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Introduction

In 1926, the marriage of Miss Mina Kirstein of Boston to a non-Jew was such an unusual and newsworthy event that it was headline news in a prominent national Jewish newspaper (Harris, 2013). Since that time, much has changed nationally and in the Boston area with regard to the occurrence of and response to intermarriage. Nationally, at least half of all marriages of US Jews are to non-Jews (Pew Research Center, 2013). Similarly, the 2015 Greater Boston Jewish Community Study (Aronson et al., 2016) found that among households with couples who are married or partnered, 47% are interfaith. Intermarriage is reshaping the US Jewish community, and it has become increasingly important to understand the needs and preferences of these families for Jewish engagement.

Conducted for Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston (CJP) by the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), this study was designed to expand CJP’s understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the burgeoning population of interfaith couples in its catchment communities. Of particular interest were households that have not already found their way into home-based or communal Jewish life. The goal of this project was to represent a spectrum of perspectives and generate actionable findings that can inform new directions in policy, programs, and initiatives that will be attractive to this group.

Previous research suggests that policies and initiatives have the potential to alter the trajectories of interfaith families and the children they raise. During the past two decades, in part as an outcome of policies and programs to welcome interfaith households into the Jewish community, an increasing proportion of these families have become engaged with Jewish life and provided their children a Jewish education (Sasson et al., 2017). Research on contemporary young adults raised by intermarried parents found that children of intermarriage who had Jewish experiences—even as late as college—were more likely to identify as Jewish and participate in Jewish community life (Sasson et al., 2015).

At the same time, many interfaith couples remain at a distance from Jewish life and many children raised in these homes enter their young adult years with little in the way of formal or informal Jewish education (Sasson et al., 2015). A soon to be published study of nearly 600 young adult Jews and their non-
Jewish partners indicates that on a variety of indices of communal, religious, and cultural Jewish engagement, interfaith couples are less involved than their inmarried peers (Shain et al., 2019). In a similar vein, the 2015 Boston Jewish community study found that although half of interfaith households have found ways to express their Jewish identities, the other half have limited connections to Jewish life. One-third could be characterized as “Familial Jews,” participating in home-based holidays but unlikely to be involved with other forms of Jewish engagement, and another one-quarter are “Minimally Involved,” with very limited engagement in Jewish home rituals or celebrations and largely disengaged from communal Jewish life.

This report describes research to develop a nuanced understanding of the preferences and needs of younger interfaith couples within the broader context of the issues and concerns that animate their lives. Consequently, the framework of the study reflects the following overarching question about the lives of young interfaith couples:

**What are the primary interests, needs, and concerns of interfaith couples in terms of their personal, professional, spiritual, and social lives?**

Within the context of their life experience, the study focused on answering the following research questions about the points of Jewish engagement of interfaith couples:

- In what ways, if any, do current programs, activities, and institutions of the Greater Boston Jewish community attract interfaith couples and address their animating needs and concerns, and to what degree do their needs remain unmet?
- What types of existing Jewish offerings are interfaith couples already aware of and to what extent have they participated in these programs?
- What are the usual or preferred means for finding out information about programs, resources, and opportunities?
- What program content areas are most attractive to members of interfaith households? For instance, do they prefer educational, social, cultural, or religious programming?
- Do interfaith couples prefer specialized opportunities for similar couples or programming that is offered to a more heterogeneous group?
- What are the logistical characteristics of programs and opportunities that are most attractive to members of interfaith households? What settings, locations, and schedules are most convenient and appealing?
- When and how does the denominational affiliation of a program or offering influence interfaith couples’ decision making about participation?

We begin with a brief description of the research methodology and the demographics of the couples studied. The report continues with a discussion of findings divided into five topic areas: the role of religion in the current lives of couples, the relevance of life stage for the animating concerns of couples, the needs of interfaith couples to feel a sense of community, and the roles of welcoming and denominational affiliation in attracting the participation of these couples. The report concludes with an exploration of new or expanded directions for programming and policy that reflect interfaith couples’ preferences and address their realities and needs at different points in their family’s development.
Methodology

The findings described in this report are based on interviews with interfaith couples and key informants.

Key informant interviews. We interviewed 20 key informants about their perspectives on the Jewish community’s engagement efforts with interfaith couples. Nine work at organizations and synagogues in Greater Boston; 11 work at organizations and synagogues in other communities or with a national scope. These key informant interviews were used to aid development of interview protocols, to contextualize findings, and to explore potential policy recommendations.

Interviews with interfaith couples. We interviewed 32 couples comprised of a Jewish partner and a partner from a different religious background. The target sample for this study consisted of committed couples with one Jewish and one non-Jewish partner that currently reside in the Greater Boston area (defined as inside the I-495 loop). Couples eligible to be interviewed either did not have children or had no children older than age eight. Couples where one partner had already converted to Judaism were not considered interfaith and were not eligible for the study, while couples where one partner was in the process of conversion and the other partner was already Jewish by birth or conversion were considered interfaith and eligible. Interviews were conducted between November 2018 and February 2019. Interviews lasted 45-60 minutes, and were conducted over the phone or in person. Three couples participated in a focus group held in Cambridge.

The couples of most interest for this study were those that did not already have extensive connections to Jewish life in the Boston area. To reach this group we employed a variety of recruitment channels. Members of an advisory panel of interfaith couples distributed recruitment messages through their personal, professional, and neighborhood social media networks. Local Jewish organizations including JewishBoston.com and InterfaithFamily disseminated recruitment messages to their contact lists and social media followers.

Local Conservative, Reform, and non-denominational congregations were asked to share information about the study with their memberships with the aim of reaching local young interfaith couples through their parents and extended family. CMJS researchers also used social media and email networks to reach couples. The study also employed snowball sampling, meaning that couples that were interviewed were asked to recommend other couples that met the study criteria.

The couples’ ages ranged from the late 20’s through the early 40’s. The majority (88%) of couples interviewed were married (Figure 1). Half of the unmarried couples were engaged, and half described themselves as in committed relationships, although they had no current plans to marry. The length of the couples’ relationships spanned 2-20 years. Four couples were same-sex, five couples included a partner/spouse born outside the United States, and eight couples included someone who described themselves as a person of color.

Among the non-Jewish partners, the vast majority came from a Christian background. Just under one half of non-Jewish partners (47%) were raised in a Protestant denomination, and 37% were raised Catholic. A small portion of non-Jewish partners (9%) were raised with a non-Christian background, and 6% were raised with no religion.
Just under one half (47%) of couples interviewed had at least one child (Figure 2). Among those that did not have children, 16% were expecting their first child at the time of their interview.

The couples interviewed resided in a wide range of CJP catchment communities (Figure 3). Forty-one percent lived in the urban core of Boston, Cambridge, Somerville, and Brookline; 34% lived in inner-ring suburbs such as Arlington, Watertown, or Melrose; and the remaining 25% lived in outer-ring suburbs such as Sharon, Framingham, or Dedham.
For Most Couples Religion Has Limited Salience

Mainstream religious engagement has declined in the current generation of young adults (Chaves, 2017). Younger cohorts, including those that were brought up in a religious tradition, are more likely than older generations to claim no religious preference (Hout & Fisher, 2014). The Pew Research Center’s Religious Landscape Study identified a growing group of people who describe themselves religiously as atheists, agnostics, or “nothing in particular” (Pew, 2015). These “nones” constitute over one third of the millennial cohort. Our recent study of Boston-area Jewish young adults, found that most are proud of their Jewish identity but are less comfortable with notions of religious Judaism (Chertok et al., 2017).

