

Parenting when Jewish and Something Else:
An exploratory qualitative study
of interfaith parents in Greater Los Angeles

Commissioned by:



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Introduction

For decades, social scientific studies of Jewish identity assessed the prevalence of various behaviors and attitudes to measure the relative strength or weakness of Jewish identities. The presence of non-Jews in Jews' lives was assumed to have a detrimental impact on the robustness of Jewish identities.¹ The phenomenon of intermarriage has been characterized as a threat to the future of the Jewish people and a problem to be solved.² Jews who marry non-Jews tend to be aware of the stigma that comes with that choice. They have only recently begun to feel welcomed by Jewish organizations.³

This macro-context underpins the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles' motivation to better understand interfaith parents. According to the 2021 Study of Jewish Los Angeles (SJLA), more than half (57%) of married or partnered couples include one Jewish person.⁴ The Federation aims to use findings from the current study to support Jewish organizations across Los Angeles to better serve members of this population.

This research is a follow-up to the 2021 study, which was commissioned by The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles and conducted in partnership with the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis and NORC at the University of Chicago. Based on data from more than 3,700 survey respondents, that study aimed to create a comprehensive description of the characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors of Jews in the second-largest Jewish

population in the United States. The principal goal of the study was to promote an understanding of the community and to aid strategic planning, program development, and policies to support and enhance Jewish life. The findings – presented as a series of thematic reports – were framed as the starting point of an ongoing conversation that would ultimately generate new research questions to support the further refinement of the Federation's priorities and strategies.

To highlight the diversity of expressions of Jewish life that are unique to Los Angeles, the researchers behind the Study of Jewish Los Angeles examined “an expansive set of ritual, communal, and individual behaviors, as well as overall patterns of Jewish behaviors.”⁵ They created a typology (an “Index of Jewish Engagement”), to identify five patterns of Jewish involvement that generally describe a “low-to-high continuum,” where the Minimally Involved participate in few Jewish activities and the Immersed engage in a wide range.⁶ Like other studies focused on the Jewish lives of intermarried Jews, the SJLA found that couples with one Jewish partner are generally less engaged with the Jewish community than couples with two Jewish partners. With the follow-up study “Jewish engagement of intermarried households: Reanalysis of 2022 Study of Jewish LA,” researchers explored the diversity of Jewish engagement among intermarried Jews.

Introduction

That report provides “more insight about the relationship between intermarriage and engagement and highlights the characteristics of intermarried Jews of all different engagement patterns.”⁷

The current study was designed to add qualitative nuance to those quantitative insights. Findings from the SJLA showed that interfaith families make up a significant segment of the Jewish population in Greater Los Angeles, yet they are often under-represented in Jewish organizational involvement. While the study found that 64% of children of interfaith/mixed heritage parents are being raised Jewish in some way, just 11% of interfaith/mixed heritage couples with age-eligible children have children enrolled in part time Jewish school and just 3% have children enrolled in Jewish day school or yeshiva. In addition, 51% of couples with one Jewish partner never attend Jewish religious services, and 68% of mixed-heritage Jewish

adults are minimally (40%) or sporadically (28%) engaged with Jewish organizations.⁸

These quantitative findings (among others) animate the guiding question driving the current study. By hearing from interfaith couples directly, the current study contributes to an even more detailed picture of couples’ motivations and choices related to Jewish engagement.

In many ways, the attitudes and behaviors of the couples in this qualitative sample mirror those in the quantitative study. As such, their experiences and perspectives highlight some of the personal, contextual, and relational dynamics that inform most couples’ choices related to Jewish organizational participation. In other ways, the experiences of couples in the current sample are distinct from the majority in the quantitative study: their engagement choices shed light on some of the experiences of those in the minority.

Guiding questions driving the current study include:

How do interfaith parents find community?

How do they make decisions related to Jewish practice and involvement?

How do interfaith parents experience Jewish community?

What, if anything, do they see as barriers to participation in Jewish organizations?

How can the Los Angeles Jewish community support these families’ flourishing?

This report begins with a description of the research methodology. Background information about the research participants is then shared, including demographic details, along with information about research participants' religious upbringing and current identification. The extent of couples' Jewish engagement and their perspectives on the relative importance of being Jewish are then contextualized in relation to findings from the 2021 Study of Jewish LA. Research participants' perspectives about their identities as "interfaith parents" are then explored. Next, findings are offered about what raising Jewish children looks like in practice. The next section presents a typology of how couples' relational dynamics influence their approaches to parenting. "Jewish Engagement" details the variety of couples' Jewish communal participation. "Barriers to Jewish Engagement"

offers insights about what gets in the way of belonging. "Fostering Belonging" includes details about the characteristics that have contributed to research participants' sense of connect and community and offers their suggestions and ideas about supporting their participation in Jewish communal organizations. The final sections offer concluding thoughts.

The quotes included throughout the report were chosen to represent a variety of perspectives and a balance of voices. Every couple was quoted at least once, and no research participant was quoted more than twice. Quotes were edited for readability.

A note about language:

Cultural ideas have outpaced language, leading to a paucity of terms to adequately describe many of the key concepts related to this research. Terms like "non-Jew," "interfaith," and "intermarriage," while still commonly used, remain problematic on numerous levels. With this caveat - and in the absence of more suitable language - those terms are used in the current report.

Methodology

To better understand the experiences and perspectives of interfaith parents, we conducted hourlong interviews with each partner from 20 couples (n=40). To recruit research participants, we activated the Federation's extensive communal connections to broadly issue an invitation via email that included information about the study along with a link to a brief screener survey.

We used self-identification to construct the sample, following best practices for research on interethnic relationships.⁹ The screener survey asked for demographic information using open-ended questions to gather each partner's gender, ethnic and/or racial identities; religious/spiritual identities and backgrounds; their zip code; and the number and ages of their children. A question was also included that asked: "How much, if at all, is being Jewish an important part of your family life?" Response options included: very, moderately, slightly, and not at all.

The screener enabled us to locate couples who: self-identified as interfaith, multi-faith, dual-heritage, interethnic, and/or intercultural; who have at least one child under the age of 13; and whose perspectives vary about the relative importance of being Jewish in their family life. Since the research is focused on better understanding motivations and decision-making related to Jewish engagement, the sample excludes respondents who indicated that being Jewish is "not at all" an important part of their family life.

From the 124 couples who responded, we constructed a purposive sample that included as much diversity as possible in terms of research participants' race, religion, sexual orientation, number and age of children, and geographic location.

