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

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.
INTRODUCTION

A growing portion of marriages of Jews in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) includes a non-Jewish spouse. The 2018 Survey of Jews in Canada indicated that 22% of Jewish adults in the Toronto area were married to or partnered with a non-Jew (Brym et al., 2019). Although intermarriage rates are lowest in Toronto as compared to other Canadian cities, the 2018 data also represented an uptick from the 18% intermarriage rate reported for Toronto in 2011 (Shahar & Schnoor, 2015). Intermarriage rates are higher among younger Jews, and approximately 35% of recently married Jews have a non-Jewish spouse (Schnoor, 2016). Younger children in Jewish households also are more likely to have intermarried parents. Although currently one third of children in interfaith households are raised Jewish, half are raised with no religious identity.

Jewish communal leaders are increasingly aware of the importance of understanding the needs and experiences of interfaith families (Schnoor, 2016). This includes developing additional strategies to embrace Jews who marry non-Jews and support them in raising children who identify as Jewish. This report describes research, conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University, that is designed to contribute to UJA Federation of Greater Toronto’s understanding of the perspectives and preferences of interfaith couples.

There is growing evidence that if intermarried Jews and their children are welcomed into the Jewish community and given access to Jewish education, they will become more engaged in Jewish life. In Canada, for example, adult children of intermarriage who experienced full-time Jewish schooling or summer camp as children showed the same likelihood of marrying a Jewish partner as peers raised by two Jewish parents (Brym & Lenton, forthcoming). In the United States, millennial children of intermarriage—the first generation born after the American Reform movement initiated outreach programs to interfaith families—are substantially more likely to have received Jewish education and to identify as Jews as compared with children of intermarriage in previous generations (Sasson et al., 2017; Saxe et al., 2014). Among US Reform Jews, children of inmarriage and children of intermarriage who have had similar experiences of Jewish home ritual, education, and social networks grow up to look very much alike Jewishly (Chertok et al., 2008).

At the same time, research conducted in the United States indicates that many children raised in interfaith homes enter their young adult years with little in the way of Jewish experience or education (Sasson et al., 2015). Many interfaith couples remain at a distance from Jewish engagement in their homes and in the community (Shain et al., 2019).
The goal of this study was to build the reservoir of knowledge available for catalyzing and informing program and strategy development across Toronto’s Jewish communal landscape. In particular, UJA Federation sought to capture the voices of interfaith couples and to share this information with Jewish communal organizations and institutions well positioned to develop new approaches to engagement with these households. The study addressed the following areas of inquiry:

- **Animating concerns:** What are the primary interests, needs, and concerns of interfaith households for the couple itself and for any children?
- **Perceptions of existing resources:** In what ways, if any, do interfaith couples find that current programs, activities, and institutions of the GTA Jewish community are welcoming and successfully engage them and their children? Which of their needs remain unmet?
- **Plans for raising children:** How are couples thinking about the religious identity and education of their children? What options for formal and informal Jewish education are they aware of and what are their thoughts about these opportunities?
- **Program preferences:** What types of programs or opportunities would be of most interest to interfaith couples? What program content areas and logistical and structural characteristics are most attractive?

The report begins with an overview of the methodology followed by a description of the demographic characteristics and current Jewish engagement of the participating couples. The next sections of the report explore the factors that either enhance and support or serve as barriers to the Jewish engagement of interfaith couples. The report concludes with a discussion of potential avenues for strategy and program development.

**METHODOLOGY**

The study employed a mixed methods strategy to explore the experiences, needs, and preferences of interfaith couples. The combination of qualitative (interview) and quantitative (survey) methods is well suited to capturing how a group understands and experiences a complex phenomenon and its cultural context.

We spoke with nine key informants, representing synagogues, key departments within UJA Federation, and local Jewish Community Centers. The key informant interviews furthered our understanding of the landscape of existing services for interfaith couples, aided in refining the interview protocols and survey questionnaire, and helped our exploration of potential policy recommendations.

Eligible couples in this study were married, engaged-to-be-married, or committed and cohabiting and included one member who identified as Jewish and one member who did not identify as Jewish and did not have a Jewish background. In addition, couples eligible for the study either did not have children or only had children ages five and younger.

The Technical Appendix to the report contains the survey instrument and interview protocols.
SURVEY

Survey recruitment included two sources: the GTA PJ Library contact list and the Canada Israel Experience (CIE) database of Birthright participants. The CIE list sample was restricted to young adults who were ages 25 or older at the time of survey recruitment and lived in the GTA at the time they participated in Birthright (2009-19). Although the sample may not be fully representative of all interfaith couples in the GTA, it does include those who are and are not currently involved in organized Jewish life, parents and non-parents, and people across multiple life stages. The experiences of these respondents therefore provide context to the circumstances of the larger population of interfaith couples in the Toronto area.

The survey was in the field from October 29, 2019 to January 27, 2020. Invitations were sent to 8,611 potential respondents of unknown eligibility. Only one member of each couple was eligible to complete the survey. The email invitation yielded 777 respondents for a 9% response rate. Of these respondents, 436 met survey eligibility requirements. Ninety percent of survey respondents were Jewish and 10% were non-Jewish. Individuals completing the survey had the option of providing their email address to receive a CAD $15 Amazon giftcard as a thank you for their participation.

INTERVIEWS

The research team conducted 40 interviews with couples between October 2019 and February 2020. Both members of each couple participated in the interview together. Interviews were conducted by phone lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. Couples completing an interview received a CAD $25 Amazon giftcard.

Researchers recruited 15 couples through networks of the study advisory panels of professionals and couples, and the contact lists and social media followers of local Jewish organizations. Twenty-five of the interviewed couples learned about and indicated their interest in taking part in an interview through their participation in the survey.
The survey included questions about the demographic characteristics of both members of the couple, their religious upbringings, residential location, and their current relationship and parental status. This section of the report introduces these couples and provides context for understanding their perspectives on the factors that enable or restrict their engagement in Jewish life.

**THE COUPLES**

**DEMOGRAPHICS**

The majority of couples participating in this survey were married: 55% were married, 6% engaged-to-be-married, and 39% in committed and cohabiting relationships (Figure 1). A small portion (5%) of couples either have partners of the same sex or include someone who identifies as another gender identity. Among the couples surveyed in this study, 68% of the Jewish partners were female.

![Figure 1: Relationship status](image-url)
PARENTAL STATUS

Half of surveyed couples have children ages 0-5. The majority (56%) of surveyed parents have one child, with an additional 40% reporting they have two children. Within the 0-5 age range, there is an almost equal distribution in the ages of the oldest children in surveyed households (Figure 2).

CHILDHOOD AND CURRENT RESIDENTIAL LOCATION

Most surveyed couples are native to the GTA. A small portion (12%) of the couples do not include at least one partner raised in the GTA, and in 43% of couples, both partners grew up locally. Among survey respondents who did not grow up in the GTA, most have lived in the area for an extended period. Jewish and non-Jewish partners raised outside of the GTA have lived there for an average of 11 and 9 years respectively.

The majority of survey respondents currently live outside of the “Bathurst Corridor” (Figure 3). Eighteen percent of survey respondents live within the Bathurst Corridor. Another 26% live Downtown, while 56% live elsewhere in the Toronto area.

Survey respondents were asked why they chose to live where they do. The reason most frequently rated as very influential was cost; only 4% said it was not a factor, while 60% said it was very important to their decision (Figure 4). Location, especially proximity to work and schools, was also deeply important, as was the overall character and

Figure 2: Age of oldest child

Figure 3: Current residential location
neighborliness of the area. The proximity of Jewish organizations, including synagogues, was a factor in the decision regarding location of residence for 37% of the couples.

In interviews, couples emphasized the importance of cost, commuting distance, and the “vibe” of the neighborhood in their decision about where to live.