Much like their generational peers, many of the Jewish partners we interviewed for this study, described themselves as “cultural” Jews. The religious aspects of Judaism, ritual, text and mitzvot, were, at best, peripherally salient to their lives. Most grew up in homes where religion was not prominent—although they have very fond memories of festive and warm family meals connected to Passover, High Holidays, and/or Hanukkah. Their Jewish education was completed by the time they left middle school, and their involvement in Jewish life has grown more attenuated since that time.

We didn’t really have an intensely religious focus outside [Jewish school], but we did follow, you know, the festivities, the most important festivities we would get together with our family. I still consider myself I suppose culturally Jewish. (Jewish partner)

In terms of my own family’s observance, it was really just Hanukkah and occasional Passover seders. (Jewish partner)

These Jewish partners recounted feeling connected to and proud of Jewish values and culture but were distanced from Judaism as a religion. They described the centerpiece of their Jewish observance as festive holiday meals shared with their immediate and extended families.

I don’t think that I want, I need to observe more, and I’m happy with the level of religion I have in my life right now (Jewish partner)

I’ve been struggling to find where my place is because I feel a little bit like a fraud going to temple because it’s so focused on the religion and not necessarily on the culture and the traditions. (Jewish partner)
Even though we’re not very observant, we do observe major holidays. [I] have meals together with my family. Sometimes the extended family, especially for Passover or something like that. (Jewish partner)

Being Jewish, for these Jewish partners, was largely described as a matter of belonging to a larger collective. For example, one Jewish focus group participant described to us that she started “sprinkling” Yiddish into her conversations as a way of feeling connected to her late grandparents. Most couples talked about wanting to give their children this same sense of membership in the Jewish people and providing them with the cultural knowledge to feel at home with members of the “tribe.”

[I’m a] big believer in being raised culturally Jewish. (Jewish partner)

I think one thing just really on a basic level is that [child] is comfortable and feels at home in a Jewish community with other Jewish people and Jewish culture. (Jewish partner)

Many of the non-Jewish partners interviewed also did not think of themselves as connected to a religious identity. Some grew up with little or no history of religious engagement or education. Like their Jewish partners, the childhood memories of many non-Jewish partners revolved around family and home celebrations of major holidays with limited reference to the theological underpinnings of these events. As one focus group participant described it, her non-Jewish spouse’s family observes some Christian holiday traditions that are “about family, not Jesus.” For all of these reasons, many non-Jewish partners made clear that they have little interest in religion as a part of their current lives.

We celebrated Christmas, not in a super-focused-on-Jesus kind of way, but we did sing Christmas carols and read Christmas-themed picture books and things like that when I was a kid. We also did parts of Easter involving chocolate and bunnies and eggs, but not a lot of Jesus-rising-from-the-dead kind of stuff. And my mom read me some kids’ versions of Bible stories in both Hebrew Bible and New Testament… We were culturally Christian, but I’ve never identified as Christian, and I’ve always only identified as Unitarian Universalist. (Non-Jewish partner)

I can’t really call myself like an active member of a church right now. I still travel very occasionally to events at the church where I grew up just to stay in touch with some people, but it’s not really as much like a religious involvement. So I guess I would say since college I haven’t really had a lot of involvement in religious community. (Non-Jewish partner)

I don’t go to church anymore on a regular basis, even on different holidays. So I guess I consider myself more spiritually religious than, you know, actually practicing. (Non-Jewish partner)

Both my parents have a Christian background. We did go to church services I think weekly, or some of those, and then we dropped off of that. We weren’t as kids particularly interested in it, but as we grew up we moved away from going to services to celebrating Christian holidays, Easter, Christmas. But [not] anything like more than getting together with family, and no religious connotation to it. (Non-Jewish partner)

In many cases, individuals chose partners who held a similar stance on religion even though the partner was from a different religious background. Members of the couples we interviewed talked about how similar they were to each other in terms of the relevance of religion in their lives and the values they wanted to impart to their families. In other words, they were not focused on, nor did they see differences in their religious backgrounds as major obstacles to building successful
Life Stages and the Needs of Interfaith Couples in Greater Boston

I would say that we really haven’t really discussed religion all that much, it’s just whatever has come in a natural way, and I think that’s more because we both are looking at religion as more of a cultural thing than it is a religious thing. (Jewish partner)

So I think for both of us, even though we had cultures and traditions that might’ve started with the religious undertone when we were children and into our young adulthood, we’ve taken the secular aspects of it. So the family, the meals, the coming together, the spending time with each other and applied that to our lives. I feel like both of us want the family, and the connection, and everything that we had growing up from these traditions absent the religion to a certain extent for me at least. (Non-Jewish partner)

I think [what] makes it a lot easier is that we have decided to focus on the common ground, and we decided to try to live our lives based on the principles that come from our faith. We’ve kind of taken those and extrapolated them into our lives. Just treat people kindly, and care about them, and care about each other. That’s what has made our relationship really strong...I think that’s probably the most important lesson that we’ve learned from religion is that these are great principles that we learned growing up on both sides, from two different religions, and yet we’re able to come together. (Non-Jewish partner)

Many of the couples we interviewed included at least one, if not two, partners who were themselves raised by parents from different religious backgrounds. For example, in seven couples, the Jewish partner was raised by intermarried parents, and another two Jewish partners had a parent who converted to Judaism. Two of the non-Jewish partners had parents from different religious backgrounds, and another six were raised by parents who came from different streams of Christianity. In most cases, this background was described as providing a positive role model for fluidity around religious identity and the possibility of creating successful marriages between people from different religious backgrounds. As was noted in a previous study of millennial children of intermarriage, some individuals raised in interfaith families see their early exposure to diverse cultures as a strength that they want to pass on to their own children (Sasson et al., 2015).

I would also say neither of us come from families where marrying somebody from not your faith background was a big issue. I don’t think it was ever, ‘how are we going to solve this problem?’ It was like, ‘Oh, you come from this, neat. I come from that, cool.’ (Jewish partner)

Given their limited focus on religious identity and engagement, it is not surprising that most of the interviewed couples were neither aware of nor involved in many Jewish programs or organizations. Seven of the couples noted that they are members of congregations, and another 14 described occasionally attending a High Holiday service or a children’s service, but have not joined a congregation. A small number of couples with children mentioned receiving books from PJ Library or attending family programming at the JCC (but are not members). Some couples were connected with Mayyim Hayyim or InterfaithFamily Boston, and had attended a class or a meet-up activity.
The Jewish members of five couples reported having participated in young adult programming, such as LEADS or Reach Out, when they were single, but noted that are no longer involved in the organizations now that they are partnered.

**What is Relevant to Couples is Tied to Their Stage of Development**

The Israeli author David Grossman wrote that “a family is a perpetual occurrence” (2010). Just as there are stages in the development of individual identity, there are also phases in the life of a couple, each of which involves navigating unique challenges and areas of growth and change. Our interviews with couples suggested four stages in the development of young couples: moving toward marriage/commitment, newly committed/married, new parents, and parents of young children. In this section we explore the animating concerns for each phase of development.

It should be noted that regardless of their stage of couple development, both Jewish and non-Jewish partners told us that it is important that whatever choices they make are comfortable for both. They understand their choices and stance on religion may change over time but are also keenly aware that they do not want to do anything that will jeopardize their relationship with their partner.