Thirty couples were invited to participate in the study and the first 20 who responded were included. Research participants were each given a \$50 Amazon gift card as an incentive and to express the Federation's gratitude for their willingness to share their perspectives.

While the normative approach in social scientific studies of marriage has been to include both partners' perspectives, research on interfaith marriage has less often included the non-Jewish partner.¹⁰ Hearing from both partners enabled us to gain a more complete understanding of interfaith couples' dynamics than is possible when only one partner's perspective is included.¹¹ Interviewing each partner separately enabled us to avoid the presupposition of a primary parent or a sole decision-maker. Instead, our approach sheds light on the similarities and differences related to partners' perspectives about their parenting decisions and the Jewish character of their families.¹²

Interviews were analyzed using a grounded theory approach: by grouping recurring ideas into a series of codes, which were then grouped by theme.

Themes were identified using a combination of emergent coding (where codes are derived from themes that surface inductively from the text and *a priori* coding (in which select codes are articulated beforehand). Outlying responses were also investigated. This method was used to firmly ground the insights derived from the data in the perspectives of the research participants.

“Are we interfaith enough?”

At the beginning of their interviews, two couples – whose self-identification in the screener qualified them for participation in the study – asked if they were “interfaith enough” to participate. They opted to take part a study about interfaith parents because the invitation was open to parents who identify as multi-faith, dual-heritage, interethnic, and/or intercultural inter-ethnic.

In one case, one of the partners is a secular Israeli. The other moved to the United States from the Former Soviet Union when they were 18. Growing up, they understood that they were ethnically Jewish and began to learn about Jewish identity during college. They shared:

Technically, we’re both Jewish, but we have very different cultural backgrounds and perspectives about how we want to raise our kids...My partner wants them to identify as Jewish but doesn’t know what that means and is apathetic. I want our kids to learn about all religions so they can have the ability to choose.

The other couple includes a partner who grew up involved in Jewish life and another who recently converted to Judaism, but who “grew up saying I was Jewish but that meant nothing.” They explained:

My mom was adopted by Jews who celebrated no holidays. We had a Christmas tree every year and once we decorated it blue. At some point my mom became very involved with Agape. I loved it and grew up in that community.

While other studies might have excluded these couples from the sample, these couples qualified to participate because they opted in. Since the goal driving this study is to support the Los Angeles Jewish community to better serve the needs of interfaith families, excluding these couples would have been paradoxical and could have had a harmful effect.

This methodological consideration illustrates two of the themes that strongly emerged from the findings: 1) the term “interfaith” is highly subjective and fluid and 2) the lived experiences of interfaith couples is diverse and multifaceted.

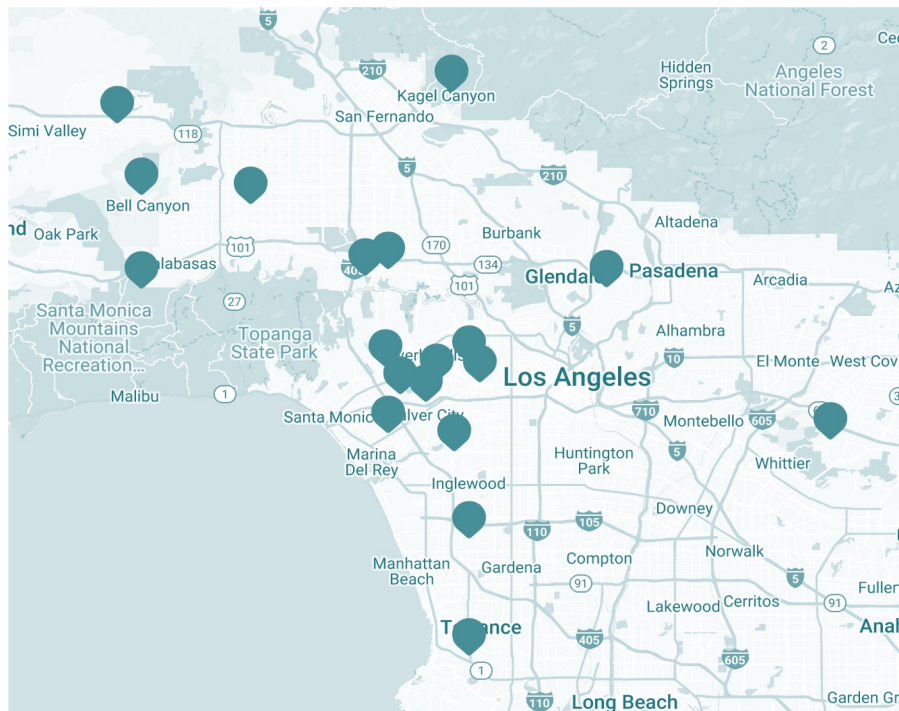
Research Participants

The 20 Couples live throughout Greater Los Angeles. They live in both the most and least densely populated Jewish areas of Greater Los Angeles, as defined by the 2021 Study of Jewish LA, which divided Jewish households into six regions for analysis purposes.¹³ Research participants live in each of those regions. One couple recently moved from Metro Los Angeles to outside the parameters of the study.

Most research participants (24 of 40) are transplants to Los Angeles: 60% moved to Los Angeles as adults. They moved for college, work, and to be near their families. Most grew up in other parts of the United States, including the Northeast (7), the Midwest (2), and in other parts of the West (5). Another ten research participants were born outside the U.S.: in the Former Soviet Union (5), Peru (2) and one each in Israel, Egypt, and the United Kingdom. Two other research participants have Israeli parents and grew up outside of Israel.

Fewer than half of research participants (40%) spent most of their growing up years in Los Angeles. Both partners in just three couples were born in Greater Los Angeles.

Regions	% of Jewish households:	# of couples in the sample
North County Valleys	4%	1
East Valley	15%	3
Westside	26%	3
West Valley	26%	3
Central/Metro/Mid	24%	8
South Bay	5%	1
Outlier (East of Central/Metro/Mid)	-	1



Research Participants

Ethnic and/or Racial Identities

Ten couples include a partner who is white, and another who identifies as: Black (2), Chinese, Egyptian, Hispanic, Latino, Mexican, Mixed (White and Asian), Persian, and Taiwanese. Eight couples include two white partners. One research participant identified as a Jew of color.

In one couple, both the Jewish and non-Jewish partners identify as Hispanic. In another, one partner identifies as African American and the other identifies as mixed: Ashkenazi and African American.

