveland's Jewish Population, 1981* (Cleveland, 1981); Allied Jewish Federation of Denver, *The Denver Jewish Population Study, 1981*; Gary A. Tobin, Robert C. Levy, and Samuel H. Asper, *A Demographic Study of the Jewish Community of Kansas City, 1986*; Michael Rappeport and Gary A. Tobin, *A Population Study of the Jewish Community of Metro West, New Jersey, 1986*; Paul Ritterband and Steven M. Cohen, *The 1981 Greater New York Jewish Population Survey* (New York, 1981); Lois Geer, *1981 Population Study of the St. Paul Jewish Community* (St. Paul, 1981); Lois Geer, *The Jewish Community of Greater Minneapolis 1981 Population Study* (Minneapolis, 1981); Ira M. Shekin, *Population Study of the Greater Miami Jewish Community* (Miami, 1981); William L. Yancey and Ira Goldstein, *The Jewish Population of the Greater Philadelphia Area* (Philadelphia: Institute for Public Policy Studies, Social Science Data Library, Temple University, 1984); Bruce A. Phillips, *The Milwaukee Jewish Population Study* (Milwaukee, 1984); Bruce A. Phillips and William S. Aton, *The Greater Phoenix Jewish Population Study, 1983-1984*; Jane Berkeley and Saul Weisberg, *United Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, Survey of Greater Pittsburgh's Jewish Population, 1984*; Gary A. Tobin, *A Demographic and Attitudinal Study of the Jewish Community of St. Louis, 1982*; Gary A. Tobin, *Greater San Francisco Population Study, 1989*; Gary A. Tobin, Joseph Waksberg, and Janet Greenblatt, *A Demographic Study of the Jewish Community of Greater Wash-*

Jewish community of 20 years ago.² Only one-third of Jewish households in most cities now consist of the conventional mother, father, and children. Another one-third consist of a married couple with no children in the household.

Fully one-third of the American Jewish community is not currently married. In a dramatic departure from Jewish lifestyles of the past, never-married persons comprise a fifth or more of the adult Jewish population in many cities—compared to only six percent in 1970. The single Jewish populations of seven cities exceed the national average and the single Jewish populations of another six cities are nearly the same as the national average of 19 percent singles. Only in Miami, with its large proportion of elderly retirees, is the contemporary percentage of Jewish singles almost as low as the six percent found by the NJPS in 1970. In addition to this large group of never-married singles, divorced persons, including single parents, and widowed persons can be added to the singles list. Together, they make up a prominent constituency in contemporary Jewish life.

Singles are no longer a peripheral group in the American Jewish community, but few Jewish communal organizations have fully adjusted to the reality of their unprecedented numbers.

In the past, when singlehood was a short-lived period, it was common for Jewish communal institutions to assume that Jewish singles would soon get married, have children, and become affiliated. It didn't seem terribly important to reach out to singles during their single state, to involve them with communal activities, and to try to provide for their needs. To-

day, however, Jewish singles comprise an important part of the total Jewish community. The Jewish community cannot afford to play a *laissez faire* game. The Jewish community needs the talents and the commitment of its many singles, and Jewish singles need the concern and the support of the community.

Where Do Jewish Singles Live?

Many unmarried Jews are drawn to areas which seem to offer a sophisticated and vibrant singles culture, such as Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Denver, Manhattan, and Washington, D.C. They may be attracted by educational or job opportunities and by the presence of large numbers of singles, for few have families in the area. While friends become extremely significant at this stage of the life cycle, often filling many family-like functions for singles, the absence of actual family may be a factor in the length of time which passes before they marry. In addition, these friendships are not necessarily likely to bring them into closer contact with the larger Jewish community, or with potential Jewish mates.

Friendship and Dating

Jewish friendship networks have in the past helped to reinforce feelings of Jewish identity. However, a number of trends, including shifting patterns of Jewish geographical location and employment, have had an impact on friendship patterns. Third and fourth generation American Jews are likely to attend school away from family and to pursue jobs away from areas of dense Jewish population. The friendship patterns of younger American Jews, especially in areas of the country where Jews are more likely to live and work in close proximity with non-Jews, have become far less exclusive. When Jews ages 25 to 34 years old live in areas which are densely populated by Jews, they are nearly as likely as older Jews to have

ington (Washington, D.C., 1984); Gary A. Tobin and Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Population Study of the Greater Worcester Jewish Community, 1986*.

2. For a more extensive discussion of transformations of the American Jewish family unit, see Sylvia Barack Fishman, "The Changing American Jewish Family in the 1980s," *Contemporary Jewry*, Fall, 1988, pp. 2-33.

almost exclusively Jewish friendship networks. When they live in areas with smaller Jewish populations, however, fewer than half of Jews ages 25 to 43 say that two or more of their three best friends are Jewish.