What’s new for me is just, like, my journey into Judaism. I don’t know where it’s going to take me, and I’m excited about it, but I also want to make sure that it doesn’t negatively impact our marriage because religion was never a focus of our relationship before. And in fact, it was something that probably bonded us together. Now that I have found the interest, it’s just important for me that we do it together in a way that we’re both comfortable with the outcome. (Jewish partner)

**Moving toward Marriage/Commitment.** Interviewed couples in this stage had made the decision to be permanently committed to each other and, in most cases, were formally engaged and planning to wed. This is the first transitional moment when partners make a major shift in their identification and start to see themselves as part of a couple rather than as two individuals. They are also learning how to establish boundaries around themselves as a couple distinct from either of their families of origin. Although most couples we interviewed described being warmly welcomed by their partners’ parents, they still faced the task of establishing their own preferences for how they would spend time with and relate to their families.

We recently went on vacation during Christmas, and I don’t really care about the religious aspect of Christmas, but I go for my family and my grandmother’s side or my mother’s side. I usually go there during those holidays, and we decided not to, and to go on vacation instead. And that was hard. The weekend of Passover and Easter…that’s the next round of figuring out how can we both be in the places that we need to be now. (Non-Jewish partner)

One of the challenges of this stage is learning to understand and navigate the different norms and patterns for expressing emotion, maintaining closeness, and resolving differences that they learned in their families growing up. Several non-Jewish partners noted that their own families were not as closely connected as the families of their Jewish partners. They had little experience with an “enmeshed” family style in which parents and siblings frequently inquire about very personal aspects of life including finances, health, well-being, and the status of pending decisions. The families of the non-Jewish partners were often described as being reserved on these
Dual-Faithful Couples

A small but noteworthy portion of couples interviewed consisted of partners who are both actively involved in the religious aspects of their respective faith traditions. One of these couples suggested the term “dual faithful” to describe their partnership. In looking for a partner, these individuals described wanting to find someone who would understand the important place that faith, ritual, and theology have in their self-identity and in the lives they want to create for themselves and their families. For these dual faithful couples, part of the joy of finding a partner was having someone with whom to share a commitment to and investment in religion.

It seems right to me that a big part of both of our religious lives at the time was this, sharing ourselves with each other. This was a way that we talked about each other and got to know each other and so then, exposed ourselves to the other person through these conversations. And that was a beautiful thing. That was great. I think there were many reasons that we fell in love, but that was part of it. (Non-Jewish partner)

To me, it was very meaningful that religion was important to both of us, but that we also shared these certain understandings of religion and the role of religion in the world. (Non-Jewish partner)

For us it was more about, we were both being observant, both having a belief in a higher power and a moral sense of how to live one’s life. And that seems more important than believing exactly the same thing in the details. (Non-Jewish partner)

Among the couples we interviewed that fit into this category, almost all had made the decision to raise their children as Jewish. The non-Jewish partners in these couples are, nonetheless, committed to maintaining their own personal engagement with their faith.

Our daughter, she’s had a naming ceremony. She’s being raised Jewish, which is fine with me. I want my child to have a religious education that’s rooted in the Bible I guess. There’s a few reasons why I wanted her to be raised in the Jewish community. First, I [have] a kind of theological aversion to syncretic religion, the idea [of] just sort of putting together some religious upbringing that’s sort of exposed her to Christianity, and then Judaism for a while. Raising a child [like] that seems really sort of disorienting and sort of mystifying. And I just worried that it would leave a negative impression that would somehow do justice to neither of these traditions or faiths. So it was going to be one or the other. I wanted it to be Judaism. Well, first of all, she is Jewish by birth according to Jewish law, and that made sense to me. Second of all, I think that just looking at the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, it makes sense to me that someone would be raised Jewish and then later on, you know, if it is moved by the gospel, becomes a Christian, and that’s not in my hands to determine. (Non-Jewish partner)
topics, preferring to wait for the couple to share information rather than asking direct questions.

I said, ‘Grandpa, I have some good news, I met this really nice guy.’ He said, ‘Oh, Jewish?’ And I said, ‘No, he’s Italian,’ and my grandfather says, ‘Oh, the same as Jewish!’ in this like happy voice…The Italian-Jewish cultural thing, it’s really cute. Like there are a lot of similarities in these large, loud families where people like to argue and make fun of each other. I think it made it easier than if [Non-Jewish partner] were from a different ethnic background that didn’t have a lot of similarities with the way Jewish families tend to be around. (Jewish partner)

My parents are originally from the South. There’s this tendency to do things out of politeness. I think [Jewish partner’s] culture is much more direct. There might’ve been more nuanced ways to have a conversation. (Non-Jewish partner)

A number of couples chose to focus on culture and heritage rather than religion in their wedding planning. Many described selecting various Jewish and Christian or other religious traditions or symbols but viewed these as cultural elements devoid of any religious significance. Many chose to have a non-clergy officiant, often a friend or family member, perform the wedding ceremony.

We just did kind of a clash of things. We included several aspects of the Jewish ceremony. [It was] definitely, by no means religious but we did, for example, the chuppah. We had the stepping on the glass. (Jewish partner)

So we had a Jewish-ish wedding by a rabbi, but we didn’t do all the traditions. We did, we did most of them, and we did all the seven blessings, but we didn’t do the circling, and we kind of picked and chose what was meaningful to us. (Jewish partner)

Key informants pointed out that programming for couples in this stage is often tied to the involvement of a rabbi. For example, a rabbi that will be officiating for an interfaith couple might require them to take an introductory course about Judaism or meet to discuss the elements of a Jewish wedding. Since most of these couples do not seek out a Jewish clergy officiant, they are unlikely to find their way into available programs. Interfaith couples are also hampered in their effort to design a Jewish wedding due to a lack of knowledge of Jewish traditions.

Newly Married. Interviewed couples who were newly married were entering a more settled period in their lives where they were making decisions about desired lifestyles and careers and building traditions for themselves as a couple. But alongside their excitement about the possibilities of putting down roots in many arenas of their lives, couples also spoke of their uncertainty about how to make important life decisions, such as where to live or buy a home, what career path to follow, and how to balance work with family life. Couples in this stage talked about learning how to productively work together on finances, make important life decisions, and articulate the values that will guide their planning. Like many other young adults, the recently married couples we interviewed were thinking about how to have strong relationships at home and with friends and other family members, as well as how to have meaningful work.

I think we have some questions up in the air. What’s our plan for if we’re going to go back to school? What’s our plan established long term?...Our parents are helpful [for] general career advice, life advice. I think we both feel comfortable asking them, turning to them. I think, part of why we’re in a rut is that we don’t really have mentors in our current field. (Jewish partner)
[This is] the first time where we’re both focused on jobs. We’d been either traveling, a lot of volunteer work abroad or just studying, and now this is the first time that we both have careers, so we’re trying to work very hard to establish a career professionally. (Jewish partner)

This is the longest we’ve lived in one place together, and that’s just a little over two years because we’ve moved around a lot due to grad school and other things. So we’re just trying to be stable financially and sort of progress in our careers and hopefully buy a house. (Non-Jewish partner)

So we both switched jobs this past summer. Both of our new jobs to provide a little bit more life stability in the sense of less stress, better working hours, that kind of thing. So I think over the past six months or so we’ve just kind of been getting settled and kind of figuring out what we’re enjoying investing in, like personal and mental health with the newfound time and stability. (Non-Jewish partner)

Several couples described the search for a community in which to buy a home as a particularly important life decision. Some recounted selecting communities based on the cost of and availability of homes, but later wished they had considered the characteristics of the local Jewish community in their decision making.