Gender Identities and Sexual Orientation

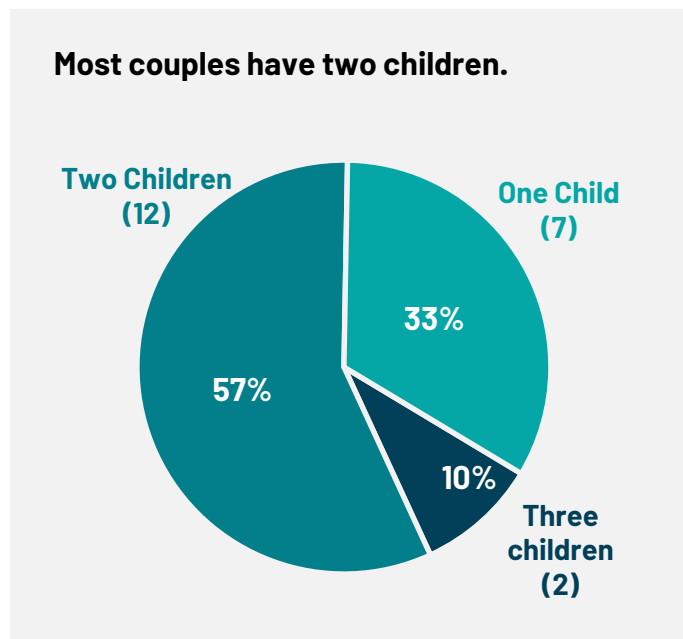
Most couples (18) have one partner who identifies as a woman and another who

identifies as a man. In two couples, both partners identify as women. (Despite targeted recruitment efforts, no couples with two men partners responded to the screener survey). One couple self-identified as polyamorous.

Children

The 20 couples have a total of 35 children, who range in age from less than a year old to age 15. More than half (13 couples) are parents of children ages five and under.

While just one family self-identified as having a child with special needs, the sample may include others who did not share this information.¹⁴



Jewish Research Participants

Among the Jewish partners: 16 identify as women and six identify as men.* Most had two Jewish parents. Four research participants had one Jewish parent. Of those four, one grew up identifying as Jewish, another grew up “interfaith but primarily Jewish” and two identified as “both.” Just one Jewish respondent said they had no Jewish connections or experiences growing up.

Most (18) mentioned attending Hebrew school and/or becoming a bar or bat mitzvah. Growing up, seven were affiliated with Conservative synagogues and another seven were affiliated with Reform synagogues. One was involved with Chabad and one identified as Modern Orthodox growing up.

Several talked about their Jewish heritage with pride. One mentioned how theirs was the oldest Jewish family in their city growing up. Another shared that their grandparents founded the synagogue where they grew up, and where their children now attend. Three said they are grandchildren of Holocaust survivors.

Research participants’ descriptions of their Jewish lives highlighted the significant role that Jewish education and organizational affiliation played in their sense of self as Jewish adults. This experience echoes findings from the SJLA, which found an association between Jewish educational background and engagement in adulthood, and which in turn corroborated findings from several other studies.¹⁵

In their own words:

I was raised Jewish and we went to a Conservative synagogue. I went to Hebrew school, had a bar mitzvah and I did USY for awhile. We had holidays with family, lit candles on Friday nights, and have family in Israel. College was a time to figure out my relationship with Judaism. I studied religion and philosophy and developed a lot of skepticism, but realized there was something of value in Judaism.

Growing up, I was immersed in Jewish life and I had a very strong Jewish identity. We had anti-Semitic neighbors, and I was staunchly and proudly “don’t-mess-with-me” Jewish. I went to Jewish camp every summer. I want my daughter to have a Jewish identity.

We came from the FSU as Jewish refugees. Meeting a rabbi who invited us to his home for Passover was life changing. I began going to Hebrew school and in high school almost all of my extracurriculars were Jewish. I was part of a Jewish teen fellowship, taught at the religious school, interned at a center for Holocaust studies, went to Israel through the local Federation... Now my brother is a rabbi.

*In two couples who self-identified as interfaith, both partners identify as Jewish in some way. (See page 5: Are we interfaith enough?)

Non-Jewish Research Participants

Among the non-Jewish partners in the sample, eight come from families with Catholic backgrounds. Of those, four continue to identify as Catholic. Two now identify as Catholic and atheist. One identifies as “nothing/Catholic,” and one is now practicing Judaism.

Seven non-Jewish partners are from families with Christian backgrounds. Of those, four continue to identify as: Christian (2), Coptic, and Episcopalian. Three others identify as atheists and/or agnostic.

Two said they grew up with no religion: one identified as ethnically Chinese, and another grew up in the United Kingdom. One research participant grew up and remains “Buddhist/agnostic.”

Non-Jewish research participants expressed a wide range of orientations to their religious upbringing, from continued commitment to fond nostalgia to adamant rejection.

In their own words:

I grew up Baptist. At church I was drawn to the choir. The community was cool and it was fun. It was nice to see my mom and my grandma, all my relatives: everyone get all dressed up. I enjoyed the ritual of it, the routine. It was always there. It's not as much a part of my life anymore, but I still feel connected. When I go home, it's still comfortable.

I grew up in a Christian household. My dad was a minister, and my mom was very faithful. I went to church everyday growing up and I prayed a lot. My friends called me “church boy”. I wanted to be a minister and I still have a calling in my life. Most of my friends are strong faith believers.

I really loved growing up in the church. It provided a lot of community and friendship that I otherwise wouldn't have had. I went to religious camp. It was really fun: feeling like you're part of something larger than yourself and your family. I lost that when I left the church at 18.