“We were very particular in moving where we live because we both wanted to be able to walk to work. (Jewish partner, interview)

[Wanted to be] very close to major highway and walking distance to the subway station Downtown. (Jewish partner, interview)

[We wanted] proximity to parks, to our farmer’s market that we go to. That kind of thing. (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

Some couples noted that it was important to live near family. Access to Jewish institutions played little role in their decision-making.

I wouldn’t say that this part was purposeful, but I think in some ways subconscious, is that we’re sort of in the middle of both our families. So my family is, let’s say a 15 minute drive away in one direction. [Non-Jewish partner’s] family is a 15 minute drive away in another direction. So we’re sort of in the middle of our families. (Jewish partner, interview)

I don’t think [availability of synagogues] was necessarily in either of our frames of reference to be thinking about where in the neighborhood, where that’s going to be part of the landscape. (Jewish partner, interview)

It doesn’t really matter where you live in a city, you don’t really need to live near Bathurst unless you require kosher establishments or commerce and groceries and stuff. (Jewish partner, interview)
Some factors were more influential in some types of couples’ decisions of where to live. For example, it was more important for couples living in the Bathurst Corridor, as compared with couples living elsewhere in the GTA, to live near family, other families raising Jewish children, and Jewish organizations. Not surprisingly, among couples whose Jewish partner grew up in GTA, being near family was more important than for couples where the Jewish member was not raised locally.

“We’ve been here for about six years, and it’s central to both my family and [non-Jewish partner’s] family. That was the main purpose of that, to be in between both families. (Jewish partner, interview)

Regardless of where they decided to live, for parents, more so than non-parents, being near family, parks and playgrounds, and other young couples, as well as the neighborliness of the area were important considerations in determining where to live. Overall, being near other families raising Jewish children factored into 56% of parents’ decisions. For most parents who live outside the Bathurst Corridor, the proximity of other families raising Jewish children was not a primary concern. Nonetheless, many of these parents were pleasantly surprised to find other Jewish families in their area.

“[Our area has] lots of other families of kids exactly the same age as us, and we kind of thought, ‘Well, there probably won’t be that many other Jewish families.’ But I think just given the demographics of how people kind of moved around the city, we were surprised how we found a fairly strong Jewish community out here. (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

Among Jewish partners, almost equal portions were raised Conservative (31%) or Reform (29%), with smaller portions raised Reconstructionist (4%), or Orthodox (2%). Twenty percent were raised secularly or culturally Jewish, and 13% were raised “just Jewish.”

More than three quarters (79%) of Jewish partners received formal or informal Jewish education during childhood (Figure 5). The most common type of educational experience was part-time supplementary school attended by almost half of Jewish partners.

**Figure 5:** Childhood Jewish education of Jewish partners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Type</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Any Jewish education</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time school</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer camp</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth group</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time school</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The majority (69%) of non-Jewish partners were raised Christian, with another 12% brought up in another religion such as Islam or Buddhism. Twenty percent of non-Jewish partners reported being raised without religion or as atheists or agnostics. Thirty-nine percent of non-Jewish partners had some form of childhood religious education (Figure 6). The most common type of religious education experienced by non-Jewish partners was full-time schooling, reported by 19%.

Figure 6: Childhood religious education for non-Jewish partners

![Bar chart showing percentages of different types of religious education for non-Jewish partners.]

**POINTS OF JEWISH CONTACT**

In surveys and interviews, we asked couples about a variety of ways in which they might be involved in Jewish programming. Only small portions reported that they sometimes or often participated in Jewish educational or Israel-related programs, activities specifically designed for interfaith families, Jewish cultural events, or volunteer opportunities organized for or through Jewish organizations (Figure 7). Couples were most likely to report regular involvement in holiday-related programs, with 30% reporting that they did so sometimes or often.

More than three quarters (79%) of surveyed couples were not currently members of a synagogue or minyan (Figure 8). Among couples affiliated with a synagogue, almost equal portions reported belonging to a Conservative (41%) or Reform (43%) congregation. Smaller portions belonged to Reconstructionist (5%) or Humanistic (5%) congregations. Among the 21% of households that were synagogue members, for 11% the
Figure 7: Participation in Jewish programs over last year, sometimes or often

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Type</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Programs for interfaith families</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basics of Judaism class</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other classes</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel programs</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering or social justice programs</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural events</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holiday programs</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among the synagogue members, 76% of couples indicated that they have access to a rabbi from whom they would feel comfortable seeking guidance. Among non-members, 39% of couples could identify such a rabbi. In interviews, couples told us that they would like to but often did not have a relationship with a rabbi who they could turn to in times of need.

What’s unsatisfying is that I want a relationship with a rabbi. I want to have someone who can help us answer these questions that we have. I had a close relationship with the minister at the Unitarian congregation that I was at. I felt that I could turn to him when I had questions about things. That I really wish we had. (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

The survey asked about couples’ attendance at High Holiday services in the last year. For three...
quarters (76%) of interfaith couples, neither the Jewish partner alone nor the couple together attended services (Figure 9).

Most surveyed couples reported that in the past year they did something to celebrate the major Jewish holidays (Figure 10). Almost universally, couples engaged in some observance or celebration of Passover (91%), High Holidays (89%), and Hanukkah (89%).

As noted in Figure 9, most did not attend services for the High Holidays, suggesting that these interfaith couples celebrated in home settings with family or friends, a pattern also observed in interviews. Over half (57%) of the couples observed Shabbat in some way at least once in the past year. Parents, as compared with couples without children, were more likely than non-parents to celebrate Hanukkah and Purim.
WHEN NON-JEWISH PARTNERS ARE MEMBERS OF RACIAL OR ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS

In 21% of surveyed couples, the non-Jewish partner or both partners identified as members of a racial or ethnic minority group. Interfaith couples whose non-Jewish member was also a racial or ethnic minority experienced increased feelings of being outside the (perceived) norm of Jewish life.

I view interfaith as being diverse the same way families can be ethnically diverse, socio-economically diverse, and so on. It’s not so easy to find the Jewish families that don’t fit a certain mold in Toronto. (Jewish partner, survey)

We are more likely to participate in Jewish life in Toronto if people act as though Jews can and should be a multitude of things—not just white, affluent, Ashkenazi Jews. (Jewish partner, survey)

[I was] the only one who isn’t Jewish and also the only one who isn’t white [at an event]…People were nice about it, and they wanted to find out because it’s [a rarity] in their universe. (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

In particular, couples with a racial or ethnic minority member were more likely to feel unwelcomed due to pressure over conversion: 53% said such experiences made them feel unwelcomed, as opposed to 39% of couples where the non-Jewish partner was white. These couples also felt more disconnected from other interfaith couples: 68% expressed a desire for more friendships with other interfaith couples, compared to 57% of couples with a white non-Jewish partner.

Despite these challenges, many couples that included non-Jewish partners from racial or ethnic minorities expressed a desire for and interest in participating in Jewish life. Indeed, when it comes to holiday celebrations, synagogue involvement, and program participation, there were no differences whether the non-Jewish partner was white or belonged to a racial or ethnic minority group. At the same time, however, couples with a racial or ethnic minority member wanted to feel fully accepted not just tolerated.

We can hold multiple identities. We are Jewish enough. We count. We can celebrate other holidays and still be Jewish. We wish to be seen for all that we are, because we bring all of those things, as a family and as individuals, with us. To be accepted and seen in community means to be seen for all that we are. (Jewish partner, survey)

I don’t want my [Jewish] husband to regret his decisions later in life, and so to be accepted as part of a community with families like ours would be nice for us. We feel like outcasts sometimes. (Non-Jewish partner, survey)
One of the goals of the study was to understand the current and potential Jewish engagement of interfaith households with children. Thirty-nine percent of surveyed parents reported raising their children solely Jewish, and 44% indicated they were raising children with two religious heritages (Figure 11). Ten percent decided not to raise their children in any religion. Additionally, 6% of parents had not yet made this decision. In 55% of couples, the Jewish parent was responsible for their children’s religious upbringing. In another 41% of couples, both parents shared responsibility.

