



STILL JEWISH!

What It Means Now to Be a Jewish Woman in an Interfaith Marriage

by Jeri B. Zeder

At various times in the last century in America, we intermarried Jewish women have been reviled as “decimators” of the Jewish people, declared prematurely “dead” by our own parents, and seen rabbis publicly turn their backs on our husbands, the fathers of our children, in synagogue. We’ve been surveyed, counted, and sorted into categories we don’t necessarily claim for ourselves. We’ve had lots to say, but until now we have rarely been heard as our own unique demographic.

Keren McGinity has just completed a study of Jewish American women who married non-Jews. I agreed to be one of her subjects. Though I have not personally lived through every horror story listed above—my parents, for example, did not say kaddish for me when I married my non-Jewish husband, whom they love—I had experienced enough. One of the first things I told McGinity was that I was not interested in participating in a study that was going to view my marriage as an unmitigated disaster of Hitlerian proportions. That was not her angle, and maybe because of her earnestness—or the coupling of her Jewish first name with a decidedly not-Jewish last name—I chose to trust her and accept her invitation to talk.

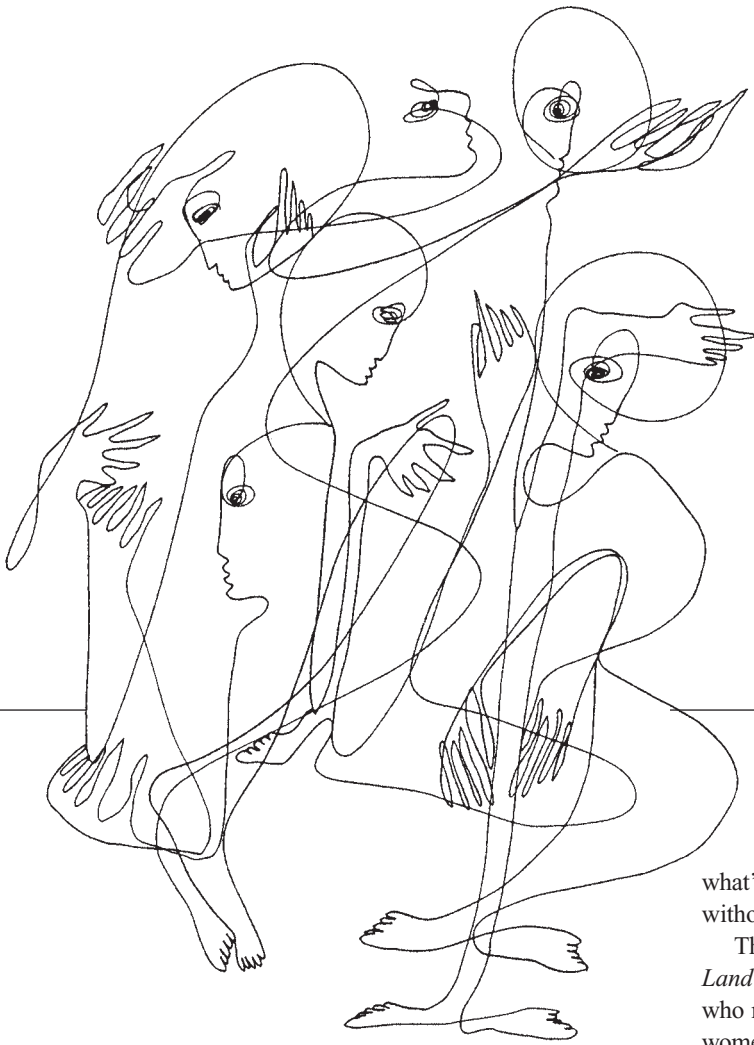
McGinity asked me about my background, our courtship, religious attitudes, power negotiations and more. Questions

like: “Did you and your husband make any compromises before getting engaged?” and “If you had to do it all over again, would you intermarry?”