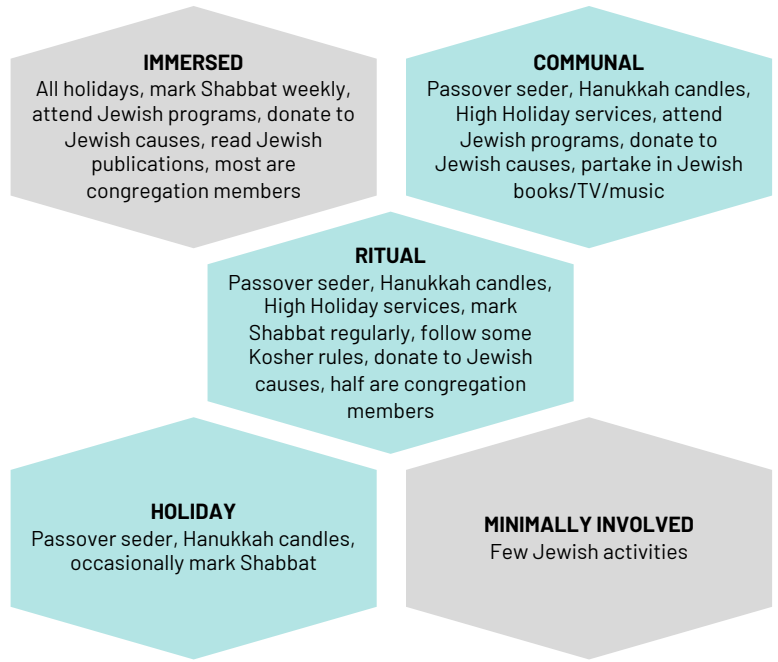
I grew up Roman Catholic. We did church on Sundays and took communion. I did religious school and the seven sacraments. I didn't challenge it. I didn't know what I didn't know. Now I don't believe in it. Religion is cult-like. It's all baloney and a ludicrous waste of time. I'm more science-oriented, driven by facts and statistics and things that are tangible.

I was raised Buddhist... My family had a small alter with ancestors, but it's more cultural and family oriented, less about formal ritual. I grew up hearing about Buddha and reincarnation, but we were never regularly going to the Temple. The Buddhism only really came out for funerals.

Jewish Importance and Engagement

The current study did not systematically gather data that would enable the couples to be precisely categorized within the SJLA's typology of Jewish engagement.¹⁶ Yet, their narrative descriptions of involvement indicate that most have experiences that would likely fall into three types of engagement: "Holiday," "Ritual," and "Communal." This is congruent with SJLA findings, where the majority of both intermarried and inmarried respondents fall within the in the three middle engagement groups. In this way, the sample is more engaged than the SJLA sample, in which 40% of intermarried Jewish adults were categorized as "Minimally Involved."

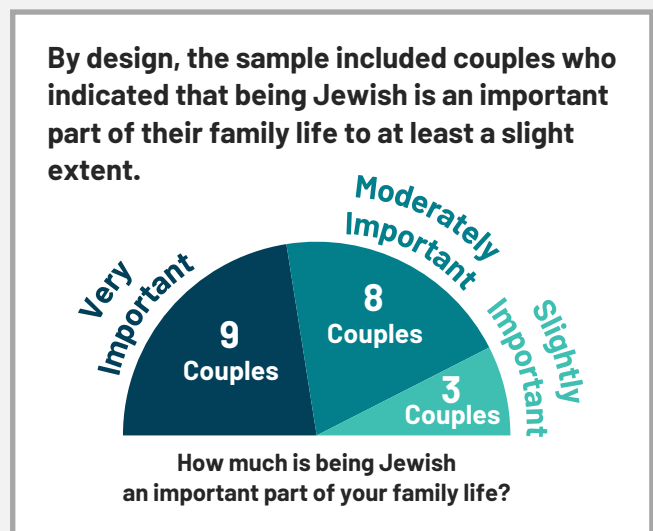
The 20 couples could roughly be categorized within the "Holiday," "Ritual," and "Communal" engagement categories as defined by the SJLA's "Index of Jewish Engagement."



To better understand interfaith parents' motivations and decision-making processes related to Jewish engagement, the sample included only research participants who indicated that being Jewish is an important part their family life to at least a slight extent. So, unlike the SJLA sample (in which 64% of children of interfaith/mixed heritage parents are being raised Jewish in some way), every couple in the current sample is raising their children Jewish in some way.

Couples' indication of the importance of being Jewish in their family life was not necessarily an indication of how they are raising their children. Three of the nine couples who indicated that being Jewish is "very important" are raising

their children as Jewish and something else. Four of those raising Jewish children indicated that being Jewish is "moderately important" to their family life.



(Not) Identifying as Interfaith

While every research participant qualified for the study by self-identifying as “interfaith, multi-faith, dual-heritage, interethnic, and/or intercultural,” their self-perception proved more complex. During the interviews when asked about how they describe themselves related to their marriage and family, only a few research participants said any of those labels truly resonate. Some couples’ responses made it clear that they had not previously discussed how they represent themselves or their families related to their mixed heritage.

Jewish research participants articulated their understanding of how intermarriage has been implicitly and explicitly denigrated in Jewish culture. Several described their experience navigating their parents’ perspectives about intermarriage. Their marriages to non-Jewish partners were seen a problem and a source of disappointment. About half of Jewish respondents mentioned experiencing familial pressure or conflict at some point related to their partner’s non-Jewish background. Just one Jewish respondent described how they had strongly internalized this negative frame:

I grew up thinking I'd marry a Jewish person, but when I met my partner, I had to come to terms with it. I was worried about what it would mean for navigating raising kids. I want my kids to identify as Jewish. I worried about how others would see me and about what my friends and family might think. I had to process all of that.

Most research participants described how their parents’ initial discomfort and disapproval has

since dissipated. One said: *“My family is very Jewish and was not excited that the person I met was not Jewish, but they all came around.”*

No one described their decision to marry non-Jewish partners as a choice to reject their Jewish heritage or identity. Nor was it a decision to claim a stigmatized identity or be embraced by a marginalized community. Instead, the label was externally assigned. One explained:

There's this tendency to label interfaith families without first asking them how they identify. That your partner's not Jewish shouldn't be the first thing on anyone's mind. That just makes people feel excluded.

Several research participants acknowledged that while they do not identify as interfaith, they occasionally use that term because they know it will be legible to outsiders. One shared:

We identify as interfaith because I understand that's how others would think of us. But I don't think of myself as an interfaith parent. I'm a Jewish parent and we have a Jewish family, but my partner isn't Jewish.

Others responded with a similarly descriptive explanation about what they do, rather than what they call themselves. One offered:

I don't know if there is a term to describe us, so I say: 'my partner is Jewish and this is what we do.'

(Not) Identifying as Interfaith

Couples that included people of color were similarly aware of other's perceptions of their relationships and families. They more commonly identified as "multi-cultural," "inter-cultural," and "mixed-religion." While these labels are used by others to understand them, they are not personally resonant. A research participant shared:

I've never referred to us as interfaith. Other people think we are. We also don't refer to ourselves as multicultural, though we definitely are.