Most couples (80%) that had decided on a religious upbringing for their children made that decision before becoming pregnant with their first child (Figure 12). Another 14% of couples made their decision during pregnancy.
Half of surveyed parents had their male children undergo a ritual (30%) or medical (20%) circumcision at birth (Figure 13). The perspectives of families on circumcision are discussed in more depth later in the report. Fifty-three percent of surveyed parents gave their child a Jewish or Hebrew name, and 30% of parents had a Jewish naming ceremony.

Among surveyed parents, 8% indicated their children are enrolled in a Jewish preschool or day care center (Figure 14). Of the 66% of parents who reported children in some other form of childcare, nearly half (47%) considered Jewish options.

Figure 13: Baby welcoming rituals

Figure 14: Participation in Jewish childcare
The survey also inquired about attendance at organized Jewish children’s programming in the prior year, such as a Tot Shabbat service or holiday celebration. The majority (53%) of these interfaith families reported that they never attended such programs6 (Figure 15).

The survey asked parents to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with statements about how they are raising their children. Almost universally, couples agreed somewhat (24%) or strongly (70%) that it was important to the Jewish parent that their children learn about their Jewish heritage (Figure 16). Just over half of couples agreed somewhat (30%) or strongly (23%) that it was important to the non-Jewish parent that their children become familiar with their heritage. Nearly all surveyed couples agreed somewhat (19%) or strongly (74%) that they wanted their children to learn about the cultural traditions of both sides of their families, while fewer wanted their children to learn about both religions (34% somewhat and 47% strongly). Most parents somewhat (24%) or strongly (54%) agreed that they plan to allow their children to choose their religious identity at a later point in their development.

Figure 15: Participation in Jewish children’s programs in prior year
In interviews, parents who had decided to raise their children as Jewish expressed strong feelings about imparting this identity to their children. For a small portion, this aim meant providing their children with religious education and experience of home rituals. However, even parents who did not plan to involve their children in Jewish worship or religious practice, wanted them to have a strong and unequivocal cultural Jewish identity.

I would say that the religion I grew up with is very important to me. It’s probably the number one thing that I want my daughter to inherit. It’s a strong sense of who I am. It’s like one of the defining features of who I am. It’s not the religion per se in the sense that today I don’t go to synagogue even though I grew up doing synagogue on the High Holidays. (Jewish partner, interview)

I wasn’t willing to raise my kids as interfaith kids. I was only willing to raise my kids as Jewish kids and to understand that daddy believes something different. I didn’t want my kids to think that they had two religions. I wanted them to know they were Jewish through and through. (Jewish partner, interview)

Similarly strong were the feelings of parents who decided to raise their children with both religious heritages. Most couples did not expect to encounter difficulties raising children in both religions. Most survey respondents disagreed that growing up with multiple religions can be confusing for children, with 29% disagreeing strongly and 31% disagreeing somewhat.

My partner and I agree that we’d like to continue to raise our daughter with the influence of Jewish culture and some of the fun stuff like Christmas and Easter bunny traditions. I think most people I know don’t have an issue with that. (Jewish partner, survey)
It's not the end of the world, and it is possible for it to work. We plan to raise our children by letting them learn a bit about both religions and deciding what they want to do when they're older. (Jewish partner, survey)

If done right, you can teach your children about both religions. Both you and your partner need to be on the same page and accept each other’s religions and show your kids that you are participating equally and that both religions are important. (Non-Jewish partner, survey)

We want our children to experience both, because they are both. (Jewish partner, interview)

Older people say that future children should have one religion or none at all. But my partner loves having a Christmas tree, with absolutely no religious basis whatsoever. We can decorate the tree ‘Jewishly,’ too. Not all holidays are religious or celebrated because of their religious background. They can have completely neutral significance. (Jewish partner, survey)

Nearly all surveyed parents agreed that having parents from different religious backgrounds would have a positive impact on children: Sixty-one percent of parents agreed strongly and 37% somewhat agreed that children in an interfaith household are more open and accepting. In interviews, couples felt proud and excited that their children would feel comfortable in multiple religious and cultural groups.

I believe an interfaith household creates opportunity for more open communication and acceptance. I don’t believe that anyone should be judged or treated as less than if their values or beliefs differ from our own. I think interfaith shows progression and acceptance and love without limitations. We take pride in how we have merged our traditions and always accepted and respected one another for our differences. We look forward to raising a family that will, hopefully, inhabit those same values. (Jewish partner, survey)

[Non-Jewish partner] is from a Latino family, and I think that we both want [children] to feel like they’re both parts Jewish and Latino. Not one or the other. I want them to feel like they’re both and that they’re like part of a group of people that have parents from two different cultures. I think that’s more common now. (Jewish partner, interview)
WHEN ADULT CHILDREN OF INTERFAITH PARENTS INTERMARRY

In 19% of surveyed couples, the Jewish partners themselves were adult children of intermarriage. The Jewish partners in these couples, and the couples themselves, were less connected to Jewish identity and life as compared with couples whose Jewish partners were raised by two Jewish parents.

Nineteen percent of the adult children of intermarriage identified with a denomination, compared to 44% of the children of inmarriage. Although couples where the Jewish partner was a child of intermarriage and couples where the Jewish partner was a child of inmarriage belonged to synagogues and observed Shabbat at similar rates, fewer children of intermarriage celebrated Hanukkah, Passover, or the High Holidays.

Jewish partners raised in interfaith households also had less formal or informal Jewish education as compared with partners raised by two Jewish parents. Fewer adult children of intermarriage reported attending full- or part-time Jewish schools, Jewish summer camps, or Jewish youth groups. As a result, couples with an adult child of intermarriage had fewer Jewish friends and fewer social connections to Jewish community.

Judaism can be a part of me but does not need to be my entire identity. It feels like there is no space to take part as someone who is half Jewish. When do you connect with other Jews? It’s intimidating because they’ve been raised with it woven through their entire existence: school, temple, camp, etc. I would like to learn aspects and weave components into my life without being overwhelmed by everyone else’s expertise. (Jewish partner, survey)

Not everyone who is Jewish has the same knowledge of Judaism and experience with the customs and traditions. I would like to learn more, but it is intimidating to me when nothing is explained and everyone has been doing traditions all their life which I was not exposed to. (Jewish partner, survey)

Adults raised in intermarried households often described the influence of this background on their own decisions about Jewish engagement. They carried memories of observing unwelcoming responses to their interfaith parents and worried that their partners and children would experience the same rejection.

I wish we were accepted in the Jewish community, and I didn’t have to feel defensive or prove my Jewishness. My parents are also an interfaith couple, and I believe the judgement they experienced resulted in them raising us to be less Jewish. (Jewish partner, survey)

My father is Jewish and my mother never converted. I never felt accepted in the wider community, and this has always affected me. I hope my children have a different experience. (Jewish partner, survey)

Important to these couples was the non-Jewish partners’ being acknowledged and welcomed at Jewish events. Among adult children of intermarriage who are themselves parents, 22% felt alienated from Jewish organizations when they worried their children would not be seen as Jewish, and 25% felt it was unwelcoming when they did not understand what was going on in Jewish programming.
FACTORS THAT PROMOTE JEWISH ENGAGEMENT

PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF JEWISH ENGAGEMENT

Most surveyed couples indicated that it was fairly or very important that their family have a place within the Jewish community. As shown in Figure 17, two thirds felt it was fairly (50%) or very (17%) important that their family feel connected to the Jewish community, and 58% gave similar ratings to the importance of their family feeling part of the Jewish community.