Couples in this stage of their partnership did not see synagogues as relevant institutions. Not only because they were related to the religious aspects of Jewish living which were not salient, but because they viewed congregational life as being connected to having children. They often spoke about synagogue membership as a step that they expected to take at a later point in their lives, when they became parents.

To me [joining a synagogue] still feels a little bit like it’s...you have a family and when you have kids that’s something you participate in. (Jewish partner)

I foresee that in a few years if we move out to a suburban town, and we’re looking to make a new community and meet other families and play with other kids, I think that’s when I’ll feel like I want to be part of a community. (Jewish partner)

With busy and very scheduled lifestyles, the couples we interviewed were also aware that they need to be more intentional about how they want to build shared relaxation into their busy lives. Although many of the traditional Shabbat rituals were not attractive to these couples, the idea of a time to come together after a busy week was. Several couples told us that they were intrigued by the idea of building Shabbat routines that would allow them to jointly relax and reflect on the week.

Discussions of how to raise future children were often hypothetical or limited for couples in this stage. Some had made the decision to raise their children Jewish but had not really thought about what that would entail. Others had not broached the subject and felt they would not really be ready to make a decision until they actually had children.

We haven’t talked about it in too much depth. I don’t know. I guess we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. (Jewish partner)

We’re thinking about having children, not immediately but sometime in the next several years, and I think we have a lot of big active questions about what that’ll look like. Most of the interfaith couples who I know where one person is Jewish, the other person isn’t active in another religion; it’s not a big part of their life right now. So then often the child can be raised Jewish and like Judaism can take over. That is different from us
because we’re planning to raise children in both religions. I think I would like more visions of what that can look like. I have some concerns about how we do that on daily basis in our household, but then also concerns about acceptance in both UU and Jewish communities. (Non-Jewish partner)

I sometimes go to [synagogue], and I have a friend there who’s older than us who has a partner who’s [non-Jewish], and they each have a kid. And so we’re interested in talking with them about what their path has been like. I’ve been thinking would be good to read some books together, but we haven’t identified any [books in] particular yet. (Jewish partner)

Several key informants pointed to the post-wedding, pre-parenthood stage as one that is underserved in the Jewish community. They pointed out the need for additional programming for all Jewish couples in this stage, including interfaith couples.

New Parents. The transition to parenthood is an especially difficult one, typically accompanied by a drop in marital satisfaction as new parents learn to adapt to the demands of taking care of a newborn while learning about each other’s strengths and challenges as parents.

We’ll figure it out, but to have that much change and add a baby is very hard to do. So it will be figuring out how to make sure that we’re still going on date nights and, as uncomfortable as it might be, to have a babysitter and leave our baby or figure that out. I think trying to make it feel like we are still who we are and don’t lose out on our identity as a couple while having a kid, I think that will be a new challenge. (Jewish partner)

Interfaith couples that had recently become parents often described confronting what it means to raise their children in one, two, or no faith traditions. For many, this was the first time they were having this discussion, and some couples put it off as long as they could, in some cases until the child was born.

I don’t think in all honesty religion has been an issue or thing that we even discussed until we had a kid. I think that’s when it became something that we had talked about. (Non-Jewish partner)

Actually the only time that religion has started to come up [was] after we had our child. That’s the point where, at least for me, I started thinking about my own son, childhood, and the family traditions that we want to instill and the traditions that I had growing up. And so it’s really only been the last year and a half that I’ve been sort of, again, interested in Judaism and Jewish life. (Jewish partner)

We are expecting our first child in February. We’re very excited. So I think a lot of those decisions are kind of coming down the road in terms of what it especially looks like or the conversations that we have. I think the next compromise coming is figuring out what Jewish identity looks and feels like once we have the child. And when and if we want to formally join the Jewish community. (Non-Jewish partner)

Many of the couples that we spoke to have decided to raise their children Jewish. Although religion and faith are not central to their lives, they do see Judaism as a source of good values to pass down to their children. Other couples were less clear on what their child’s religious identity would be. They might be considering exposing their child to multiple religions equally, one primary religion, or no religion at all. Even when couples indicated that they had decided to raise their child Jewish, they were often still unclear about what this meant in terms of home observance and religious education.
It’s a continuing conversation I think, but in terms of any Christian observances [having a Christmas tree], that’s pretty much the extent of it. And it’s not against something that I foresee us having a big religious emphasis on, in terms of like talking a lot about Jesus or things like that with our son. But again, this is something that [we] will need to figure out as we go out. But in terms of like his, his religious identity, I think primarily that will be Jewish.  (Jewish partner)

Couples at this point of development also described facing new manifestations of their ongoing dialogue with extended family about their decisions related to religion and the religious identity of their children. These conversations emerged in response to baby welcoming and naming traditions or around the celebration of holidays.

My mother is religious and values her religious upbringing very well. I don’t think she really knows where to put like a two-faith relationship and marriage such as what [Jewish partner] and I have. She’s a little heavy handed when it comes to Christmas. It’s not really a conversation that she’s really involved in. Although I think she could be more than she is.  (Non-Jewish partner)

Parents of Young Children. As the oldest child moves out of infancy, couples described having more “bandwidth” to engage in local life. They often described themselves as becoming “citizens” of the communities in which they reside and looking for connections for themselves and their children.

At this stage, interfaith parents also talked about becoming keenly aware that they would soon have to be able to answer their child’s questions about what it means to have parents of different religions.

I guess one of the challenges here is to give a religious education to a child to that they do grow up in one of these communities, while at the same time being aware of the difficulty in negotiation that goes on when you know, your father is a different faith. That’s a lot. And I would just finally add, it is a lot of work, a challenge.  (Jewish partner)

If [Non-Jewish partner] and I butt heads in certain areas, or when [child] gets to an age where she’s starting to understand things and like we have to explain what we think about religion and how they work together, then I’ll definitely seek out counsel in some way. It’s so complex how to talk to a child about the whole interfaith piece.  (Jewish partner)

On the Catholic side, obviously Christmas. My family has Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. We’ll have Christmas lights outside. We don’t have a Christmas tree, but we have stockings and you know, we want to expose our daughter to a little bit of the Catholic side of her background. But we don’t want to go all in and get the Christmas tree and do all that. You know, I want to respect the fact that we’re raising her Jewish. But then other, other things—we’ll celebrate Easter at my family’s house.  (Non-Jewish partner)

As couples established their own family traditions and took action to implement the religious identity they envisioned for their child, the non-Jewish partner, in particular, described needing to come to terms with what that will mean for their relationship to their child’s religious upbringing.

I don’t think that outsider is the right term, but I’m sorta looking from the outside in, at her religious upbringing, but also, kind of walking beside her, doing it. I feel lucky that the temples that we’ve been affiliated with, to the best that they can, welcome me and welcome our family as an interfaith family. So that’s a real important thing. I think if we were somewhere else and we weren’t welcomed or we felt judged then I would have…it would be a challenge for me, but you know, since we’re so supported, it’s great.  (Non-Jewish partner)
The combination of it being our home, and it being my home, and it being a Jewish home, can it be all those things at once? I’m very comfortable with it being a partly Jewish home. I am very comfortable with celebrating Jewish holidays and supporting [Jewish partner] and Jewish practice of various times. And I also want to learn about it. But also like I think, if the whole home is Jewish, it might not be my home. I have this, discomfort around that. (Non-Jewish partner)

At this point in their development, couples often recounted starting to explore local options for Jewish life. In some cases, this process resulted in their finding synagogues that felt welcoming and a good fit for their family. For others, even joining a synagogue did not mean that they had found a good option for experiencing Jewish life with their young children.