Most research participants did not describe their relationships using a frame of reference that centered their different backgrounds. This was not a salient way to understanding themselves. One asserted:

In almost all relationships, people are bringing different cultures. Why draw attention to something that doesn't need additional attention? It feels like we're focusing on the wrong thing. I don't know what a better term would be, but there has to be something better.

While discussions about interfaith families are ubiquitous among Jewish leaders, research participants' responses illustrate the inadequacy of that frame to represent their lived experience. Language that is widely used to characterize and categorize people in this group did not resonate with most research participants.

Raising Jewish Children

According to the SJLA, about half of intermarried parents raise their children “Jewish only.” The experiences and perspectives of the 10 couples in the sample who aim to raise Jewish children adds complexity to that seemingly straightforward quantitative finding.

Raising Jewish children was a strong priority for most Jewish respondents. Several shared a sentiment articulated by one research participant who explained: *“I knew I wanted to raise a Jewish family even with a partner who isn’t Jewish.”* Several emphasized the importance of this choice during early conversations in their relationships. One shared: *“Before we were even that serious, I basically said it would be a dealbreaker not to raise my kids Jewish.”*

Most couples are navigating the evolving process of raising Jewish children without external support or guidance. Few said they consulted with friends or acquaintances and even fewer said they turned to their parents or other family members. Nor did they consult counselors, therapists, or clergy.

Adult Jewish education was part of five couples’ experience prior to having children. The few couples took classes and participated in programs for interfaith couples. They spoke very highly of those experiences, which continue to inform their thinking. One couple was particularly proactive about seeking out resources:

*We had a lot of conversations and spent a lot of time finding out how people do it. We took a class, read **Being Both: Embracing Two Religions in One Interfaith Family**, saw a therapist and met with a Reverend a of couple times. It took four years. My husband wanted to have a clear picture before we got married and I wanted to agree that it would always be unfolding.*

Two other couples enthusiastically described the many positive impacts of their participation in a program that was designed to help couples bring Jewish life into their homes in a meaningful way. The experience powerfully supported them to reflect on and actualize their intentions for their Jewish families with others who were doing the same.

The decision to raise Jewish children was, for most couples in the sample, related to how they hope their children will identify, rather than connected to their religious observance or affiliation. To most, raising Jewish children does not mean excluding the non-Jewish partners’ heritage or traditions. One non-Jewish partner articulated how agreeing to raise Jewish children did not mean erasing her background:

Being Catholic is woven into the fabric of who I am and thinking about how to raise our kids was hard at first. We decided that when we had kids, they would be raised Jewish and also have information about Catholicism. My background would also be embraced.

Raising Jewish Children

Their desire to raise Jewish children was not about raising “Jewish only” children.¹⁷ Almost all the couples who said they are raising Jewish children celebrate non-Jewish holidays with their non-Jewish partner’s family. Some also celebrate Christmas in their homes. A non-Jewish partner explained:

We talked about how we want to approach the holidays, incorporating all the Jewish holidays and probably just Christmas but not in a religious way. My kids will essentially be raised Jewish and we’ll try not to say they’re half Jewish.

The Jewish partner in another couple shared:

At our home, it’s primarily Jewish. We light Shabbat candles most Fridays. We do the holidays... things that give our kids a sense of Judaism and spirituality. Attitudinally, we bring in Buddhism. I consider myself a JewBu. We celebrate Christmas and Easter with my wife’s family. We’ve done a Christmas tree with a Jewish star, but we’re still figuring out the tree situation. It’s a work in progress.

Despite their determination to raise Jewish children and have Jewish families, what that means in practice continues to evolve for most couples. One shared:

We agreed early on to have a Jewish family and we’re still figuring out what that means. We don’t feel like we belong in a community. We have our own path.

Research respondents’ complex and nuanced descriptions of their parenting choices calls into question the accuracy and efficacy of using terms like “Jewish only” or “exclusively Jewish” to characterize their intentions or practices.¹⁸

Relational Dynamics

Interviewing each partner individually sheds light on how couples' relational dynamics influence their approach to parenting related to Jewishness. Couples tended to take one of three of the adjacent approaches:

- 1. Couples who agreed to raise Jewish children (8)**
- 2. Couples who agreed to raise their children Jewish and something else (7)**
- 3. Couples who are less aligned about how to raise their children (5)**

1. Couples who agreed to raise Jewish children

Eight of the couples raising Jewish children included non-Jewish partners who were supportive and involved. The non-Jewish partners in these couples participated in Jewish holidays, social events, and some are involved with synagogue life.

A Jewish woman, who has a participatory and supportive non-Jewish partner, expressed her gratitude for her partner's involvement with this sentiment:

I'm a Jewish parent. I don't think of myself as an interfaith parent. I understand that others would. My family is Jewish, but my husband is not. We've been very lucky. The rabbi has been complementary of my husband's participation in our synagogue. We've been accepted by the community. I've really appreciated my husband's generosity.

Her husband reflected on how his understanding about parenting a Jewish child has evolved over time:

When we were dating, my wife said: if this is serious, we'll need to raise our kids Jewish. It's a deal breaker. I agreed at the time, not

realizing what I was getting myself into. Before we had kids, she went to temple maybe four times a year. After they were born the Jewish stuff ramped up. It would have been more helpful to know more about what I was getting into. I didn't know what I didn't know, but it worked out.

Another non-Jewish partner who is raising Jewish children, shared how he was surprised by his own level of interest and involvement. He explained:

If you were to tell me 20 years ago, I would be a member of a Conservative temple ...that was nowhere on my radar. But I really enjoy the community and I participate quite often. I'm involved with a men's group: I like the volunteer work and events. Our kids go to Hebrew school once a week and we usually hang out there after class. We just went to a family camp... Our kids are very much the center of our lives, and a lot of our social circle is based on our children.

2. Couples who agreed to raise their children Jewish and something else

These couples explicitly agreed they would expose their children to both of their backgrounds, without favoring one or the other. They tended to emphasize their shared values, most often mentioning the importance of family and acting with kindness.

In their own words:

Neither of us is invested in our own identity to the exclusion of the other's identity, so it's been fun and positive to figure out how much we want to dip into the traditions.

We want them to learn from both sides – to highlight the things our religions have in common and the things that are different. We want them to be happy they're both Catholic and Jewish. We want them to lean on the positive things tied to religion: being a good, compassionate, helpful person; volunteering; donating; community... things like that. We don't want to push one way or the other to have them exposed to those things.

We're not really practicing any religion. It doesn't come up day to day because we don't observe either side. When Christmas comes, we put up the tree and talk about Santa, and when Hanukkah comes, we talk about the menorah. We look at it as: these are our shared cultures and we try to celebrate everything.

