

Continued from previous page

president for strategy and planning at the Council of Jewish Philanthropies. "They said the way we asked the question led to a higher number of families saying they were raising their kids as Jews. So we looked at what that means in terms of real practice: day to day, week to week, what are these families doing?"

The result of that investigation not only confirmed the earlier findings, including the 60 percent figure, Preuss said, it also showed that a couple's initial decision to raise their children as Jews is the critical factor in determining an intermarried family's level of Jewish involvement.

Once a couple decides on a brit milah or baby naming for their newborn, he said, "the rest follows," from synagogue membership to religious school to Shabbat observance.

The Council of Jewish Philanthropies report also showed, as did the Steinhardt report, that at least in Boston, intermarried families in which the children are raised as Jews look pretty much like inmarried Reform Jewish families in terms of Jewish practice. Nearly 70 percent of the children in both groups celebrate bar or bat mitzvah; similar percentages are enrolled in religious school and are members of congregations, although the intermarried families tend to join later and leave sooner; and both groups attend services with the same frequency.

That didn't happen on its own, local Jewish leaders say.

"I believe strongly that our approach in Boston works," said CJP President Barry Shrage, a longtime advocate of communal investment in Jewish outreach and education. "Our efforts to make our community more welcoming and to create more meaningful Jewish experiences are linked to the finding that 60 percent of the children born in intermarried households are being raised as Jews."

One major difference was noted in the religious education of teenagers. Whereas 37 percent of inmarried Reform families and 61 percent of Conservative families enroll their children of high school age in Jewish education, that number drops to 13 percent among intermarried families who are raising their children Jewishly.

The Council of Jewish Philanthropies is using this to beef up its financial support for Jewish education, for teens and younger children, as part of its strategic plan to be unveiled in May.

"The CJP will now spend a lot of time and money to strengthen the Jewish educational experience for 9- to 16-year-olds and their families," Preuss said.

The National Center for Jewish Policy Studies is releasing the findings of another extensive intermarriage study headed by University of Connecticut sociology professor Arnold Dashefsky.

Researchers interviewed 149 intermarried couples, mostly Jews married to Christians, in four cities, asking about their Jewish behaviors, degree of involvement with their Jewish communities, and negative and positive experiences with those communities.

Titled "Intermarriage and Jewish Journeys in the United States," it was not a ran-

Reversing decision, Rabbi Folberg to perform some interfaith weddings

By **Tonyia Cone**
Special to The Jewish Outlook

After years of working with interfaith families and the questions they can encounter, Rabbi Steven Folberg of Austin announced last month that under some circumstances he would perform weddings of interfaith couples.

The decision reverses his policy of nearly 23 years as a rabbi.

"One of the things that is clear to me, and many of my rabbinic colleagues would confirm this, is that often it is the non-Jew in an interfaith couple who provides the motivating force toward Jewish involvement and affiliation for their family," Folberg, senior rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel, said in the sermon in which he made the announcement.

Folberg's choice fits into an effort on the part of the Jewish community to reach out to interfaith families, he explained in the sermon. The National Jewish Outreach Institute offers the Mother's Circle, an education and support network for non-Jewish moms raising Jewish kids, and some congregations have taken steps to honor non-Jewish parents who are helping to create Jewish families.

Folberg will conduct interfaith wedding ceremonies when the person who is

not Jewish is not actively practicing another religion and does not wish to bring another religion into the home and when the couple intends to create a Jewish home in which all the festival celebrations are exclusively Jewish. Also, if the person who is not Jewish is not yet ready to make Judaism their faith, their attitude must be compatible with the cliché "never say never."

GUIDELINES

Rabbi Benjamin Sternman, Beth Israel's associate rabbi, who has performed interfaith wedding ceremonies under the same conditions for years, provided Folberg with the guidelines.

In his sermon, Folberg explained, "I asked myself two very pragmatic questions. First, what is to be gained by turning these people down? The answer, as far as I could tell, was, 'Nothing.' And second, what is to be gained by conducting their wedding? And the answer was, 'Given the circumstances, quite a bit.'"

The full text of Folberg's Parashat Vayakhel sermon, in which he announced his decision to begin performing some interfaith weddings, can be found online at www.bethisrael.org under the "Sermon Archives" link in the "Resources" section of the Web site.

dom study — the respondents were already involved in Jewish or interfaith organizations from which researchers obtained their call lists. So with the Jewish partners having more Jewish background than the national samples used in other studies, the quantitative findings may not be widely applicable.

Still, researchers say it could prove useful to Jewish institutions and communal leaders seeking ways to engage the most Jewishly interested intermarried families in their midst, a good target audience in any case. The researchers plan to follow these families for several years to see how their Jewish behaviors evolve.