When asked about their family’s current level of involvement in Jewish life, the majority of survey respondents indicated a preference for more participation. Forty-six percent felt their current involvement was somewhat less than they would like, and 7% felt it was much less than they would prefer (Figure 18).

When asked about their interest in different types of Jewish programming, 30% or more of respondents indicated they were somewhat or very much interested in programs specifically for interfaith couples or households, volunteering in the Jewish community, and holiday-related celebrations (Figure 19). Among parents, many reported

Figure 17: Importance of connections to Jewish community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connected to a community</th>
<th>8%</th>
<th>26%</th>
<th>50%</th>
<th>17%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part of a community</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrated into a community</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Not at all important
- Not very important
- Fairly important
- Very important
Figure 18: Current versus desired level of Jewish involvement

Figure 19: Interest in Jewish programs, somewhat or very much

*Only asked of parents
interest in programs on Jewish perspectives on parenting (35%), programs that were family friendly (68%), and those specifically for children (70%).

LOCAL JEWISH FAMILY

Our previous research on interfaith families suggests that local extended families often serve as portals into Jewish life (Chertok et al., 2019). Family members “curate” Jewish programming options, informing couples of opportunities that might be particularly attractive. Having family nearby also increases opportunities to engage in Jewish home rituals and celebrations.

One of the striking features of the couples we spoke with is the high proportion that have ties to their local Jewish families. The majority (88%) of surveyed couples included someone raised in the GTA, and almost all (90%) of the Jewish partners reported having local family. As shown in Figure 20, 78% of couples with local Jewish families reported seeing them frequently.

The majority (86%) of surveyed couples indicated that they celebrated Jewish holidays with their local family. During interviews, couples expressed how integral local family was to maintaining their ties to Jewish life.

Now that we’re back in Toronto and see my family more regularly, [religion] fits into our life more easily. (Jewish partner, interview)

On a typical Friday night, most of the time we’re either at my parents’ house, having Shabbat dinner with them, or we’re home having Shabbat dinner ourselves. (Jewish partner, interview)

Just as the presence of local Jewish family enhanced the Jewish connections and activities of interfaith households, those couples without local ties experienced less access to Jewish life.

The real problem for me in Toronto is finding a likeminded group of people...I find being Jewish, without family, in Toronto the most isolating than anywhere else I have lived in North America or Europe. (Jewish partner, survey)

Figure 20: Frequency of seeing local relatives
Neither of us have family here, which I also think impacts how we incorporate faith into our lives and somewhat limits it. (Jewish partner, interview)

Couples who did not have local Jewish family were less likely to celebrate Passover or the High Holidays than peers who had local family connections (Figure 21). Almost three quarters (72%) of survey respondents who did not have local Jewish families indicated that they would like to have local people with whom to celebrate Jewish holidays, and 66% wished they knew more about how to celebrate the holidays.

Figure 21: Impact of having local Jewish family on holidays

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Jewish partner from Toronto</th>
<th>Jewish partner from elsewhere</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celebrate Passover</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrate High Holidays</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wish had people to</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>celebrate with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wish knew more how to</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>celebrate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FACTORS THAT INHIBIT JEWISH ENGAGEMENT

RABBINIC POLICY AND PERSONAL STATUS ISSUES

Synagogues in the GTA have established a variety of policies regarding the ways in which interfaith couples and families are included in different aspects of synagogue life. For example, most local rabbis and synagogues do not accept Jewish identification through patrilineal descent. These policies often reflect the boundaries and understandings of halakha established by denominational movements and central rabbinic governing bodies.

For many interfaith couples, their lives first intersect with these local policies when they explore marriage and wedding officiation. While there are a few rabbis in Toronto who have recently decided to officiate at interfaith weddings, most do not (CJN, 2018). One third of married couples responding to the survey had a wedding with an ordained Jewish officiant. Another 21% would have liked to have had a Jewish officiant but could not find one willing to perform the ceremony.

In interviews, some couples told us that their interactions with Jewish institutions and clergy in preparation for their wedding was the first institutional barrier they encountered. In some cases, these difficult experiences discouraged them from being involved in Jewish life.

I feel like if a Jewish couple is reaching out to a rabbi or a Jewish organization to help them with their wedding, I think they definitely need to start being more open minded about whose weddings they’re going to officiate. I feel like the wedding is the point at which you set off as a Jewish couple or a Jewish family. If at that point you are already experiencing hurdles and doors closing—it doesn’t set a great tone, especially for the non-Jewish partner or for the Jewish partner. (Jewish partner, interview)

When we started to look into officiants for our wedding, all these rabbis just said, ‘No, we won’t marry someone interfaith. We won’t do it’—even Reform rabbis. And that’s a real turnoff to being engaged in the community. You want to engage interfaith couples. You can’t wait until they have kids. (Jewish partner, interview)

We would have liked to have been supported at the time of marriage and that both our traditions were accepted. Not to have felt rejected by the Jewish community at the time of marriage. (Jewish partner, survey)

I met with a Conservative rabbi before getting married and [rabbi] totally turned me off by suggesting that in Toronto specifically the rules are different and even in a Reform congregation, my non-Jewish wife and I would never be accepted and our children would never be recognized as Jewish unless they convert. (Jewish partner, survey)
Interfaith parents also expressed concern about the Jewish status and acceptance of their children. Some grappled with the meaning of matrilineal descent and the requirements for child conversion, including circumcision. Families worried their children would be viewed as “not Jewish” by Jewish peers and institutions. In particular, parents worried their children would not be accepted by synagogues, especially if the mother was not Jewish.

I feel like [child] is fully Jewish, but I know Judaism puts a lot of value on the mother being Jewish. So that’s a fear or anxiety that I have that [child] won’t be fully included by other Jews. I remember that being the case when I was growing up. Both of my parents are Jewish but hearing other people say, ‘Oh you’re not Jewish because your mom’s not Jewish.’ That’s something that makes me sad because I want [child] to feel like he’s Jewish if he wants to be, and not feel like the community’s stopping him from feeling fully Jewish.  

(Jewish partner, interview)

Some families chose child conversion as insurance for their child’s acceptance in the Jewish community. These parents often framed their decision as ensuring their child would have the maximum degrees of freedom to explore their Jewish identity in the future.

I wanted to make sure that depending if they wanted to be more Jewish than now, I didn’t want them to have any kind of roadblocks. Just give them options.  

(Jewish partner, interview)

We’d like to convert our babies to give them the maximum amount of choice in their life and because it’s really important to [Jewish partner]. I’m just not a religious person, whereas it’s important to him.  

(Non-Jewish partner, interview)

I wanted [child] to be converted to Judaism. I wanted to do Reform because I thought that mostly aligned with my values, and with the understanding if she gets a Reform conversion getting a Conservative/Orthodox conversion down the road wouldn’t be such a step for her as much. I just wanted her to have that foundation. I wanted to make sure that she wouldn’t be called ‘not Jewish’ by people. Because I know that can be really hurtful, particularly for young people.  

(Jewish partner, interview)

Other interviewed couples took issue with religious leaders requiring circumcision in order to conduct a baby naming or other Jewish baby welcoming ceremony. For Jewish and non-Jewish partners, circumcision presented a barrier and a focus of difficult conversations.

In Canada you have a lot of European immigrants, and circumcision isn’t the norm if you’re not Jewish. My husband comes from a European family. He’s a first generation Canadian. Circumcision was a really huge challenge for us when it came to that intercultural, interfaith life that we were going to be leading, and we had to compromise. It was really challenging for me.  

(Jewish partner, interview)

We really felt very pressured by [rabbi] to circumcise. Before we had these conversations, we felt like [rabbi] was a real source of support. But then it felt, in the end, that [rabbi] actually wasn’t as much of a source of support. It was very upsetting.  