My wife represents the Jewish culture, but we don't stringently abide by traditional things a Jewish household would do. I come from a Black Baptist family, but we're not doing all the things a Black Baptist family would do. We do what we do. We're not rigid. It's beautiful and we're fortunate to be able to genuinely see things from different perspectives. It's not one-sided. It's not homogenous.

3. Couples who are less aligned about how to raise their children

Among these couples are those who acknowledge their lack of alignment about how they are raising their children and those who do not. One Jewish partner articulated his tacit acceptance of their lack of agreement, explaining:

We have different views about what we want for our kids. We both want our kids to be exposed to Jewish culture, but she wants our kids to have a choice. We celebrate Jewish and non-Jewish holidays. I want our kids to have some Jewish education, but my wife won't want that, so I avoid that conversation.

In two couples, the partners agreed to raise their children as Jewish and something else. Their responses illustrate how their intentions and practices are less aligned. The non-Jewish partner in one couple asserted:

We talked about it before our child was born. We decided we weren't going to steer them in one direction. We weren't going to choose. We wanted to make sure our kids understood that there were many religions in this world. I like that my wife is one religion and I'm another. I like the fact that we're teaching our kids about two religions.

The Jewish partner articulated similar intentions in theory, but their account of their children's extensive Jewish involvement implies a different desired outcome.

We talked about what we want in our family: We want our kids to have lots of options. We want them to compare and contrast and see what they're connected to. They have a lot more exposure to Jewish culture and religion from their Jewish preschool and camp, but I don't intentionally exclude anything. I would say they would identify maybe 80% as Jewish. But I'm also not going to push them.

Both partners in another couple agreed they are raising their child to be both Jewish and Christian. While they are aligned in their approach, their comments underscore differences in their intended outcomes. The Jewish partner explained:

I'm proud of my Jewish culture and heritage. I gave my son a Hebrew name because I wanted him to have his Jewish heritage out front. I want our son to know how special he is because he has so much culture: African American, Jewish and Christian. I want him to know that he's unique and special and that he can have all of that.

Their non-Jewish partner shared a slightly different intended outcome:

We had several conversations about how we wanted to raise our kid. My son is born Jewish because my wife is Jewish. I want him to know what that means for him. It's part of who he is, and I want him to experience that. I also want him to understand why I believe the way I do. We celebrate Hanukah and Christmas, and we pray in Jesus's name every night before bed. My wife would love for him to attend a Jewish school and be more educated about Jewish religion and culture. I don't want to force Christianity on him, but if he thinks I'm right he'll choose that.

In two couples, while the non-Jewish partner agreed their children would be raised Jewish, they regarded themselves as outside of that process. A Jewish partner explained:

We're quote unquote raising our son Jewish. But really for both of us, it's not exactly what we envisioned or even what we'd prefer. It comes down to the Jewish holidays. That's where we have our difficulties. On a day-to-day basis, she doesn't mind me taking him to any Jewish event, even though she never comes. During the Jewish holidays I always feel kind of alone unless I'm going to visit my parents.

A non-Jewish partner in another couple shared:

For my wife, it was non-negotiable that we'd be raising our kids Jewish. She told me that on our first date. There wasn't much negotiation. We agreed that she would lead the path toward Jewish stuff and I'm the adjacent participant. I am familiar with the prayers and songs, but I don't love participating. I don't have energy for prayers or ritual. It feels like a waste of time. I don't want to poison the kids against religion, but my opinion about it will be obvious when they get older.

Reflections of the Impact of Relational Dynamics

The intergenerational transmission of religion has been studied extensively over the past several decades, with significant attention paid to the connection between religious socialization and the declining rates of religious affiliation.¹⁹ Studies have consistently found that parents who do not share the same religion produce less religious children.²⁰

Social scientists of American Jewry who have examined rates of Jewish engagement among children of intermarried parents have come to similar conclusions.²¹ Researchers have more recently turned their attention to examining the processes of religious socialization by focusing on gathering parents' perspectives and approaches.²² A 2019 cross-national study of religious heterogamy and the intergenerational transmission of religion resulted in a finding that is particularly relevant to the current

study. Consistent with the larger body of research, that study concluded: "Having religiously heterogamous parents or parents with dissimilar religious attendance patterns are both associated with lower overall religiosity in respondents." However, that study also found both parents' religious participation to be key to their children's religious socialization, even when they do not share the same religion.²³ Based on that finding, we can infer that the interfaith parents in this study who are in greater alignment about raising Jewish children in both theory and practice have a stronger chance of realizing their intention than couples who are not unified in their approach.

Jewish Engagement

Much like the experiences of couples with two Jewish partners, research participants' experiences of Jewish engagement vary.²⁴ Six of the 20 couples are currently synagogue members. Two other couples were members but have since moved and have not found another congregation they wish to join. Notably, in each of these of these eight couples, the Jewish partners were women. In this way, the research participants' experiences further corroborate research on the significance of gender as a key factor determining families' religious orientation. According to the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies' 2015 study of millennial children of intermarriage, Jewish mothers in intermarried homes exert a particularly strong influence on childhood experiences.²⁵ This is also consistent with broader patterns of American religious life, in which women have long been at the center of religious practice.²⁶

Early in their relationship, a Jewish woman in one couple made it clear that synagogue affiliation was important to her. She explained:

When we were first getting to know each other, I described how large of a part temple activities played in my life. I would bring it up a lot because I wanted him to understand how important it was to me. It shaped who I am. A lot of my closest friends are still from temple and camps. When we moved back to Los Angeles as a couple, we started going to the synagogue where I grew up.

While her partner grew up without religion, he was steeped in Chinese ethnic culture growing up. He described his experience of congregational life in this way:

To be frank, I'm still very removed from the religious aspect of it, but I'm very happy to be a member of the temple, and I'm appreciative that I have this community as a place to raise my kid. Our temple does a family Shabbat and it's really great to be able to spend that time with my daughter. A lot of times I'm learning with her, which is interesting. The lessons align with my own beliefs and upbringing. I'm still not Jewish, and I still know very little, but I feel like part of the community.