McGinity herself is one of “us”: a Jewish woman married to a Gentile man. She’s also, now, a Ph.D. from Brown. Her just-completed dissertation, “Still Jewish: A History of Women and Intermarriage in America,” is the first gendered history of intermarriage and the first historical, exclusive look at American Jewish women who intermarried during the Twentieth Century. McGinity interviewed 42 Boston-area women of Ashkenazi descent from Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox backgrounds, whose first, second, or third marriages were to non-Jewish men they married between 1938 and 2000; the oldest woman was 92 at the time of her interview.

Other scholars—sociologists, psychologists, and demographers—have studied intermarriage and how attitudes toward it have shifted over time. Usually we look at population studies and their offspring—theories on why Jews intermarry, programs to prevent intermarriage, injunctions against rabbis performing intermarriages, and so on—in the present tense, for the substance of what they say, and their implications. But McGinity is a historian. In her work—as in our own experience—we intermarried Jewish women take center stage. The

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most important truth she points to is this: that intermarried Jewish women are defining for themselves what a Jewish family is—and those definitions, while they may not please some, feel authentically Jewish for the people who are creating them.

When she speaks publicly about her work, as she did in April in Newton, Massachusetts, McGinity cautions up front that the women she interviewed do not make up a statistically valid random sample. Her approach is qualitative. “I’m using the personal not simply to quantify how many people are attending services, lighting candles, having or not having a Christmas tree,” she says. “I’m more interested in what having or not having a Christmas tree means.” When a woman has a Christmas tree because she no longer considers herself Jewish, it isn’t the same as when, say, a woman has a Christmas tree out of respect for her widowed mother-in-law who had no one else to spend Christmas with, McGinity’s thinking implies.

Comparing these experiences over the span of 10 decades, McGinity asserts that what intermarriage meant for Jewish women in the first half of the century is quite different from what it meant in the second half—a finding consistent with those of other researchers. A primary catalyst for change was feminism, she claims. Jewish women marrying in the latter decades of the century not only felt less constricted by community expectations, but were also more assertive about wanting a Jewish home, stating clearly that they wanted this, and

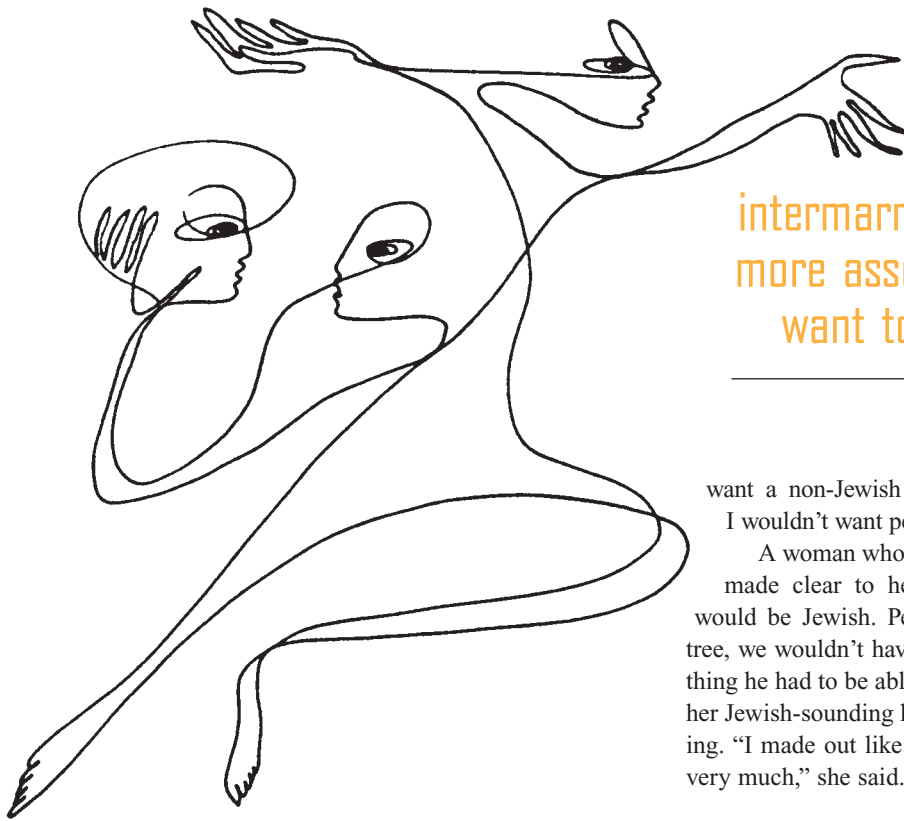
what’s more, they could imagine a marriage and a Jewish home without a Jewish man in the house.