(Non-Jewish partner, interview)

For some LGBTQ couples, the determination of the child’s personal status based on the religious identity of the person who carried the child raised larger concerns about acceptance of their relationships in the community. These couples often felt they were not given enough information to understand the policy positions of Jewish clergy.
PRESSURE TO CONVERT

Many interfaith couples indicated they felt pressure from family, friends, and religious leaders for the non-Jewish partner to convert to Judaism. Among surveyed couples who have local Jewish family, 44% experienced conversion pressure from their families, as compared with 29% of couples who did not have local family. Pressure to convert from religious leaders in the community felt unwelcoming and intrusive to these couples and pushed some away from Jewish involvement.

In contemporary society, the focus on the authentic self is often equated with following one’s guiding values and personal wants (Bauman 2005; Bellah et al. 1985). For the non-Jewish partners we interviewed, this was particularly salient. In the face of pressures to convert from Jewish religious leaders, family, or the broader community, these non-Jewish partners sought to maintain their personal values. For many, this was a matter of “authenticity” and respect for their own identities and choices. They viewed conversion as a serious religious act, which did not align with their personal, often secular, views. For couples where both partners were not religious, conversion for the sake of religion felt disingenuous.

For two gay men, it wasn’t even father, mother, it was ‘who is your surrogate?’ and ‘where did the baby come out of?’ (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

I feel that it’s just disingenuous to convert if I don’t necessarily believe in a higher spiritual power that way. I feel it’s more disrespectful to convert if I don’t believe in it fully. Because you’re not converting to the culture you’re converting to the religion. Right? (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

Conversion] just wouldn’t have been honest. It just wasn’t who I was. The idea of going to classes and going before a Beit Din and saying that this was authentically myself was incorrect, and that’s it. That’s the only reason. Like it just wasn’t my identity. It wasn’t who I was, and it would just be inauthentic. (Non-Jewish partner)

[Jewish partner] isn’t religious, [he is] a secular Jew. As we looked more and more into [conversion], we realized that the conversion process is quite a religious process. And neither of us are actually religious, so does it make sense for me to do this thing when neither of us actually subscribe to the religious side of it anyway? (Non-Jewish partner)
LIMITED OR AMBIVALENT ACCEPTANCE/ WELCOMING

A recent study of the perceptions of intermarriage in the GTA describes a consensus position held by Jewish lay and professional leaders from a variety of communal organizations. That view holds that single Jews should be encouraged to marry other Jews, but if they do not, the community should support them and their non-Jewish spouses in order to facilitate their raising Jewish children (Schnoor, 2016). In both interviews and surveys, interfaith couples in the current study were asked about their experiences of feeling welcome or unwelcome in a variety of Jewish settings including with extended Jewish family, in synagogues and in their participation in other Jewish programs.

The survey asked an open-ended question about what couples most wished the Jewish community understood about them, and 248 respondents shared their thoughts. The most frequent answer, given by 31% of respondents, was the desire to be seen in a positive light and not denigrated as an inferior option, inherently less Jewish, or dysfunctional.

*I am no less Jewish because I married someone who isn’t Jewish.* (Jewish partner, survey)

*I would like the Jewish community of Toronto to understand it is not difficult or confusing to have a happy interfaith home. It is the same as any home.* (Jewish partner, survey)

*I wish that the Jewish community didn’t put so much emphasis on having a Jewish spouse or partner. I find it highly offensive when my husband’s siblings speak about not accepting if their children were to date someone who wasn’t Jewish. It is offensive to myself and my daughter and really turns me off of the religion.* (Non-Jewish partner, survey)

The desire to be accepted was also evident in interviews. As one Jewish partner summed up her partner’s experience, “It’s that they made you feel like an outsider.”

*Just let somebody be who they want to be and don’t judge. If more people could just be accepting and take that approach, [it] would be a lot easier I think on everyone. A lot less stressful.* (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

*I wish the attitude would less try to discourage intermarriage and more: let’s try to encourage Jewish continuity within intermarriage. Let’s try to find ways to let interfaith couples understand that there are opportunities for them and their children to be part of the community, as part of the Jewish religion, in a fulfilling way.* (Jewish partner, interview)

The survey also asked couples to indicate how easy or difficult it would be to find Jewish programs with certain characteristics. One quarter of respondents felt it would be difficult to find Jewish programming that was welcoming to interfaith couples, and 53% were unsure how difficult it would be. Only 23% felt it would be easy to find such programs or settings. An even smaller portion (13%) felt it would be easy to find programs attended by other interfaith couples. Among survey respondents who were not currently synagogue members, 16% said that a reason for not joining a congregation was their concern about how synagogues treated interfaith couples, and 10% were worried that their non-Jewish partner would not find acceptance.
It was important for me that [non-Jewish partner] was on board with whatever Jewish activities or programs we do with my daughter, I wanted it to be specifically an organization that would be welcoming to both the Jewish and the non-Jewish parents. (Jewish partner, interview)

Surveyed couples were asked about the factors that contributed to or detracted from their sense of feeling welcome in Jewish spaces (Figure 22). The majority noted that it was important that events be cultural and not religious in nature (80%) (see following section), and that hosts acknowledge the presence of non-Jews (62%) and explain Jewish rituals (57%). Couples felt unwelcome when they overheard interfaith relationships denigrated (44%), did not know Hebrew (43%), or felt pressure to convert (42%). One third (34%) of parents felt unwelcome when organizations did not consider their children to be Jewish.

Figure 22: Factors that contribute to/detract from feeling welcome
Interviewed couples spoke about the importance of having their presence as a couple acknowledged in Jewish settings. Explicit welcoming helped them to feel seen and accepted.

Honestly, even if [Jewish organizations] literally just said, like, ‘interfaith families welcome.’ You see businesses and programming saying it’s an accessible venue or LGBTQ families are welcome. It’s that extra nod of we acknowledge you. You’re welcome. (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

At [synagogue] because there are a number of interfaith couples they were more of the stance, ‘Okay, it’s great to see you again.’ There was never the pressure to convert. There was a general sense of appreciation. ‘Okay, you’re here for your family, you’re here for their development, their growth,’ and that was fine. (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

I’d be really great to just acknowledge everybody who is in the room, and I feel like that’s something that’s missing. (Jewish partner, interview)

Remember that there might be people who are not Jewish in the room, and how do we also not assume who’s Jewish in the room? (Jewish partner, interview)

In discussing their sense of welcome in Jewish programs and organizations, interfaith couples also told us that it was important their non-Jewish spouses not feel compelled to hide their religious identities and backgrounds in order to be welcomed. Couples felt that when their acceptance was conditional on negating part of the non-Jewish partner’s identity, it was shallow and inauthentic.

This rabbi said to me that when interfaith families come into Jewish spaces, they’re there for the Jewish part, and they’re not there to have any other part of them acknowledged, so they hang it up when they come in. I just don’t see how that’s possible. You are who you are in all aspects at all times. All those things are still true. They inform who you are and your experience. You say that you’re welcoming, but you want me to hang up part? You want this part of our family to be hung up when you’re [in] the Jewish space. (Jewish partner, interview)

I find that because I am Jewish that automatically means my children are Jewish. No questions asked, no grey area. There is little to no acknowledgment of the other side of things. Judaism always takes precedence over everything else. In an interfaith household there is another person with another way of living involved, who shouldn’t be ignored. (Jewish partner, survey)

In interviews, couples also noted that they felt unwelcome when incorrect assumptions were made about their level of Jewish knowledge. Without upfront explanations of Jewish customs and rituals, non-Jewish and Jewish partners described feeling afraid that they might make mistakes and face embarrassment and public censure.