For some couples, denomination was not an important factor when choosing a synagogue. Instead, the decision was based on practicality rather than ideology. While the Jewish partner in one couple grew up attending a Reform congregation a few times a year, they chose to join a Conservative congregation because their children had friends who attended, and the location was convenient. The couple felt "embraced" by their congregation. The non-Jewish partner shared:

The staff at the synagogue has been great: very welcoming. I've never felt like an outsider coming from a different religion. I don't feel excluded at all. When we were at the bimah during my son's bar mitzvah, I couldn't say some of the words, but they didn't apply to me, so I felt fine about it.

Despite their positive experience, neither partner is particularly interested in maintaining their membership once their youngest child has a B-mitzvah. This is a common sentiment for families raising Jewish children, regardless of the parents' background.²⁷

Another couple joined a Reform synagogue because they and their child felt welcomed into the community. Despite that, the Jewish woman in the couple – who described herself as *“a poster child for the Conservative movement growing up”* – did not connect with the Reform services, so they attend High Holiday services at a Conservative synagogue.

Two other couples described how their synagogue involvement has changed in concert with their life circumstances. Before they moved to Los Angeles, one couple had been very involved with a Jewish community in another city. They described their social life in that community as *“robust.”* The rabbi from that community officiated at their wedding and led an Israel trip they attended. They occasionally went to Shabbat services and engaged in adult Jewish education. When they moved to Los Angeles several years ago, they prominently displayed their *ketubah* and hung *mezuzot* throughout their home. They continue to say Shabbat blessings every Friday night. After some exploration, they have not found a community or congregation that suits them. They were interested in some of the programming at one synagogue, but *“weren't in a financial situation to join.”* They liked the services at another, but *“didn't find their people.”*

Another couple rented a home for almost a decade in a densely-populated Jewish neighborhood of Los Angeles. They were active members of a synagogue, where they had their children's bris and baby-naming ceremonies. But most of their friend group ended up moving away after having a second child. For them, a job change and the desire to own a home prompted their move to an area further outside the city, where the cost of living is lower. After they moved, they toured the three synagogues closest to their new home, but none felt like a good fit. This was disappointing to the Jewish partner, who had a strong sense of Jewish community growing up and wanted that for themselves and for their children. This lacuna is becoming more pressing as their children get closer to bar and bat mitzvah age. They explained:

I need to sit down and figure out what we should do for our daughter's bat mitzvah. My middle son wants to learn Hebrew and I'm not sure what to do. I feel at a loss...the challenge is not about being interfaith, it's about our location.

Several Jewish men described the experience of wanting, but not finding, a community. One said:

We would like to be part of a Jewish community. We are surrounded by lots of Jews in our neighborhood. We're exploring synagogue membership, but the ones in our area are too religious for us. We loved tot Shabbat at one synagogue, but it's too far. The thing that's also stopping us is money.

Another shared:

We're kind of doing hit and run Judaism. We don't have roots anywhere. We had fun at a synagogue purim party, but I didn't know anybody, and I didn't really belong there. I'm not naturally someone who would want to be a super-duper involved, necessarily, but I want to have a place for the High Holidays, and Hebrew school eventually.

Still another explained:

A big part of why I want to join a synagogue is the community. The best way to really have a social circle is to be in a religious community. We want to meet people like us, with similar values to us, in similar life stages. I've looked at both Reform and Conservative synagogues in my area, but it all kind of blends in together. Once we get towards needing a preschool, we're going to have to decide which communities we want to be a part of.

While some have been more proactively searching than others, none have found their place.

Eight other couples, who are not tied to congregations, mentioned participating in various events and programs at Jewish organizations across Greater Los Angeles including: American Jewish University, Beit Teshuvah, Camp Alonim, Camp Gan Shalom, Honeymoon Israel, the JCC, LA jBabies, Momentum, NuRoots, PJLibrary, Skirball Cultural Center, Vista Del Mar, and the Zimmer Children's Museum, as well as several different Chabad Centers. One couple is part of a Jewish parents' affinity group at their child's public school. Four research participants – all women – have previously or continue to work in Jewish organizations and/or congregations.

Two couples, who are members of the same synagogue, described how participating in Honeymoon Israel fostered a sense of connection that has grown over time. Partners in both couples noted that people from their Honeymoon Israel cohort have become the core of their Jewish community, which they have expanded through their synagogue participation.

Barriers to Jewish Engagement

A 2019 study of interfaith engagement concluded that the majority of intermarried couples felt welcomed in Jewish community.²⁸ While many couples in this research had similarly positive interactions in Jewish communal contexts, several shared experiences that reflect the minority of respondents in that study: they described “feelings of being ‘other’ and not fitting in.”²⁹ Research participants described barriers to engagement that are ubiquitous regardless of marital status or religious background.³⁰

Marginalized Identities

Partners in seven couples shared experiences of otherness related to various identities that have been marginalized in mainstream Jewish communal contexts. Three white Jewish partners of people of color described negative interactions they attributed to racial prejudice. One shared:

When our son was a baby, we did some social activities with a Jewish baby group. My husband doesn't look Jewish. He's dark and looks like an Arab guy. We went there to be social, and no one talked to us.

Another described their experience:

There was one synagogue I went to where everyone was super nice. Then I started bringing my partner who is Black and someone whispered in my ear, ‘Are you sure this is the person you want to be with?’ It was so awkward in the moment. I just responded ‘Yes, this is the decision I made.’ Because of that, and the traffic, and because they belittled the Reform movement (even though it was Reform), I decided to leave.

A white Jewish partner who has a white non-

Jewish partner articulated their awareness of how they have benefited from white privilege in Jewish communal context:

My husband is white and can pass as whatever. A lot of people with non-Jewish partners who aren't white assume synagogues won't be welcoming.

The Jew of color in the sample described a negative experience in a Jewish communal context that echoed the experiences of many others.³⁰ They explained:

I felt like I had to prove my Jewishness. I was tokenized. People asked: ‘Who is Jewish, your mom or dad?’ That felt off-putting.

Parents who identified as LGBTQ+ described experiences in Jewish communal settings where they felt alienated by heteronormative language and were uncomfortable with binary gender expectations.

While several couples in the sample are members of Conservative synagogues, others were weary of feeling excluded by the denomination's policies restricting participation related to matrilineal descent and non-Jewish partners. A non-Jewish partner explained why a Conservative synagogue in their neighborhood was not an option for their family:

I wish it was a Reform synagogue. That would be awesome – it's just 5 minutes from our house. It would be great for our son to do his bar mitzvah there and I could participate. But I know that Conservative synagogues have a lot of restrictions and traditions I'm excluded from. I don't want my children feeling like I'm excluded.