The words of writer Mary Antin, author of *The Promised Land* (1912) and an immigrant from the Pale of Settlement who married a Lutheran in 1901, speak of a new world where women could marry for love, and were freer than they were in the Pale to choose a different way of life. McGinity quotes from her writings: “When I came to America I lightly dropped the religious forms that I had mocked before...”

Though not quite Jewish, Antin did not embrace Christianity. When push came to shove, she declared: “I can no more return to the Jewish fold than I can return to my mother’s womb; neither can I in decency continue to enjoy my accidental personal immunity from the penalties of being a Jew in a time of virulent anti-Semitism. The least I can do, in my need to share the sufferings of my people, is declare that I am one of them.”

McGinity reminds us too of Rose Pastor Stokes (1879-1933), and Anna Strunsky (1877-1964), also immigrant Jewish women who intermarried in the early 1900s. Stokes was a socialist and anti-war activist; Strunsky, a writer. “They for the most part moved into their husbands’ and mainstream social circles,” McGinity reports. “They left the Jewish fold, more than not.”

The women McGinity spoke with who intermarried in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s felt the sting of anti-Semitism and tried to submerge their Jewish identities. “I’ll always admit that I’m Jewish if asked,” one woman said, “but I don’t come forward all the time and say that I am.” Another woman, a World War II refugee from Vienna, explained that anti-Semitism had influenced her decision to marry a non-Jew in 1949. “In some ways, I’ve wondered lately whether I was running away from all of this,” she said. Several of McGinity’s interviewees reported that



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intermarried Jewish women are
more assertive now, saying they
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their knowledge of Jewish life was too sketchy to pass on to their children. Some became Unitarians and ceased to consider themselves Jewish at all. Yet all these women were “still Jewish,” in McGinity’s eyes, in a different sense. One of the women who converted to Unitarianism recounted that, after attending a bar mitzvah, she remarked to her husband, “I was the only person there who wasn’t Jewish.” His response? “But you are.” Even for those who had converted, “no one let a Jew forget she was a Jew,” McGinity says. “Jewishness was inescapable, whether they claimed it for themselves or not.”

Influenced by the diminishing ethnic and racial boundaries of the time, and the growing fascination with ethnicity (think *Black is Beautiful*, and the rise of Jewish pride after the Six-Day War of 1967), McGinity’s women who intermarried in the 1960s and 70s felt free to marry gentile men while at the same time—unlike their counterparts in earlier decades—strongly and loudly affirming their Jewish identity. One woman, who married a non-Jew in 1969, told McGinity that a powerful influence was “this idea that we’re all the same and that...the way to solve a lot of the conflicts and problems—because it was the civil rights movement we were just coming out of—was that people would intermarry.” (When this woman’s father learned of her intention to marry a Japanese-American, he warned her, chillingly, “Remember Pearl Harbor.”)

These decades also saw the rise of second-wave feminism and then a distinctly Jewish feminism. For some women in McGinity’s sample, even the feminist question of whether to change over to a husband’s last name had a Jewish twist. Every time she met someone new, said one woman who took her husband’s non-Jewish-sounding name, she would work into the conversation the fact that she was Jewish. Another woman, who chose to keep her birth name, told McGinity, “I did not

want a non-Jewish last name...because I am Jewish and I wouldn’t want people to think that I wasn’t.”