Why is it the temple doesn’t have a service for younger kids? Their tot service starts at 6pm. My four-year old, if she’s not in bed by 7pm, it’s a hot mess. (Jewish partner)

Other couples found a synagogue to be a means of finding community. Often their entry was through programming for their children or specifically connecting with other young families.

One of the new things we did this year is we hosted some people from [child’s] Hebrew school class families here for a Hanukkah. It was just three other families that could make it, but it was nice. Just one of the other families was interfaith, the others weren’t, so it was just chatting with them, interesting to hear some of the differences. (Non-Jewish partner)

We quickly found that this synagogue to which we belong was a good fit for us, to our values. And as far as just the social aspect of the types of people that were here are, in line with the types of people that we tend to be friends with personality wise. It became clear it was our people. It was the kind of place that we felt at home, and it was the kind of place that was [a] good home in terms of values and in spiritual practice, ritual practice. It felt very comfortable. (Jewish partner)

As parents talked about the process of educating their children about their religion, many Jewish parents described becoming aware of the limits of their own knowledge of Judaism. They expressed feeling incompetent as they tried to explain Jewish thought and ritual when they knew so little themselves.

I have such an elementary-level understanding of Judaism that before I can really decide how I want to incorporate it into my life, I need to understand it a little bit more. (Jewish partner)

Many of the challenges and choices faced in this stage of being a couple are dependent on knowledge of what religious identity entails and the Jewish options available for education and engagement. Key informants often echoed the comments of the couples interviewed and noted that many of these young adults do not possess enough information to make informed decisions. For many Jewish partners, their own Jewish education ended during their early adolescence, and they lack a family history of attending worship services or communal celebrations. Choosing programs for their children may entail learning about and experiencing options that they, themselves, did not have. Key informants also noted that programs should allow for the possibility that some interfaith couples might intend to raise their child in two religions.
Interfaith Couples Are Looking for Community, Not Membership

Human beings strive for a sense of community. They long to be part of something larger than themselves and, within this context, to be recognized and valued as unique individuals (Becker, 1973). Sense of community has been defined as the experience “that one was part of a readily available, mutually supportive network of relationships upon which one could depend and as a result of which one did not experience sustained feelings of loneliness” (Sarason, 1974). In their study of emerging community settings, Thurston and ter Kuile (2015) of Harvard Divinity School noted that many of the organizations they studied provided similar services to more traditional institutions. The difference was that the emerging settings where people reported experiencing community emphasized transparency, obligation, authenticity, creative expression, and social justice.

The lives of contemporary Jewish young adults are busy and often transient. They move multiple times in their young adult years for graduate education and training and for early career job opportunities (Chertok et al., 2017). For many, these transitions mean that their social networks undergo constant revision, and their closest or oldest friends may live at a distance. In addition to this flux in their social networks, the shift from one stage of couple development to another is often accompanied by the need to find a new network of friends who are in a similar stage of life and are facing similar challenges.

Many of the young couples we spoke with were looking for peers with whom they could feel a sense of community. Living at a distance from their families of origin, they were often keenly aware that they would like to have a stronger network of relationships that can be supportive in times of need.

I guess we’re just sort of in a lucky position that, you know, in general we’ve been pretty stable so we haven’t had to think about, you know, needing more systematic kind of support. But we both live far away from our family. (Non-Jewish partner)

Both the Jewish and non-Jewish partners we interviewed often mentioned that the strong sense of community among Jews is one of the most attractive features of Jewish living. This sense of belonging to a larger group is central to what many young couples described as wanting to offer their children.

Community is super, super important, and is something that I always wanted as a person who had my own family, to feel connected to a community. But it also helps for [child] to feel like he has a positive experience growing up as a Jew. (Non-Jewish partner)

A community, where you can build relationships with people. That to me is being Jewish. (Jewish partner)

There’s no question that the older that I get, the more I am seeking out some sort of Jewish community. I have yet to find the one that really suits me. Part of it is that the important part of Judaism to me is much less about the practices and the rituals and much more of the spirituality, a little bit of the oral history and some of the core tenets that, you know, aren’t necessarily exclusive to Judaism. Finding that community, obviously is not impossible. (Jewish partner)

Several key informants noted the importance of having a social network with whom to share the exploration of Jewish living. As one said, “If you have friends doing this, you do it.” Several couples mentioned that they participated in some programs geared toward young adult Jews or interfaith couples, such as Honeymoon Israel, where they connected with other couples.
We’ll Cross That Bridge When We Come To It

Coming back from Honeymoon Israel, we felt like we did kind of have a new community to be part of. We’ve probably gone to six Shabbat dinners in the past two years, over zero the years before that. I think that’s been a turning point for us. And since then, we have all these new couple friends. We hung out with one couple on Friday night, we’re seeing another couple on Thursday night, and maybe the conversation will turn to something religious or interfaith related, but maybe it won’t. (Jewish partner)

Other couples told us that they attended programs but did not have enough opportunity in those settings to find couples with whom they formed real friendships. It is interesting to note that several of the couples attending our focus group discussed the need to find couples with whom to share the journey and reported to us later that they decided to continue to meet as a group. This newly forming friendship circle has gone on to share Shabbat dinner.

We do have a sense of community and belonging at the synagogue, but we don’t really have any friends that we see outside of the synagogue, who go there. And I wouldn’t say that we’re very involved there. We kind of do need a community that’s there to support you, and the project is like having a two-faith household. We’re just not involved with them enough for them to be institutional or community centers where we work out what it means to do what we’re doing. (Non-Jewish partner)

Authentic Welcoming is Necessary

In 1978, Rabbi Alexander Schindler, then president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, urged the Reform movement to embrace intermarried families and “draw [them] even closer to our hearts.” In the following years, Jewish communal institutions reframed the communal discourse about intermarriage and created strategies of outreach and welcoming (Case, 2014; Dorff & Olitzky, 2007; Mayer, 1991). In many ways, the approach of outreach successfully changed the culture of many Jewish institutions to one of welcoming, opening the doors of Jewish engagement to interfaith families.

Many of the couples we interviewed described being warmly welcomed by Jewish institutions.

I guess I’ve been pleasantly surprised, like really in a kind of refreshing way of how open people are and how welcoming people are...I just felt to a degree, surprised and impressed by how open the Jewish community is. (Non-Jewish partner)

[Rabbi] has been a very clear about welcoming us. I think that just makes all the difference. I think people are very curious about us and just kind of want to know our story and sort of see that we’re pretty serious about religion. I think they take seriously and respect that. We’ve never encountered anyone that flatly rejected us. (Jewish partner)

Even though I am the Jewish member and [Non-Jewish partner] is the Christian member we’re still treated very equally as members of the community. That is just the attitude of the staff towards everybody, that if a Jewish parent and a Christian parent our families are Jewish. You know a Jewish partner and a Christian partner of a family are both equally members of the congregation and that is really, really important to the fact that we feel at home here. (Jewish partner)

For some couples, finding a rabbi to officiate their wedding served as either a barrier or an entrée into Jewish community. The experiences surrounding the search for a Jewish officiant to perform an interfaith wedding sometimes influenced couples’ opinions of the Jewish community and how welcome they could expect to feel.
We started looking at rabbis, and it became very clear that we were going to have to look for a rabbi that was different, very liberal, and so we ended up going [to] probably like three or four until we were really comfortable with [them], and [they felt] comfortable with us. That was the big part of it. (Jewish partner)

[The rabbi (independent)] was fantastic and you know, the one thing that he had said to us was ‘I want to make it about you guys, and I’ll include what you want to include, and I’ll keep out what you don’t want to include.’ So he really worked with us and didn’t really set expectations, he didn’t really tell us what he wanted in the ceremony. He immediately said, ‘it’s you guys and what are you expecting? What would you like?’ (Jewish partner)

In some cases, despite the initial welcome by a congregation, couples felt an undercurrent of disapproval or being treated as outsiders rather than as integral and valued members of the community. For example, some couples were offended by language that suggested that intermarriage was a “challenge” to the Jewish community. They did not see themselves as a problem and wanted to be known for who they were and not for what they were not. One rabbi, mindful of this perception, described amending the High Holiday blessing of non-Jewish partners to include an apology to the congregation that in the past, interfaith marriages and families were referred to as a problem by the Jewish community.