Barriers to Jewish Engagement

Geography

The extensive geography of Los Angeles was the barrier to participation most frequently mentioned by research participants. This factor was especially pronounced for couples living on the outskirts of Greater Los Angeles, where there are fewer opportunities for Jewish communal engagement.

It's a matter of logistics. I signed up for a babies group and they had a bunch of meet ups, but they were all on the West Side, which is too far.

We kind of stay within about 30 minutes of where we're at, so anything we'd do would have to be fairly local. Unless it was some magical incredible event, we probably wouldn't go into LA.

We're away from central LA. I wish I could meet people in our area, so I don't have to commute to participate.

Cost

Much has been written about the impact of financial barriers on Jewish engagement.³¹ Cost was cited by six couples as a challenge to their Jewish organizational participation.

As a family that wants to be Jewish, finding a Jewish community is hard. We have a fine salary but it's still expensive.

I don't want to force my kids into something. They went to Jewish camp for a week for 2 summers. It wasn't that great and it didn't feel that Jewish. If it doesn't feel right, why spend the money?

I heard there's a camp scholarship for first time Jewish kids. But it was still too expensive. I wish the camps were more accessible.

Not Knowing Enough

Reticence about not feeling knowledgeable enough prevented both Jewish and non-Jewish partners in the sample from feeling comfortable in Jewish communal settings. This well-documented barrier has been shown to impact Jewish engagement regardless of marital status.³² Several Jewish partners described “not knowing enough” to respond to their partners’ questions about Judaism and Jewish life. Non-Jewish

partners described awkward moments related to ritual observance. One shared: “I went to a Jewish conference and there were a couple of times I felt like an outsider... I didn't know to keep quiet after challah before handwashing.” Another believed they would feel more comfortable if they understood the context and reason behind some of the rituals.

Fostering Belonging

Several key themes emerged when research participants were asked to share examples of past moments when they felt a strong sense of connection and belonging. Their comments highlighted the multi-faceted nature of belonging.³³ Their recollections focused on positive encounters with others that enabled them to feel fully seen and accepted.

They connected with others based on shared affinities, identities, and beliefs. They described how shared histories bonded them to childhood friends and how similar life stages helped relationships flourish during and after college. They mentioned how their values and interests aligned with people they met through voluntary associations. In their professional lives, some felt mission-aligned with colleagues.

Some research participants admitted they have not had many experiences of belonging. Others said while they “found their people” in the past, their life circumstances have changed, and they have not yet created such connections again. Many shared that parenting has required them to shift their expectations around finding a sense of belonging. They primarily socialize with parents of their children’s friends, having prioritized convenience over depth of connection.

These themes strongly re-emerged in research participants’ musings and suggestions about what might support their Jewish organizational

engagement. They expressed their desire for family-friendly opportunities to develop relationships with others in similar life cycle stages and/or with whom they share interests and values. Some want to learn about others’ approaches to parenting and navigating the challenges in interfaith relationships. Some would like to learn alongside their children. They want opportunities to learn about and engage with Jewish history, tradition, culture, and community.

Several expressed the importance of accessibility. Particularly appealing opportunities would be both hyperlocal and cross-community or inter-organizational (and would not require a singular organizational commitment). A few called attention to the importance of marketing language that clearly articulates who is welcome.

Research participants specifically requested engagement opportunities for:

- Non-Jews who are raising Jewish children and who are not interested in converting but want to learn about Judaism and Jewish life
- Jews who want to learn about Judaism and Jewish life
- Millennials who are about to start families
- Moms
- Groups that include people with diversity of ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and religious background

Research participants offered suggestions about how to support their Jewish organizational engagement:

In their own words:

I'd love more family-friendly things that have Jewish themes but are open for all, and where people who aren't very Jewish or aren't Jewish at all can feel comfortable. There needs to be an easy entrance into the community. There's not an easy way in without joining a synagogue. It's hard to find opportunities, even when you're putting in the effort. It's hard to find places that would welcome your partner.

Acceptance is huge. That means not questioning, not prying, not having ulterior motives, not pushing anybody toward conversion, or telling you how to raise your child. I don't think being a religious Jew is a value I need to give my child for him to be Jewish. I want there to be a place for secular Jews.

I think first and foremost the goals should be fun and inclusivity. All the other things should be secondary. People don't want to feel different. It's important to focus on similarities. We all want the same things for our kids. We all have feelings and we're aware of what's going on in the world. Let's just hang out: that's how you learn organically.

The way to grow the Jewish community is for rabbis and leaders to be interested in listening to what young Jews want and need and be willing to experiment with new ways to provide that.

A lot of the time we're trying to find something for the kids to do, where we can also connect with others. I'm interested in activities for kids of different ages that would attract people who are interested in exploring community. That could be a good way to reach out to families who are multifaith.

Concluding Thoughts

This study sheds light on how research participants make decisions about Jewish practice and involvement, how they find community, and how they experience Jewish community. It also shares couples' perspectives about barriers to Jewish participation, along with their reflections about how Jewish organizations might more effectively serve them.

These findings highlight "interfaith" as a status and identity that is largely ascribed, rather than claimed by most research participants. Whether they assume that designation or not, most expect to be seen by others as "interfaith." Yet couples do not experience "interfaith" as a fixed category: while they opted in to a study about interfaith parents, most research participants do not typically think about themselves in those terms. To them, the fact that they do not share the same heritage as their partner is not a defining characteristic of their relationships.

For anyone raising Jewish children, numerous factors contribute to their choices about how and how much to prioritize engaging with Jewish practices and community. This study illustrates the ways research participants' parenting is influenced by their: relationship dynamics, life-cycle stages, gender, sexual

orientation, socio-economic status, and geographic location. In addition, this study shows how couples' emotional connections and interactions with extended family members affect their family lives, regardless of their choices about raising Jewish children. This finding challenges the efficacy of attempting to conceptualize a clear distinction between raising children "Jewish only" or "Jewish and."

Research participants' narratives highlight the ways in which raising Jewish children in Los Angeles, like elsewhere, is an ever-evolving process: their behaviors and attitudes toward Jewish identity, community, and practice have changed over time and will inevitably continue to do so. The multiplicity and dynamism of couples' experiences and perspectives call into question the continuing utility of focusing on their different backgrounds as a meaningful organizing principle.

This report, when coupled with quantitative findings from the SJLA, promise to provide valuable insights that can enable the Jewish Federation of Great Los Angeles to support Jewish organizations in more effectively serving a wide range of parents raising Jewish children.

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