These shifting friendship patterns are one contributing factor in changing attitudes toward interdating and intermarriage. Among the youngest singles in MetroWest, New Jersey, more than one-half of Jews ages 18 to 24 said that they consider it "very important" or "fairly important" to marry another Jew, as did almost two-thirds of singles ages 25 to 34. However, of singles ages 35 to 44, only one-third said they feel it is important to marry a Jew.

There are probably several reasons for this drop in emphasis on finding a Jewish mate among the ages 35 to 44 group. First, there are many divorced persons in this age group, and second marriages are more likely to be intermarriages than first marriages. Second, the pool of eligible persons in this age group is smaller, and religion may recede as a non-negotiable issue when more immediate personal issues are at stake. Third, ethnotherapists working with Jewish singles have found that among never-married persons in this age group is a certain proportion of persons with "hard-core" negative feelings about Jews of the opposite sex. Such unmarried Jews are uneasy about the prospect of marrying a non-Jew, but they feel unattracted to Jews. Caught on the horns of a dilemma, they continue to postpone a marital decision.

Single No More: Where Are Jewish Marriages Made?

Surprisingly, when married Jews are queried about the location in which they first met their current spouse, the most common manner of meeting for every age group is "through family or friends." In MetroWest, New Jersey, almost one-half of couples over age 55, over one-third of couples ages 35 to 54, and well over one-

quarter of couples ages 25 to 34 met through people they knew.

In striking contrast, intermarried couples are the group most likely to meet each other in public settings: more than two-thirds met at work, at school, or at a public place, but only about one-fifth met through family and friends. Thus, intermarried couples are three times as likely as all married Jewish couples to have met at work, and one-half as likely to have met through family introductions.

Couples meeting randomly at school, at work, or in other public places are more likely than most to be interfaith couples. This would suggest that, if the Jewish community feels it has a stake in promoting Jewish-Jewish marriages, it would do well to increase its sponsorship of a variety of social programs for singles, as well as subsidized dating services. A *laissez faire* attitude will not draw singles closer to Jewish communal life and will not intensify feelings of Jewish identity. Clearly, there are many demographic forces pulling in the opposite direction.

Singles and the Jewish Community

Singles of every age in every city surveyed expressed strong interest in having the Jewish community sponsor more programs for singles. Jewish communities around the country have initiated a range of programming, from traveling Friday night worship services for singles to lectures to dances to actual subsidized dating services. Some of these programs have been successful beyond the wildest expectations of their sponsors; others have not attracted their expected clientele. Research is needed into which programs work best at facilitating friendship networks for Jewish singles, and how those programs can be adapted for various areas of the country.

Meeting a Continuing Challenge

The impact of changes in educational and occupational patterns on American Jewish

households appears to be continuing. Singles will probably maintain an important presence as young adults use their twenties and thirties to pursue career goals and self-development. The single status resurfaces again following divorce or bereavement.

During periods of extended singlehood, American Jewish singles are often remote from the identity reinforcements provided by the families they grew up in. Unmarried singles have not yet acquired the families—and with them the life cycle status—which will encourage them to affiliate with the Jewish community. They are becoming increasingly sophisticated in terms of secular knowledge; they are moving to new areas, establishing new ties, meeting new friends and eventually their mates. Older singles often live far from the areas where they formed their connections with Jewish institutions. During each of these crucial time periods, the great majority of Jewish singles have little contact with the organized Jewish community.

The changing behavior patterns of the American Jews in terms of family formation have profound implications for the American Jewish community. For over 2000 years Jews as a group have regarded the married state as the only good and productive state for adults; the Jewish bias

toward marriage and families has suffused our literature, our official rituals, and our folk culture. As a result, our institutions have focused on the traditional, intact family.

It is time to focus on a variety of Jewish households instead, and American Jewish singles should head our list.

Singles have asked for outreach from the Jewish community in several different areas. First and foremost, they would like to be considered part of the community instead of a marginal group. They have asked to be included in general communal group events, as well as to have social, religious, and communal events geared specifically to their needs. Never-marrieds, divorced persons, and widowed persons have all asked for help in forming friendship networks of various kinds. Single parents and elderly singles often need practical help with transportation, in addition to financial consideration, so they can participate in Jewish communal activities. Ironically, if we wish to strengthen and enhance Jewish family units in the United States today, we must look beyond the so-called conventional Jewish family. We must respond to and support actual, existing households. In contemporary American Jewish life, singles are marginal no more.