Couples said their interest in Jewish participation was stymied in some cases by a less-than-welcoming community and the fact that a rabbi would not perform their wedding ceremony.

KEY FINDING

Perhaps the most interesting findings had to do with rabbinic officiation at interfaith wedding rites.

At a time when the Reform movement in particular is deeply divided between rabbis and cantors who perform intermarriages and those who do not, the study found a statistically significant correlation between intermarriages performed by Jewish clergy and the later involvement of the couples in Jewish life. It marked the first such study to do so explicitly, say researchers who worked on this and the other two studies.

The study found that 87 percent of intermarried couples who were married by Jewish clergy later raised their children as

"Jewish only," compared to 63 percent of the couples married by co-officiants, by non-Jewish clergy or in secular ceremonies.

Also, 50 percent said it was very important that their grandchildren be Jewish, compared to 18 percent of the second group.

Even more striking is the correlation between rabbinic officiation and later avoidance of Christian behaviors.

Just 2 percent of those married only by a rabbi now belong to a church, compared to 26 percent of those married in other ways; just 2 percent of the first group attend church on Easter Sunday, compared to 21 percent of the second group; and 46 percent of the first group put up a Christmas tree compared to 65 percent of the latter group.

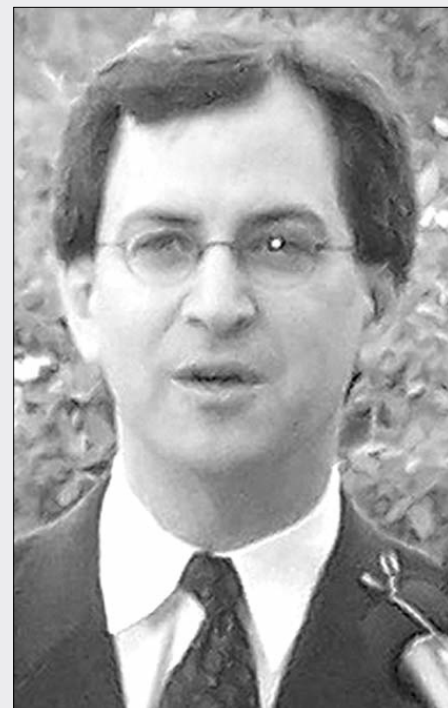
The researchers were quick to explain that the study is not suggesting that rabbinic officiation itself has any influence on a couple's future behavior.

"The findings do not indicate causality," Dashefsky cautioned.

Rather, he stresses, it is "a marker on a pathway, on a couple's Jewish journey. These people were looking to involve themselves in Jewish life; this is part of the whole package."

That is not how the couples themselves saw it, however.

Among those couples who were unable to persuade a rabbi to perform their intermarriage, one-third — 30 percent of the Jews and 36 percent of the non-Jewish spouses — claimed that the refusal distanced them from any form of institutionalized Judaism. Conversely, nearly half (46 percent) of intermarried spouses who were



Rabbi Steven Folberg says in sermon, 'One of the things that is clear to me ... is that often it is the non-Jew in an interfaith couple who provides the motivating force toward Jewish involvement and affiliation for their family.'

The direct link is <http://bethisrael.org/UserFiles/File/Other%20Documents/Parashat%20Vayakhel%20.pdf>.

— — —
Tonyia Cone, a regular contributor to The Jewish Outlook, can be reached at tonyia76@gmail.com.

married by a rabbi claimed that rabbinic participation in their wedding ceremony "had some influence" on their lives.

These results only obtained in cases when a rabbi was the sole officiant, not when a rabbi co-officiated with non-Jewish clergy.

Researchers say an interfaith couple that opts to have only Jewish clergy officiate at their wedding ceremony indicates a level of interest in and commitment to Judaism that is not implicit when a rabbi and a minister officiate together.

"It's a symbol of the direction this couple wants to go," Dashefsky said.

As in the other two intermarriage studies, the Hebrew College study found that even the most Jewishly engaged intermarried families are more prone to do things that inmarried Jewish families "don't feel comfortable with," Dashefsky said, such as put up a Christmas tree.

That should not be seen as making them less Jewish, he said. "It doesn't stop them from fasting on Yom Kippur, lighting Chanukah candles or joining synagogues."

The challenge is for Jewish institutions and leaders to approach such families in a more nuanced, less all-or-nothing fashion, he said, allowing them to move at their own pace toward, or away from, greater Jewish engagement.

"I hope our study opens a discussion about how the organized Jewish community should think about engaging people who are not following all the norms of Jewish life," Dashefsky said. "Guess what? Most Jews don't follow all the norms of Jewish life."