Don’t make us feel bad about our choices. (Jewish partner)

The language at synagogues and in denominations isn’t necessarily welcoming. Not just the language barrier, but the way they talk about couples like us on their websites. (Jewish partner)

We don’t think that us being a couple is a big deal. I don’t think that’s a thing that needs to be understood. Maybe as a person, individually, about how we engage with a community, but I guess it doesn’t really cross my mind personally that we are an interfaith couple. (Jewish partner)

I would say that institutionally Boston does a terrific job with Jewish stuff, that the organizations are great. The leaders of the synagogues are great. It’s very strong with that. It’s the welcoming-ness of those communities that, you know, you can only go so far, you know, if you’re the staff and the clergy, you can do whatever you want to do, but if it’s the people who are affiliated with your organization who are not particularly welcoming, then there’s only so much you can do. (Jewish partner)

Some couples expressed their concern that their approach to being an interfaith couple might not be fully accepted if they decide to raise their child in two religions or include both religions in their home life and in their identification of themselves as a family.

There are some resources that say that they’re open to interfaith couples. Specifically, I was interested in us taking Mayyim Hayyim’s class for newly married couples or engaged couples and it says that it’s opened to interfaith folks. But, it’s framed as for folks wanting to build a Jewish home and there’s some question about like, is that what we’re both doing and what does that mean to us?...What I hear about interfaith couples where one person is Jewish, and a Jewish community accepts that because they’re going to raise their kids Jewish. We are going to raise our kids Jewish, but we’re also gonna raise them actively something else. Like not just Jewish. I feel anxious about finding those resources that don’t want me to be a kind of blank. Like, ‘Oh yes, I will make way for Judaism, but also I’m bringing something like an active spiritual tradition too.’ I’m not a ‘nothing’ religiously. (Non-Jewish partner)

As noted previously, some of the Jewish partners we interviewed were themselves raised in intermarried homes. This experience provided them with models of how to
navigate this situation productively, but in some instances also gave them first-hand observation of the less-than-welcoming ways in which their non-Jewish parents were treated by the Jewish community. They described bringing these memories and concerns into their own experiences with Jewish institutions.

I think part of [my concern] stems from my mom not feeling super welcome sometimes in the Jewish community I grew up in, even though she’s the one that essentially ensured that my sister and I were raised Jewish, and she’s the one who drove us to Hebrew school and you know, made sure we chanted our Torah portions. I think allowing [Non-Jewish partner] to feel like he can ask questions, and no one’s assuming that he’s going to come in with a certain level of knowledge is something that I look for. (Jewish partner)

In some instances, initial experiences of welcoming felt, over time, less authentic. Key informants noted that interfaith couples do not see themselves represented in leadership in synagogues and other Jewish institutions and sometimes do not feel leaders “speak their language.” As one key informant put it, “You can put all the money and resources you want into programs, but when they’re run by Jews married to Jews, it feels hollow.”

Interfaith couples, and especially the non-Jewish partners we interviewed, wanted to be seen as valuable members in their own right rather than as a means for ensuring continuity. Some noted that they are expected to be more observant than inmarried couples. Others commented that there was great interest in how they were raising their children but no real interest in them as individuals with their own talents, interests, and needs. One key informant described interfaith couples as feeling “like they have a target on their back,” ripe for “capture” by the Jewish community.

It feels like they only want me for our kids. We’ll be nice to you so your children will be Jewish—we don’t condone it, but we want your kids.” (Non-Jewish partner)

There was always some tension there around the fact that while they claimed to be very welcoming of interfaith families, they had a number of synagogue policies that I didn’t feel were entirely welcoming, and that they weren’t willing to discuss. The discussions that I did have, they weren’t willing to discuss in an organized way, and the personal discussions that we bad didn’t make me feel very confident. Membership is open, but voting was restricted to the Jewish members of families like ours, and they couldn’t wrap their heads around creating a membership policy or set of bylaws that would actually allow our child to be bar mitzvah’d if I died before his bar mitzvah, because [Non-Jewish partner] could not be a member there on her own, even if we had been members for years together as a family. (Jewish partner)

Welcoming has been the focus of many initiatives in the Jewish community, but how institutions help interfaith couples move along a path of belonging to the point where they feel fully integrated has received less attention. Some couples recounted being regularly welcomed when they attended activities at a synagogue but never really progressing to feel like they belonged in the community. Couples with additional points of distinction, including LGBTQ or interracial couples, felt that they were always seen as a “novelty” or a “token.” They yearned to be part of Jewish institutions where no one remarked on their participation, and they were just “another couple.”

**Denomination Matters (Sometimes)**

Some Jewish partners noted that the denominational affiliation of synagogues, in particular, is important to them. In most cases, the desire to affiliate with a particular
denomination was related to the Jewish partner’s relationship to his/her larger extended family and the desire to find a congregation that would meet the ritual requirements of parents and siblings. In most cases this meant a preference for a synagogue affiliated with the Conservative movement. Some Jewish partners wanted their children to have the same informal Jewish educational experiences they had growing up, and this was related to movement-specific camps and youth groups.

Couples were also aware that some liberal denominations were more accepting of intermarried couples and expressed preference for synagogues affiliated with these movements.

I feel like for us being a gay interfaith couple, you know, the more religious a congregation, the less welcoming it probably will be. So I probably avoid the more religious places. Whereas, I feel like most Reform, Reconstructionist, and Humanist, potentially Conservative synagogues might be a little bit more welcoming. It’s just a question of finding those sorts of congregations. (Jewish partner)
We’ll Cross That Bridge When We Come To It
Recommendations

Blessed is the one who waits in the traveler’s heart for his turning


One of the themes that emerged from this study is the need for Jewish communal resources to be “waiting” for the moments of “turning” that young interfaith couples will experience. Programming needs to meet these couples where they are and “when” they are as they move from one stage of family development to another, each with its own challenges. Young interfaith couples told us that religion is not central to their lives but that they are very interested in establishing a sense of community for themselves and their children. These couples also made clear that they are interested in creating connections with couples that are like them and with whom they can share the journey.

The findings of this study represent a starting point for Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston as it develops new directions in policy, programs, and initiatives that will be attractive to intermarried households. We conclude this report with a set of suggestions for next steps in this process.

Lead with Content Relevant to Life Stage

Couples were very clear that offerings that address the developmental challenges they currently face are the ones they are most likely to attend. Catching people at the transition from one stage to the next has the potential to leverage these moments of change as couples reevaluate how they want to live their lives. As they proceed into the next stage of their union, couples are often looking for role models and mentors and open to new ideas and suggestions.

