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Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies  
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The Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), founded in 1980, is dedicated to providing independent, high-quality research on issues related to contemporary Jewish life.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Jewish communal leaders in Toronto are increasingly aware of the importance of understanding the needs and experiences of interfaith families. A growing portion of marriages of Jews in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) includes a non-Jewish spouse, and this trend is especially prevalent in younger couples. This research, conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University, is designed to contribute to UJA Federation of Greater Toronto's understanding of the perspectives and preferences of interfaith couples and to catalyze development of new approaches to engagement of these households. The study includes interviews with 40 interfaith couples, half of whom have children ages 0-5, as well as surveys of 436 interfaith couples.

## POINTS OF JEWISH CONTACT

- A minority of surveyed couples sometimes or often participated in Jewish educational or Israel-related programs, activities for interfaith families, Jewish cultural events, or Jewish volunteer opportunities.
- The majority of surveyed parents indicated that they had not attended an organized Jewish children's program, such as a Tot Shabbat service, in the past year. Less than one tenth had a child enrolled in a Jewish preschool or day care center.

- The majority of surveyed couples were not members of a synagogue or *minyan*.
- Almost universally, couples engaged in some observance or celebration of Passover, High Holidays, and Hanukkah. Over half marked Shabbat at least some of the time.

## FACTORS THAT PROMOTE JEWISH ENGAGEMENT

- Most surveyed couples felt it was important that their family have a place within the Jewish community and wanted their family to have more involvement in Jewish life.
- Almost all parents wanted their children to have a strong and unequivocal cultural Jewish identity.
- A high proportion of surveyed couples had ties to local Jewish family members who served as gateways into Jewish life. Couples without local ties felt they had less access to Jewish life.
- Couples felt welcomed in Jewish spaces when events had a cultural focus, when hosts acknowledged the presence of non-Jewish participants, and when rituals and traditions were explained.

- Many interviewed couples recalled positive experiences with the PJ Plus and “Jewish &” programs, and found their programs to be welcoming, accessible, and engaging.

## FACTORS THAT INHIBIT JEWISH ENGAGEMENT

- Couples felt unwelcome when interfaith relationships were denigrated, when the non-Jewish partner felt pressure to convert, or when they were expected to negate or hide the non-Jewish partner’s religious identity.
- Couples struggled with issues of personal status. Many felt frustrated that they could not find a Jewish clergy member to officiate their wedding and worried that their children would not be accepted as Jews without conversion.
- Couples whose non-Jewish member was also a racial or ethnic minority experienced increased feelings of being outside the (perceived) norm of Jewish life.
- Limited Jewish knowledge prevented interfaith families from participating in Jewish life, educating their children, and becoming members of synagogues.
- Couples described their frustration in finding programs that were intellectually engaging and were free of expectations about conversion.

## PREFERENCES

- Couples were looking for ways to learn about Judaism that were a mix of both “how-to” instructions as well as more in-depth exploration of Jewish values and thought.

- Couples wanted educational offerings that acknowledged the learning needs of both Jewish and non-Jewish partners and invited open dialogue with other interfaith couples.
- Couples were concerned about the cost and location of programs. Location was an especially difficult challenge for couples who live outside the Bathurst Corridor.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Create a community of practice among programs and organizations that do—or could—play a role in developing the landscape of opportunities for interfaith couples.
- Work with Jewish institutions and clergy to explore the current and potential involvement of interfaith families and to examine explicit and implicit messages about these families.
- Expand the availability of low-threshold, high-impact learning opportunities.
- Leverage the influence of local family to disseminate awareness of resources for Jewish living. For couples without local Jewish family, develop programs that help them connect with other Jewish families, including interfaith families.
- Develop satellite programs in strategic locations, especially outside the Bathurst Corridor.
- Encourage experimentation in local programming to better integrate interfaith families into the community. Use smaller scale, pilot programs that include evaluation to help the community, as a whole, develop approaches for welcoming interfaith couples and families.