If a synagogue wants to be welcoming to people who are not necessarily familiar, there just needs to be some basic understanding and introduction to how-to at the door. Something that paralyzed me with fear for years was should I wear a kippah or not wear a kippah. If I wear it, am I being appropriating? Or if I wear it, am I being respectful? (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

Although some of the couples we interviewed were not sure of whether they would be welcome within the larger Jewish community, most felt accepted by and integrated into the Jewish partner’s family. Non-Jewish partners especially appreciated welcoming messages and actions that made them feel they belonged in their new extended families. In some cases, welcoming opened the door for non-Jewish partners to learn about Judaism by participating in home rituals and family celebrations.
When I first met [Jewish partner’s] parents, it felt like I was kind of already part of the family. I wasn’t the outcast. They’re very welcoming and very friendly. (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

My parents are very happy and don’t have any issues with that. I think my parents think that it’s cool to raise kids in a family that has two different perspectives and for us to learn from each other. My parents like to learn from [non-Jewish partner] and his family about their experience. Especially given we’re a Jew and a Muslim, which could be like the punchline for a million jokes. But we feel like we’ve been really lucky, and I think it’s because our parents are good, extremely flexible, and open. (Jewish partner, interview)

Where we felt welcomed? I think with [Jewish partner’s] Toronto family, I think I celebrated now Rosh Hashanah with them three or four times and they treat me as if I’m Jewish. We do the blessings together. It feels very natural. (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

Some couples also noted that the presence of the non-Jewish spouse encouraged other family members to think more about their own Jewish identities and engagement. In some cases, this resulted in expansion of their own participation in Jewish living.

[Jewish partner’s] mom said to me a little while ago, ‘Thank you for coming into our lives because I feel like you’ve made us more Jewish.’ She didn’t have a mezuzah on her door until I [asked], ‘Why don’t you have a mezuzah?’ And she was like, ‘You’re right! I’m going to put one up.’ (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

**DESIRE FOR CULTURAL, NOT RELIGIOUS OPPORTUNITIES**

The proportion of Canadians who say they have no religion or are religiously unaffiliated has risen in the last four decades from 4% in 1971 to 29% in 2019 (Lipka, 2019). Approximately one fifth of Toronto’s population describes themselves as having no religious affiliation (Beaman 2017).

Many couples in this study also described themselves as having a cultural but not a religious identity. Among surveyed Jewish partners, the majority indicated that growing up they identified with a Jewish denomination (Figure 23). However, when asked about their current denominational identity, more than half of Jewish partners indicated they are secular or culturally Jewish (44%) or “just Jewish” (17%).

When asked about their current religious identities, many of the non-Jewish partners we surveyed indicated that they had no religion (24%), or were atheist or agnostic (22%).

The survey also asked respondents to indicate the role of religion in their current lives. Forty-two percent of surveyed Jewish partners described themselves as not at all religious, and another 46% said they were not too religious.
In interviews and the survey, Jewish partners often told us that, for them, Judaism is about identification with Jewish culture and a sense of heritage. Jewish identity is a source of pride and meaning because it connects them with their families and speaks to a shared history that informs their identities.

I definitely view myself as more culturally Jewish. So often I’ll go up to my parents’ place and have Shabbat dinner with them. We’ll light the Hanukkah candles, and it’s just more of a cultural aspect in our lives. (Jewish partner, interview)

The word religion is what trips me up because the religious aspect of it I still struggle with. But the identity aspects, the cultural aspects…it’s a huge part of my life right now. (Jewish partner, interview)

Despite being in an interfaith relationship and not practicing religious Judaism, cultural Judaism still matters to us. (Jewish partner, survey)

We are proud of our Jewish culture and traditions despite not [both] being Jewish or religious. (Jewish partner, survey)

As previously noted, many surveyed parents wanted to pass a strong sense of Jewish peoplehood, history, and culture rather than religious identity on to their children. Jewish parents wanted to be able to teach their children Jewish content and values, even as some balked at “religion” as such.

One thing I’d be interested in is going to a discussion group about imparting Jewish values and culture on children in a secular way. It’s very important to me that they can say prayers and identify as Jewish, but I don’t want them to be RELIGIOUS. (Jewish partner, survey)

When couples described the types of programming they would find attractive, many noted that their preference was for cultural and not religious activities. Even when it came to programs or learning related to holidays or Jewish values, they wanted the approach to be more “philosophical” and secular, rather than prescriptive and religious.
I would like to be involved in the community and the culture without religious elements being too pushy. My husband (and I) find it unwelcoming, though we want our children to understand the culture and history. (Non-Jewish partner, survey)

My partner loves the secular lessons of Shabbat, Yom Kippur, etc., and participates precisely because they offer meaning and value without necessarily being about devotion to a deity. (Jewish partner, survey)

I don’t know if we would necessarily want to go to something that would be about religious things unless it had some sort of philosophical element to it that made it a little bit more accessible for a secular person. (Jewish partner, interview)

A lot of the programs that are offered are through the shul which means that ultimately, it comes back to being a religious Jew, which is where we get a bit lost. My wife and I both want an understanding of the Jewish religion, history, and traditions, but we are more interested in the community. We both grew up with a strong sense of family and community, which is what we want to pass on to our family. (Jewish partner, survey)

LIMITED JEWISH KNOWLEDGE

The couples we interviewed often told us that they did not feel they knew enough to participate in Jewish programs, services, and settings. Not surprisingly, non-Jewish partners typically had no background or experience with Jewish life. However, many Jewish partners also referred to their limited knowledge of Jewish tradition and ritual as a potent barrier to engagement in Jewish life, both in their homes and in the community.

It’s like going into the unknown, I guess. (Jewish partner, interview)

It’s challenging to integrate Judaism into our lives when one partner doesn’t know about the culture or community. One partner often feels like an outsider, so it’s difficult to prioritize events/feel comfortable attending. (Jewish partner, survey)

How are we going to teach all these non-Jewish friends about playing with the dreidel? I don’t even know how to teach them, what am I supposed to say? I’m constantly feeling like I need to do research, and I don’t really have sources to turn to. (Jewish partner, interview)

It often feels a little overwhelming, I think, because I’m like, ‘Well, you’re my leader in this.’ And he’s like, ‘I know how to be Jewish because of my family, but that isn’t the way necessarily that I want to be Jewish.’ So, we’re trying to figure out what that means for us. (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

Gaps in Jewish knowledge also prevented many interfaith couples from fully engaging in holiday celebrations. The survey asked respondents to indicate the extent to which a variety of elements would make it easier to celebrate Jewish holidays. Thirty-three percent of couples felt that it would be somewhat or very helpful to know how other interfaith families approached the holidays, and 29% felt it would be equally helpful to know more about the meaning and significance of Jewish holidays (Figure 24).

Limited Jewish knowledge also prevented interfaith families from participating in and becoming members of synagogues. Among surveyed couples that were not members of synagogues, 15% indicated that a reason they did not belong was their concern about a lack of Jewish knowledge. Interviewed couples also described Jewish lack of knowledge as a barrier to synagogue membership.
Honestly, this is maybe silly, but I wish there was a rule book or something I could look at. So that I just know what is expected and what is not expected. Or what is not okay. And what is appropriate. I’m always worried about doing something terribly wrong in synagogue. (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

I wouldn’t have even known where to begin. I don’t know what the synagogues are. I didn’t know what Conservative versus Orthodox was. I just didn’t have that education, so I didn’t even bother trying to find Jewish community here. (Jewish partner, interview)

Interfaith parents who decided to raise their children Jewish felt there was more they would want and need to know in order to be successful. One third of surveyed Jewish parents felt not at all (5%) or only a little (28%) that they had sufficient knowledge to help their children with Jewish education (Figure 25). A larger portion of non-Jewish parents indicated either no (43%) or only a little (40%) confidence in their Jewish knowledge. Interviewed parents also voiced this concern.