In our interviews, we identified four stages in the development of young couples, each of which has implications for the content and characteristics of programming. At each stage of couple development, we noted areas of content that were immediately relevant to the interfaith couples we interviewed. These topics might or might not be directly connected to Jewish identity and living. Table 1 provides examples of content that might be of interest to couples at different life stages. For example, for couples planning their wedding, a relevant topic for themselves and for non-clergy officiants might focus on the elements of a Jewish wedding. Courses
specifically focused on interfaith couples might also include couples that are further along in their family development to serve as role models and facilitators.

Our interviews also revealed topics that were relevant across life stages. These include Jewish culture, tradition, and thought, and how they relate to contemporary life. Programs focused on some of these topics might also fulfill the needs of dual faithful couples that want to explore theological differences and similarities.

My own drive to know more about Judaism is a very cerebral one. I want to understand more about the ethics and philosophy and the thinking of it, the ritual. I’m much more interested in talking with like-minded folks about what a good life looks like and how to, to live a moral life in this world than I am about lighting candles. (Jewish partner)

If someone told me about, you know, hey, a local synagogue near you is having a wine tasting with Israeli wine, Jewish food, for Hanukkah, we would be all over that. (Jewish partner)

Focus on Building Small Communities of Couples

Finding, building, and fostering community for themselves and their children is a salient priority for many of the couples with whom we spoke. We would suggest that, both directly and indirectly, the Jewish community focus on building small communities of couples and families. A focus on community building should be integral to all programming targeted to young couples. Time should be set aside, even in educational and cultural programs, for people to get to know each other and form nascent connections. Some activities might have the explicit purpose of

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<tr>
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<td>What is a Jewish-wedding?</td>
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Table 1: Relevant content by stage of couple development
helping couples get to know other in- or intermarried peers in their neighborhood that are in a similar stage of life.

I think if there was something, and this is sort of modeled on the Riverway Project from Temple Israel, if there were a way to, um, you know, know people who live in your zip code with similar-aged kids, that would be awesome. (Jewish partner)

I think the only thing that I would encourage organizations to know is what we as two people are looking for is community. The Jewishness will come later for us. We would be more likely to come to a board game night or a craft brewery tour than trying to figure out religious aspects. So I think you can’t as an organization, you can’t discount the communal nature that you all can provide. It's just getting like-minded people together, and a lot of them will be Jewish, and there might be some Jewish talk around it, but really it's more that like there's like a bunch of board games that are cool out there, and we’re going to play some of them. Just kind of start that community-building process that will become important down the road. (Non-Jewish partner)

We recommend that CJP provide resources and support to these small communities in several ways. An online platform might include resource materials for holiday and Shabbat celebrations and also ideas for more secular suggestions for helping couples get to know one another and spend time together. These ideas might include service through Jewish social justice organizations, hands-on crafts, or cooking projects tied to holidays. Groups and coalitions of groups in the same geographic area could be provided with resources in the form of speakers and educators or reduced or free admission to Jewish cultural events, such as a small group Jewish cooking class or Israeli wine tasting.

Offer Specialized and Integrated Opportunities

When asked, most couples interviewed did not immediately feel that they wanted a network composed solely of interfaith couples. The couples we spoke with were mainly interested in programming that spoke to their stage of life, either as a young couple or with young families. However, on reflection, some did see the benefit of having programs that addressed their specific life situations, decisions, and challenges as an interfaith couple. Several couples mentioned the importance of organizations like InterfaithFamily that advocate for families like theirs.

Couples who were interested in programming directed at interfaith families wanted opportunities where they could talk with peers and with older interfaith couples to share stories, advice, experiences, and concerns. For one non-Jewish partner, this could be a space to discuss how to navigate the Jewish world as a non-Jew.

I remember going to a Purim celebration, and I just remember we were treated like outsiders and it was really uncomfortable. It would be really nice to have a community where we were with other people like us, interfaith couples. (Jewish partner)

I’m thinking it will be really cool to get to know other non-Jewish partners of Jewish people. I feel like I know lots of Jewish people, and I know lots of non-Jewish people, and some of them are partnered with each other. That could be interesting to like have a discussion, or maybe more organized gathering and get to know how other people are thinking about their place in Jewish spaces, and whether their home is a Jewish home, and if they have the same anxieties about whether to announce that they’re not a Jew in a Jewish space. (Non-Jewish partner)
Some interviewees wanted opportunities to meet couples like them so they could discuss and have examples for what their future family might look like. This often related to decisions they were making about the religious identity and education of their children.

We’re planning to raise children in both religions. I think I would like more like visions of what that can look like. (Non-Jewish partner)

We recommend that CJP foster and support a repertoire of offerings that include programs or segments of programs that address the specific concerns of interfaith couples. This might take the form of sessions within existing educational programs or specific offerings for interfaith households. It would also be fruitful to provide opportunities for interfaith couples to meet and talk with each other, perhaps in discussions lead by older interfaith couples.

**Logistical Considerations are Critical**

Couples may have good intentions about participation in Jewish life, but as one interviewee put it, “It’s really entirely an issue about time and logistics.” Couples have a strong preference for opportunities that are hyper-local, in their neighborhood or a short ride away by car or public transportation. Program location is a particular issue for couples who have moved to outer- or even inner-ring suburbs that are less Jewishly dense and have few or no options for Jewish engagement.

Some of the kinds of programming that couples are asking for already exist but are offered in locations that are not attractive. For example, Mayyim Hayyim offers a course for newly married couples, “Beyond the Chuppah,” that addresses many of the issues relevant to couples in this life stage. Unfortunately, the course is only offered in Newton, a location unlikely to be attended by couples from urban areas or most suburbs.

I’m not going to want to drive, you know, two, three, four towns over to take [child] to [Hebrew school]. The closest synagogue is not that far; it’s 20 minutes, but again, when you have a small child, 20 minutes might as well be two hours. (Jewish partner)

You come home and you don’t want to get back in the car. You just go from that Back Bay back to Newton. It was 45 minutes, the traffic’s stuck and you’re tired… I would say geographic proximity would be great. (Jewish partner)

A lot of the Eser events are in Cambridge and Somerville, and we’re in [the suburbs], so the big issue is they’re during the week, they’re usually at like 6:00-7:00, and then they end around like 9:30-10:00, and by the time we get home it’s going to be like 10:30-11:00, and then we have to get up the next morning to go to work and do it all over again. The locations have been challenging. (Jewish partner)

Our recommendation is that programming be offered in multiple locations, including at satellite sites in the outer suburbs. This might include siting programs in secular spaces in suburbs where there is little or no Jewish institutional footprint. This approach would have the added value of providing programming in non-synagogue locations in which some interfaith couples might feel more comfortable. As one key informant put it, “We need to remind people that Judaism doesn’t just happen in a building with a Star of David on it.”

Parents also noted that they are more likely to attend programming when childcare is provided even at some cost. The logistics of arranging for a babysitter are enough to deter them from attending programming even when it is of interest to them.
If you told me you’re going to provide free babysitting in a safe environment where my kids would have fun early enough that you know, picking him up at 8:00, maybe it was a 5:00 dinner, and you have drinks. Then you have a discussion about it. That would be so important to me. Or a very minimal babysitting cost. (Jewish partner)

Expand Options for Jewish Early Childhood Education

Parents living in lower Jewish density towns and neighborhoods, both suburban and urban, expressed openness to, and even interest, in Jewish educational options but felt constrained by the logistical barriers created by distance. Such areas, however, are unlikely to have sufficient numbers of Jewish households to sustain Jewish childcare centers.