A woman who married in 1978 told McGinity that she made clear to her husband-to-be that their household would be Jewish. Period. “We wouldn’t have a Christmas tree, we wouldn’t have Christmas lights, and that was something he had to be able to live with.” She insisted that he take her Jewish-sounding last name, and they wound up hyphenating. “I made out like a bandit on this one. I did not give up very much,” she said.

Intermarriage rates, which had been creeping steadily upward, soared at the end of the Twentieth Century, from 2 percent in the years 1900-1920 to nearly 50 percent by the year 2000. There was unprecedented hysteria in the Jewish community about intermarriage, as clergy and scholars issued warnings about a new impending “Holocaust,” this one precipitated by love, not hate. But women who intermarried between 1980 and 2000 tell a different story. Many describe a vibrant commitment to living Jewish lives in Jewish families. “My parents think I’m a religious fanatic now, because I say the prayers on Friday night,” one Jewish woman told McGinity.

Not only do they claim a Jewish identity for themselves; many intermarried women also have insisted on passing Judaism on to their children. “If we don’t do it, it won’t get done,” one interviewee asserted. These wives, unchallenged, are in charge; they are their family’s Jewish “experts.” Their role as the family’s Jewish spiritual leaders has made them, perhaps, work harder at living a Jewish life than they would have otherwise. Explaining her and her husband’s roles in raising Jewish children, one woman said, “I am carrying more weight around here and with my family because my husband is looking to me on different holidays to show the way. So maybe that has made me stiffen my back a bit and do some reading and learn how to carry the show, like maybe I wouldn’t have to if I’d married someone else who is Jewish.”

Ironically, at the same time as many intermarried Jewish women were working hard to build Jewish families, some were being ostracized at synagogues. One woman reported that the rabbi made her gentile husband sit with the congregation, rather than with her on the bima, during their baby’s

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naming ceremony. Another says she got the “hairy eyeball” from temple staff when she, bearing a non-Jewish last name, was trying to organize a bris for her son. Another, participating in a program in Israel for Jewish leaders, had to endure an opening discussion condemning intermarriage. This, despite the fact that these are women actively participating in the Jewish community and raising children who are socially and, because they are born to Jewish mothers, 100 percent Jewish according to Jewish law.

The widely acknowledged revitalization of Jewish life at the end of the twentieth century—new synagogue programs to draw in twenty-somethings, burgeoning Jewish film festivals, concerts of ethnic Jewish music, and more—is influencing intermarried Jewish women. And the influence may be mutual. McGinity pulls out this telling detail: four generations after Mary Antin intermarried in 1901, her great-granddaughter married a Jewish man and is raising a Jewish daughter. “Intermarried Jewish women are part of the revitalization of Judaism,” McGinity insists. “They are not apart from it.”

Vassar historian Deborah Dash Moore believes McGinity’s work will provide a necessary counterpoint to the popular, overwrought handling of this subject. “This is important because intermarriage for the last decade or more has been used as the fire alarm in the night, the wake-up call to American Jews, generating sufficient anxiety so they’ll open their

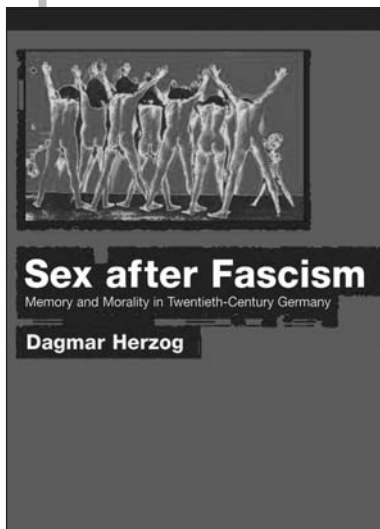
pocketbooks,” she says. “A little bit of dispassion from a historical perspective is valuable.”