I feel like I’m just so ignorant, and we’re so busy, and it’s hard to figure out how to do this well. This is our shot. This is our kid’s life. (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

Non-Jewish parents especially wanted to learn the cultural components of Jewish childhood so they could be fully involved in their child’s upbringing. Nearly three quarters of non-Jewish parents said that knowing Jewish children’s songs (74%) or Jewish history (72%) would help them with raising their children (Figure 26). Over half felt that knowledge of Jewish prayers (55%) or traditional Jewish recipes (52%) would be helpful as they raise their children.

LIMITED OPTIONS FOR LEARNING

As noted above, many interfaith couples are interested in learning more about Jewish culture, traditions, and history, not only at a child-friendly level but also for the adults themselves. Yet many couples recounted difficulty in finding learning opportunities that met their needs. The survey asked about how easy or difficult it would be to find programs with certain characteristics. Forty-two percent

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Figure 24: Knowledge that would make celebrating holidays easier

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Very Much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How other interfaith couples celebrate</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The meaning of Jewish holidays</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to celebrate Jewish holidays</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
felt it would be difficult to find programs that were interesting, and many felt it would be difficult to find programming that was high quality (18%) or would not require Jewish knowledge (19%) (Figure 27). Most couples responded that they did not know if programs with these characteristics existed—suggesting that they had little knowledge of the options available to them.

In interviews, some couples described their frustration in trying to find classes that were intellectually engaging. They wanted to be empowered to explore Jewish ideas in a supportive and inviting atmosphere.

Some of the things that I’ve gone to for interfaith feel a little bit tokenistic. Like, ‘We’re going to do these activities, but you don’t really want to engage in the ideas.’ My fantasy would be that every Thursday...
evening we can go with a couple of other couples to sit and talk with a rabbi where he’s providing some instructions, an education to us about what it means to be Jewish, what it means to have a Jewish family. To me that feels like a very worthy investment for a sitter. Where we actually get to engage substantially in the ideas. (Jewish partner, interview)

There’s not really a place where you can go and say, ‘Hey, I’d like to learn these deeper spiritual things with Judaism,’ at least in my experience. (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

It was important to couples that educational offerings acknowledged the learning needs of both Jewish and non-Jewish partners. Even better would be opportunities to actively address the questions of non-Jewish partners and invite open dialogue with other interfaith couples.

We do want to learn about our cultural heritage (both Jewish and Christian), we just want to do so in an accepting environment, and one that would educate us appropriately so we feel included as opposed to excluded. (Jewish partner, survey)

A learning experience for interfaith families that acknowledges both faiths would be hugely welcome for us. (Jewish partner, survey)

If they had any [classes] if the subject or material was actually mixed culture, maybe I’d be more inclined to go. (Jewish partner, interview)

Some couples also found it difficult to find learning opportunities neither explicitly nor implicitly intended as a first step toward conversion. These couples wanted classes that were free of expectations about conversion.

I think conversion classes play that role, but it’s the emphasis that you’re converting. (Jewish partner, interview)

Most people in the class were converting, and I really wished I had just taken a class at University of Toronto, to be honest, because it was very much slanted in the direction of you will convert, you will do this. I [would like] more of an information class, that it was actually not so much, I’m telling you, you will do this, you will do that,’ and more informational. (Non-Jewish partner, interview)
Some interfaith couples looking for age-appropriate and inclusive programming found learning opportunities at JCCs. Programming such as Hebrew classes and Tikkun Leil Shavuot study were seen as approachable entry points into the Jewish community.

The Tikkun Leil Shavuot program at JCC, that’s just like the whole Toronto liberal Jewish community. I don’t go every year, but I sometimes go. That’s neither related to age nor shul membership. It’s just if you want to spend all night studying Torah on Shavuot. (Jewish partner, interview)

I forgot what the holiday was called, but they were going to keep the JCC open all night long, there was going to be 12 hours of eating cheesecake and dissecting the Torah and putting it back together. That was such a cool thing the JCC was doing, and I thought that would be a really fun celebration of Judaism...So the JCC is really our biggest doorway into whatever we’re going to do. (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

Both Jewish and non-Jewish parents desired resources and opportunities to learn how to have a Jewish family. Many of the couples we interviewed made special note of their positive experiences with PJ Library and the PJ Plus program. They found these resources to be at the right level providing clear and accessible learning and activities. These families appreciated that PJ Plus programs were attended by other interfaith families.

Celebrations around holidays such as Purim and Hanukkah were often cited as accessible family programs.

The PJ Library has made it really easy by just sending us a free book that we read at bedtime because, even though [non-Jewish partner] every year makes fun of Tu Bishvat, having that book and reading about it, my son wouldn’t even know about this holiday if it wasn’t for the fact that the PJ Library sends us a free book in the mail about it. (Jewish partner, interview)

The “Jewish &” programming recently launched by the Miles Nadal JCC targets “multi-faith and cross-cultural individuals, couples and families.” Appreciation for this initiative was a recurring theme for many of the interviewed couples who found the events welcoming and accessible.

We are hugely grateful for the Miles Nadal JCC for providing us with the first exposure to a Jewish community that feels exciting to me and my daughter. (Jewish partner, survey)

I have seen some things [at] the [Miles Nadal] JCC where they say everyone’s welcome to participate. And that certainly makes us feel comfortable. For me what’s also important is with my kids I don’t want them in any way to ever feel weird because their mom didn’t convert and they would feel somehow like mommy isn’t welcomed somewhere. When a point has been made that you’re welcome, it’s nice. (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

I know that [Miles Nadal] JCC is all about inclusivity and the fact that there’s not even a prerequisite to be Jewish to participate. (Jewish partner, interview)

There’s [Jewish &] programming that welcomed both sides of the family. So maybe it’s a Shabbat potluck and what you bring to the table is from your non-Jewish side. Making sure that we can bring, if not religious, but cultural traditions of the other side of the family to the table I think is really important and sort of welcoming. (Jewish partner, interview)
Jewish is super interesting to me. I’d like to try that one just because it’s always nice to see different couples doing their own thing differently. (Jewish partner, interview)

COST AND LOCATION

Aside from their specific needs and interests related to being interfaith, the couples we surveyed and interviewed faced many of the same concerns about cost and location encountered by all young Jewish households. One third of couples (32%) indicated it would be hard to find programs that are conveniently located, and 21% thought they would have difficulty finding affordable programs (Figure 28). Many survey respondents, however, did not know if it would be hard or easy to find programs with these critical characteristics.

Surveyed interfaith couples do not belong to synagogues for a variety of reasons. Cost and location were among the major reasons they cited for not being members. For 31% of non-members, cost was a barrier, and 12% did not live near a synagogue.

Beyond synagogues, many people we spoke with described the high cost of Jewish life, a situation exacerbated by the high costs associated with living in Toronto.

I think the only real difficulty in Judaism in general in Toronto is that it’s very expensive to be Jewish. [Synagogue] had a membership tier where you could sort of pay what you could afford and work towards their annual membership, but their annual membership is $5,000. That’s a lot of money. And that was absolutely not something we could afford. (Jewish partner, interview)

I think that it would be nice to have more opportunities at low cost. There is no OneTable or post-undergrad people to have a Shabbat dinner together as friends who don’t have kids. We’re all working full time jobs. There’s no way of doing that in ways that are affordable and accessible. (Jewish partner, interview)

Cost is also a hurdle, since paying for membership to a place of worship is completely foreign to my partner and he can’t wrap his head around it. (Jewish partner, survey)

Figure 28: Ease of finding Jewish programs that are affordable or conveniently located

![Image of Figure 28: Ease of finding Jewish programs that are affordable or conveniently located]

Don’t know | Difficult | Easy
---|---|---
Affordable | 46% | 21% | 34%
Conveniently located | 33% | 32% | 35%
How cost prohibitive it is to be able to join a synagogue, especially when you have a young family to raise and daycare costs! (Jewish partner, survey)

In a community like Toronto with a historic Jewish core, the location of programs can be an inhibiting factor for people who live outside of that geographic area. Overall, only 18% of couples living in the Bathurst Corridor said they had difficulty finding a conveniently located program, compared to 29% of couples living Downtown and 38% of couples living elsewhere in Toronto (Table 1). For parents, however, there are much larger distinctions. Among surveyed parents, 22% in the Bathurst Corridor thought conveniently located programs were difficult to find, compared to 45% of parents Downtown and 48% of parents living elsewhere in the GTA. Location, therefore, can be an especially difficult challenge for couples who live outside the Bathurst Corridor.