We’re checking out preschools right now, and it’s like location, convenience. (Jewish partner)

Being in an area you don’t really know, you want the best education for your child. And so I knew this [Jewish preschool] in the suburbs…my mom’s cousin is a teacher, everyone goes to, but we’re not in that area. (Jewish partner)

[The child’s daycare] started out as a convenience/logistics thing. Just location-wise and the fact that, not for nothing, we do get a slight discount because it’s affiliated with [Non-Jewish partner’s] work. When it comes to childcare, it’s not a small consideration. (Jewish partner)

With the high cost of center-based care in Massachusetts—among the highest in the country (Childcare Aware of America, 2018) —there may be an opportunity for CJP to encourage and support development of additional options for such families. Home-based childcare is both less expensive than center-based care, and has fewer children per site (Childcare Aware of America, 2018). We recommend CJP explore what it would take to expand the number and geographic diversity of Jewish childcare options throughout Greater Boston. In higher-density areas, these could be full-fledged centers, but in lower-density areas, home-based care options may be sustainable.

For example, information or other assistance can be provided to synagogues open to operating their own program or subcontracting to a tenant. CJP may even consider providing information, or even loans, to entrepreneurs to seed a for-profit center. Alternatively, subsidies toward Jewish childcare for interfaith families (similar to the Discover Day School vouchers) might interest these families if the childcare is available locally.

Encourage Greater Collaboration among Organizations Working with Interfaith Couples

In the greater Boston area, there are many organizations working with interfaith couples and families. These organizations include synagogues and the Jewish Community Center, but also Mayyim Hayyim and national programs such as OneTable, Honeymoon Israel, and PJ Library. The collaboration/partnership among these organizations is limited and leads to a duplication of efforts, unaddressed gaps, and programs open only to alumni of particular programs.

In keeping with the best practices of “design thinking” (Kelley, 2001) this study focused on understanding the perspectives and lived experience of interfaith couples. Putting ourselves into their shoes is the first step to developing offerings that will address their needs and respect their concerns.
We'll Cross That Bridge When We Come To It
References


Appendix: Interview Protocols

Interfaith Couples Interview Guide

Personal background

1. Let’s start by talking about when you were growing up.
   - What, if any, religious backgrounds did your parents come from?
   - [If parents intermarried] How did your parents negotiate their religious different backgrounds?
   - What, if any, experiences did you have a child that you think of as connected to your family’s religious or cultural backgrounds?
   - [If Jewish parent] Growing up, what, if any, Jewish programs/activities did you engage in? (Formal or informal)

History as a Couple

2. Tell me a little bit about how the two of you met.
3. What discussions, if any, have you had with each other about the role of religion or ethnic background in your life together?
   - When during your relationship did these conversations occur?
   - Who, if anyone, did you turn to, individually or as a couple, for support or guidance in these conversations?
4. Aside from religion, what, if any, other cultural differences have you negotiated as a couple?
5. [If married or engaged] What religious traditions did you [are you planning to] include in your wedding celebration?
   - How were decisions made about what traditions you would include?
6. Tell me about the most recent time when the two of you had to negotiate or compromise about something related to your different religious or cultural backgrounds.
   - Who, if anyone, did you turn to for support or guidance?
   - How did you feel about the outcome/decision you made?
7. Think about a time recently when the two of you had to make a difficult decision or face a difficult situation together.
• Who, if anyone, did you turn to for support or guidance?
• What role, if any, did your religious backgrounds have in guiding or comforting you as you dealt with that situation?

Current Situation

8. Currently, what are your priorities? Where is your time and attention focused?
   • Individually?
   • As a couple?
9. What do you want your life together as a couple to look like?
10. What are the things in your life and future that you worry about? What keeps you up at night?
    • Where do you look for support or guidance as you try to deal with those concerns?
    • What role, if any, do your religious backgrounds have in guiding or comforting you as you deal with these concerns?

Religion in Current Life

11. What activities, if any, do you engage in that feel connected to your religious/ethnic backgrounds?
    • Festive meals, celebrations
    • Which activities do you do as a couple?
    • Which do you do individually?
    • How did you become involved in these activities?
    • Any connections with faith or ethnicity-based organizations e.g., synagogue or cultural center?
12. How satisfied are you with your current ways of expressing the religious or spiritual aspects of your background or identity?
    • Anything missing?
    • What factors have made it more difficult for you [individually and as a couple] to express the religious or spiritual parts of yourself?
13. [Jewish partner] What do Judaism and being Jewish mean to you?
    [Non-Jewish spouse] How is Judaism similar or different from your definition of religion?

Children

14. Do you have or are you planning to have children?
   • [IF NO skip to Current Situation]
15. [IF YES] How are you teaching, or planning to teach your child(ren) about each of your religious/ethnic backgrounds?
    • What does it mean to you to “raise a child Jewish?”
    • What have you already done and what are your intentions, for life-cycle celebrations like baby naming or bar/bat mitzvah?
    • Religious education?
Connections

16. Where do you find a sense of community in your life?
   - How, if at all, does your religious background/identity influence where you look for community?
   - Tell me about a time recently when you felt you were missing a sense of community.
17. What connections or interactions do you have with other interfaith couples?
   - What types of interactions or connections would you like to have with other interfaith couples?

Needs/Preferences

18. What Jewish programs /opportunities have you gone to in the Boston area this year?
   - Individually/together
   - What led you to participate (how did you hear about it)
   - What was that experience like? Was it “right” for you?
   - How important was a denominational affiliation in choosing the program?
19. What programs/opportunities did you hear about but decide not to go to because they were not of interest?
20. What do you wish you could tell Jewish institutions about you as a couple?
21. What do you wish Jewish institutions would do differently in the way they approach/treat you as a couple?
22. What types of programs/opportunities do you wish were available?

Closing

23. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Key Informant Interview Guide

1. What do you see as the primary responsibilities and goals of your organization?
2. How does your organization [your work] interface with interfaith couples? To those that are exploring Judaism?
   - What programs, resources and information does your organization {do you} currently make available to interfaith couples? To seekers?
   - Are there differences between the ways you work with partnered people and with individuals?
   - What is the overall purpose of these programs? How do you hope that couples [seekers] will be different after they have participated?
   - What is the next step after couples [seekers] have participated in your programs?
   - What are the gaps in your offerings?

3. What is your understanding of how mixed heritage couples think about exploration of Jewish engagement?
   - What are their top priorities/what are they looking for?
- What turns them off about exploring Jewish engagement?
- What are the barriers to their involvement?

4. How do interfaith couples [seekers] find out about what you offer?
- What groups don’t seem to find out about your offerings?

5. What characterizes couples [seekers] who do versus those that don’t access your existing offerings?
- (How) do they differ by background, age, life stage, etc.?

6. Which of your programs/approaches have been most successful in promoting exploration of Jewish life?
- Why do you think those programs have been so successful? (Topic, staff, location, timing, etc.)

7. Which programs/approaches have been the least successful?

8. In your judgement, is there such a thing as individuals who are very unlikely to ever be engaged in religious exploration? Can you tell who are the “unlikelihoods” and those who are potentially reachable but so far under-engaged?

9. Thinking about the Boston area, [your geographic area], how are the needs/preferences of interfaith couples [seekers] understood? What is the “image” of the interfaith couple?
- How does your work fit into the local eco-system of efforts to meet the needs of this group? What are the disconnects or gaps in the system?
- How much communication do you have with other providers? What are the issues that are on the minds of these organizations currently?
- What are the next “frontiers” in programming in Boston [your area] related to intermarriage [seekers]?

10. How might we recruit interfaith couples [seekers] for interviews, especially those that have not already participated in programming?