McGinity argues that intermarried Jewish women are now making Jewish homes according to their own definitions of “Jewish.” That may be so, but this self-definition sidesteps the question of Jewish continuity—a subject McGinity did not intend her thesis to address. Brandeis professor Sylvia Barack Fishman, author of *Double or Nothing? Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage* (see facing page) says that intermarried Jewish men are significantly less likely to raise Jewish children than are intermarried Jewish women—15 percent to 40 percent, according to Fishman. But the families with the highest likelihood of raising their kids Jewish are those where both parents are Jewish. It simply is the case, Fishman says, that if current rates of intermarriage persist or rise, the population of American Jews will fall.

In the first half of the twentieth century, fewer Jewish women intermarried, suggesting that they were less free to choose non-Jewish spouses. But McGinity’s research suggests that they also felt less free, when they did intermarry, to live as Jews. While intermarried Jewish women today may feel freer to marry for love rather than to uphold tradition, they are also freer, thanks in part to feminism’s gains, to live comfortably as Jews despite not having—or maybe because of not having—a Jewish spouse. ●

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THINKING ALLOWED



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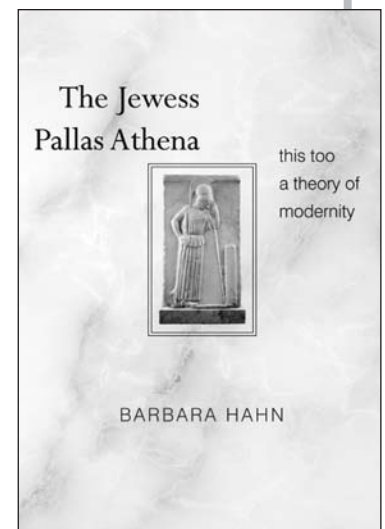
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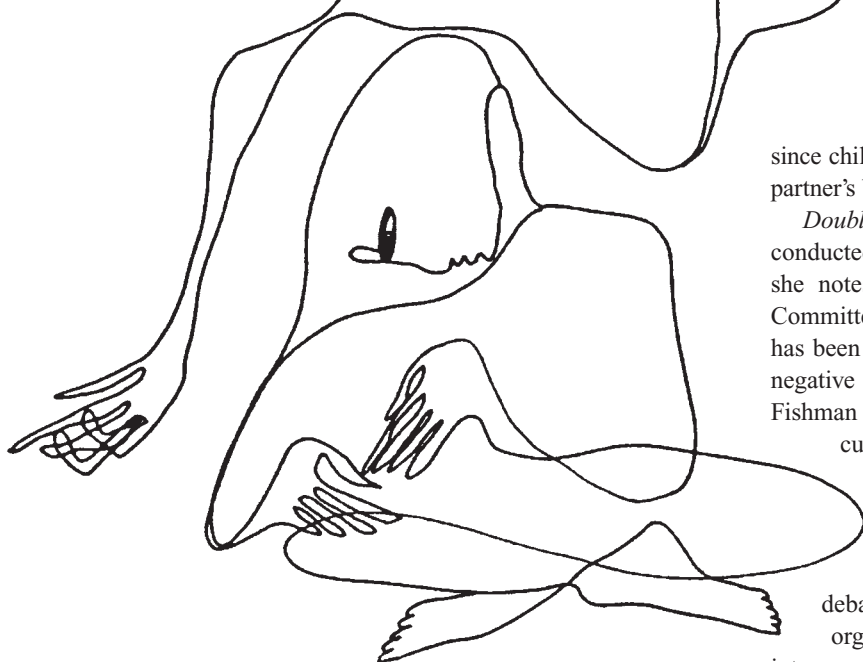
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Different Takes on Intermarriage

Eighteen years ago, Paul and Rachel Cowan published *Mixed Blessings: Marriage between Jews and Christians*, a classic in the literature on intermarriage. Its authors, a man born Jewish who grew up in an assimilated family, and his wife, a New England Unitarian and a descendent of Mayflower Pilgrims (now a Jew by Choice and a Reform rabbi), were candid about their bias in favor of choosing a Jewish life. Their book recounted, in a way that hadn't been done before, the emotional and practical details of marriages between Jews and Christians.