I feel like there’s a real physical barrier for me getting to things these days because it just takes so long to get there and, at the end of the week, I’m tired, and I don’t want to go. (Jewish partner, interview)

Most of the stuff is happening in Vaughan/Thornhill, and I’m not willing to trek with young children all the way out there for a program. Even if I know they’re going to have a great time. (Jewish partner, interview)

There are not many services offered in the North York region for families to access easily, and very few synagogues. We often travel to North Toronto to access the programming we want our family to be involved in. (Jewish partner, survey)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Overall (%)</th>
<th>Parents (%)</th>
<th>Non-parents (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bathurst Corridor</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downtown</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsewhere</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Difficulty finding conveniently located programs by geography, for parents and non-parents
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Summary and Recommendations

I am not raised Jewish, so a lot of it is foreign to me. I really want my kids to have some kind of understanding or encounter with the divine. We’re trying to swim upstream in a way. (Non-Jewish partner, interview)

This quote from one of the non-Jewish partners we interviewed and the metaphor of “swimming upstream” captures the opportunities and the challenges inherent in enhancing the Jewish engagement of interfaith households in the GTA. Our interviews and survey make clear that many of these couples are looking for more ways to participate in Jewish life. To return to our metaphor, rather than being on dry land or apathetically floating away, these couples are “in the water” and actively concerned with their family’s Jewish engagement.

At the same time, many recount the factors or “currents” that make it harder for them to achieve their destination. Couples fear some Jewish institutions will view them and their families as undesirable or unfortunate. Interfaith parents want to give their children a strong Jewish identity and connections to Jewish heritage, but worry that synagogues and other Jewish institutions will not accept their children as Jews. Many parents are also keenly aware of their limited Jewish knowledge but do not know how or where to find learning opportunities that are low threshold, high quality, and without any connection to conversion. Those with local family benefit from an inviting portal into Jewish home ritual and celebrations, but others do not have this option. Some interfaith couples report finding inviting, engaging opportunities to take part in and learn about Jewish life through such programs as PJ Plus or Jewish & at the Miles Nadal JCC. However, opportunities for involvement are far more limited for those living outside of the Bathurst Corridor or Downtown.

The findings of this study represent a starting point for UJA Federation as it seeks to understand the needs of interfaith couples and to expand the landscape of opportunities for these households. We conclude this report with a set of suggestions for next steps in this process.

Create Collaborations that Focus on the Needs of Interfaith Families

The integration of interfaith families affects the entire Jewish community of the GTA, and addressing this issue requires the concerted and coordinated attention of multiple Jewish organizations. We recommend UJA Federation build a community of practice among the disparate stakeholders, organizations, and programs that do—or could—play a role in developing the landscape of opportunities for interfaith couples. This partnership will need to include the participation of synagogue rabbis and lay
leaders who are often the first communal representatives that interfaith couples encounter.

**Develop a Central Portal for Locating Resources for Interfaith Families**
To address existing gaps and foster easy access to resources for interfaith couples, we suggest the development of a central online platform where families can learn about offerings, programs, and classes. This central portal might also include information about which local rabbis are willing to officiate and/or work with couples who are planning to wed.

**Focus on Explicit Welcoming**
UJA Federation may not be able to directly influence individual rabbis and central rabbinic or denominational bodies and their policies related to personal status issues and wedding officiation. However, UJA Federation can take a central role, working with Jewish institutions and rabbinic groups, to take a closer look at the current and potential involvement of interfaith families in their organizations. This task would involve examining the messages Jewish organizations explicitly and implicitly send about the place of interfaith families in the Jewish community.

**Expand the Landscape of Low-Threshold, High-Impact Learning Opportunities**
Both Jewish and non-Jewish partners in the couples we interviewed and surveyed were often looking for ways to learn more about Judaism. They wanted a mix of clear “how-to” instructions as well as more in-depth exploration of Jewish values and thought. Interfaith couples, like many of their inmarried peers, were seeking a diversity of Jewish content including cultural, volunteer service, and community building options. Regardless of the topic, they wanted to know that programs did not expect them to have prior Jewish knowledge or to be on a path to conversion. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the potential use of online platforms for engaging interfaith couples in opportunities to learn more about Judaism and Jewish life.

**Leverage the Influence of Local Family**
One of the strengths of the GTA Jewish community is that many young couples have grown up in the area and have opportunities through extended family to engage in the celebration of Jewish holidays. These family ties provide a portal to Jewish life that can be leveraged to extend knowledge of and access to other resources for Jewish living. Information about programs specifically designed for or attractive to interfaith couples might be disseminated through families.

It is also important to note the disadvantages faced by interfaith couples without local Jewish family. To address their needs for experiences of Jewish home life, we suggest development of programs that allow young adults to find groups of peers with whom to experience Jewish life. This strategy might include efforts to help young couples connect with other families, including interfaith families, who will open their homes and share aspects of their Jewish family life.

**Develop Satellite Offerings in Strategic Locations Across the GTA**
To address the needs of the growing population of young interfaith couples residing outside traditional Jewish neighborhoods, we recommend programming be offered in multiple locations, including at satellite sites outside the Bathurst Corridor. In areas where there is little or no Jewish institutional footprint, this might include siting programs in secular spaces.
Many interfaith couples may be comfortable with content experienced in religious settings, but others find these environments and this type of programming to be intimidating or not in keeping with their own stance on religion and worship. Providing programming in non-synagogue locations would have the added value of increasing the comfort level of some interfaith couples.

**Experiment with New Options**
Through its allocations function, UJA Federation can encourage experimentation in local programming to better integrate interfaith families into the community. Not every approach will find success, nor will what works for one synagogue or organization be replicable in another. Starting with smaller-scale, pilot programs that include an evaluation component can help the community as a whole discover and develop approaches for welcoming interfaith couples and families.

The Jewish community of Greater Toronto, led by UJA Federation, faces challenges and opportunities as it seeks to enhance the engagement of interfaith couples and families in Jewish life. In this moment of great potential and possibility, we hope that the findings and suggestions of this report help guide the community as it plans for this next chapter.
NOTES

1 We use the terms “interfaith” and “intermarried” to refer to couples in which one partner is Jewish and the other is not. This includes couples that are married as well as those that are in committed relationships.

2 Since more than half of interview couples were recruited through the survey, demographic information will be presented for surveyed couples only.

3 This is higher than among interfaith couples in Canada as a whole, where Jewish men are more likely to be married to a non-Jew than are Jewish women (Brym & Lenton, forthcoming). The difference may reflect the differences between intermarriage in Canada as a whole and in densely Jewish areas such as the GTA.

4 The area bounded by Dupont Street to the south, Major Mackenzie Drive to the north, Dufferin Street to the west, and Yonge Street to the east.

5 “Just Jewish” is a standard survey response for questions about denominational identity.

6 90% of parents were recruited to the survey from the PJ Library contact list; not all necessarily participate in PJ Plus, which is why they reported not attending programs.

7 https://www.mnjcc.org/browse-by-age/for-the-whole-family/jewish-life/1296-jewish.html
REFERENCES


