

Forward.com

Look Who's Raising Jews

Opinion

By Jennifer Thompson

Published May 19, 2010, issue of [May 28, 2010](#).

What do you call people who study Jewish traditions, regularly attend synagogue and work hard to raise Jewish children? Often we simply call such people “non-Jews.”

According to the 2000–01 National Jewish Population Survey, 24% of people living in Jewish households are not Jews, the result of an intermarriage rate that was estimated to have reached 47% by the century's end. With a third of intermarried couples raising their children as Jews, this adds up to a large number of non-Jewish parents who are raising Jewish children.

The Jewish community should be proud of its programming that educates and encourages intermarried couples in their Jewish practices. Such programming is becoming the norm: Even the Conservative movement, which is clear in its opposition to intermarriage, is focusing more on outreach to intermarried families, the topic of a historic workshop hosted earlier this year by the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Nevertheless, we are not yet as engaged as we should be in a deeper conversation about what kind of membership a Jewish person's non-Jewish family members have in the Jewish community.

The language we use to talk about non-Jews is an important way of signaling who and what they are to Jewish communities. Yet we still don't have a way to succinctly and accurately describe non-Jewish family members other than calling them “non-Jews.” This designation creates the false impression that Jewish people's non-Jewish family members are as distant from the Jewish people as any other non-Jew — an impression that is ultimately counterproductive.

For the past five years, I have been researching the experiences of intermarried Jewish families for my doctoral dissertation. My research has focused on the Jewish community of Atlanta, where the rate of intermarriage was nearly 70%, as measured in 2006. I encountered many families in which non-Jewish partners were deeply engaged in Jewish life.

In many instances, a Jewish man married a non-Jewish woman — sometimes a believing Christian, sometimes not — and insisted that their children be raised as Jews. But the Jewish man often did not actually help with Jewish practices in the home, leaving his non-Jewish wife to educate herself about Judaism and lead the family's Jewish practice.

In such cases, the non-Jewish wife could easily have declined to take on this chore, but it was often important to her to feel that her children's Jewishness had integrity. The non-Jewish women I met in the course of my research were selecting synagogues for their families to join, earnestly learning about Jewish traditions and baking challah from scratch. (Many of the families I describe here align themselves with Reform congregations, which recognize patrilineal descent, but one could imagine instances in Conservative, and even Orthodox, communities in which a non-Jewish mother is raising a child who has converted or will end up converting to Judaism.)

I've also met non-Jewish men — like my own husband — who attend synagogue with their Jewish wives and kids and participate actively in Jewish home and communal life. One man with no plans to become Jewish even directs his synagogue's choir, overseeing weekly practices and recording sessions.

I know that not all intermarried couples are this dedicated to Judaism, and that many are quite secular or practice Christianity. Not all non-Jews married to Jews have the same relationship with the Jewish community. Yet we have no way of referring to women and men like the ones I described earlier except as “non-Jews,” distant and excluded from the Jewish community. It is ironic that these non-Jews are helping to ensure Jewish continuity, as they and their Jewish spouses understand it, even though they have no recognized place in the Jewish community.

Rabbis whom I interviewed as part of my research were deeply concerned about the needs of individuals as well as the integrity of the Jewish tradition, but I did not hear of any sustained conversation among them about what to call people in this situation. Often, our communal focus seems fixed on encouraging conversion, which is a safe, traditional answer, but it's not an answer that speaks to many of the people at whom it's ostensibly aimed. Some rabbis have floated the idea of *ger toshav*, a “resident alien,” which would recognize the non-Jew's place in the community without requiring conversion, but that doesn't seem to have caught on either.

Giving these non-Jews a more specific name would show that we're taking their contributions to the Jewish community seriously. Perhaps the name should come from the people themselves. The emergence of groups like the Mothers Circle, an educational support group for non-Jewish women raising Jewish children, is helping to generate a consciousness among their members that they share experiences and concerns. As that consciousness develops, perhaps a new name will spontaneously emerge. I hope that if it does, we will be listening and ready to hear the name of these people who are part of our community, even if we don't fully realize it yet.

Jennifer Thompson recently received her doctorate in ethics and society from Emory University.

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