As the rate of intermarriage has accelerated, the controversy over what it means and how to respond has found its way into more and more conferences, programs, sermons and family conversations. What questions do we ask, and of whom? How to understand the data, whether from questionnaires or impromptu conversations, scientific polls or our personal experience? It's not surprising that a schism exists in the Jewish community between those who feel an urgent need to help intermarried couples connect with the Jewish community, and those who regard such activity as a waste of time and resources. Two recent books exemplify different views of the intermarriage reality.

Double or Nothing? Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage by Sylvia Barack Fishman (Brandeis University Press, \$24.95) and *Interfaith Families: Personal Stories of Jewish-Christian Intermarriage* by Jane Kaplan (Praeger, \$39.95) both rely on interviews with couples, and each adds something new and important. *Double or Nothing* presents background and current data regarding intermarriage (the term used here for those couples where there has been no religious conversion) and how it is affecting and is affected by the Jewish community. *Interfaith Families* provide readable narratives which illuminate the emotions and decisions experienced by individuals contemplating or living with intermarriage: How do we explain our choice to our parents? Can I give up the celebrations I've loved

since childhood? What if I feel allergic to religious things my partner's background?

Double or Nothing? is a work based on research Fishman conducted for the American Jewish Committee in 2001, and she notes the support of Steven Bayme, director of the Committee's Department of Contemporary Jewish Life, who has been one of the most consistent voices emphasizing the negative impact of intermarriage on the future of Judaism. Fishman comprehensively covers the historical, religious, cultural and personal perspectives, and those who have been following the emotionally charged communal arguments about the effects of intermarriage on the Jewish community will want to know what she has to say. The current debate has included whether it's ethical for Jewish organizations and schools to deny employment to an intermarried person (either partner, whether Jewish or not), as well as whether resources should be spent on outreach to those deemed marginally Jewish (that is, the intermarried) or more wisely and appropriately spent on those already affiliated and ritually observant.

Given its academic and sociological approach, Fishman's book will be of most interest to clergy, educators, and others concerned with intermarriage issues. I count myself among that group. I am a Jew by Choice, for the past 20 years an active synagogue member and an outreach professional developing ways to draw interfaith families closer to the Jewish community. I see the concerns about interfaith families from both sides.

I understand that my journey may not be the norm. My work has ranged from hauling Jewish soul food from Zabar's in Manhattan for a deli-deprived temple community in Lincoln, Nebraska, to piloting the Conservative movement's *Keruv* ("drawing people near") initiative at my synagogue. I have seen up close the benefits when non-Jews and their Jewish partners feel welcome to explore Judaism, and so I worry about the consequences that may derive from the suggestion in Fishman's title that if both partners are not Jewish there will be "nothing" Jewish in their lives.

More useful (and perhaps more sympathetic) for intermarried couples and their parents is Kaplan's *Interfaith Families*; the author delivers more than 50 portraits of individuals and couples touched by intermarriage, and then steps out of the picture. "There were no experts who stepped in to comment on the material or to offer their interpretations," she writes.

Nearly a generation after the Cowans' groundbreaking work, we hear new themes among the familiar ones. In the past, the non-Jew may have been bewildered when the "uninvolved" Jewish partner insisted on having Jewish children; this has often given way to firmer and more specific demands from the non-Jewish or newly Jewish partner that the Jewish spouse get on board with active participation. For those living directly or by association with intermarriage (which at this point is nearly every Jewish family in America), Kaplan's work provides a welcome opportunity to learn "the kinds of details only someone experiencing a situation firsthand could know."

—Eve Coulson