INTERFAITH MARRIAGE AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE FAMILY:
A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE.

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INTERFAITH MARRIAGE AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE FAMILY:
A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE.

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by
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The National Jewish Population Survey has shown that the intermarriage rate among American Jews has climbed drastically over the course of the second half of the twentieth century. The intermarriage rate for Jews who married before 1970 stands at 13%, rises to 28% for those whose marriages started in the 1970’s, and then increases again to 38% for Jews married in the first half of the 1980’s. Today, the total is a massive 50%. Nearly all children (96%) in households with two Jewish spouses are being raised Jewish, compared to a third (33%) of the children in households with one non-Jewish spouse. (NJPS Report, 2001). The table below can put these numbers into visual perspective.

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This seminar paper is an examination of interfaith marriages, and its effects on the family, and community from a Jewish perspective. By doing so, this paper will define several areas of interfaith marriage. It will identify common psychological problems encountered by children in such families, show statistical evidence of the dramatic increase of interfaith marriages, introduce solutions, and finally choose a solution that will demonstrate the need for families of interfaith marriages to have both education and counseling in order for them to flourish in such an environment.
Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed is, how does interfaith marriage psychologically affect the children of these unions. Additionally, how does intermarriage jeopardize the continuity of the religion as a whole?

Definition of Terms

Of importance, is defining interfaith marriage, also known as intermarriage. Most people use these two words interchangeably, as is the practice in this paper. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, an interfaith marriage consists of a marriage between people who are from different social groups, races or religions, or who are from the same family (Webster, 2008). For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on the marriage where one individual is Jewish and is married to someone of another faith, or of no faith at all.

The word Rabbi means a Jewish person (previously only men), trained in Jewish law, and ordained for professional religious leadership.

Delimitations of Research

The references used for the review of literature were collected over a period of 40 days using the resources of the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin – Platteville. The several search engines provided by EBSCOHOST were used. The key search terms were “interfaith marriage”, and “Jewish”.
Method of Approach

A review of literature relating to research, and studies and of interfaith marriage in the Jewish religion and its effects of families (1970s-present) was conducted. Anecdotal evidence was also collected from counselors employed with Jewish Social Services and Madison Jewish Community Council (MJCC) in Madison, WI, in order to get first-hand experience. Another review of literature on related research was conducted in order to explore which types of counseling and/or education is needed to help families who are struggling with issues stemming from interfaith marriage. The paper will be organized according to the following table of contents.
Why is it so important that intermarriage be addressed in the Jewish community? Kerry Olitzky, the executive director of the Jewish Outreach Institute, is quoted as saying, “Interfaith marriage is not the end of Jewish continuity – not raising Jewish children is” (Olitzky, 2003 p. 57). The continuation of the Jewish religion as a whole is put in jeopardy by such marriages. However, just as important, how does this affect the children that are being raised in such a union? The research also has to look at the numbers by which intermarriage is growing in the Jewish community.

The National Jewish Population Survey has shown that the intermarriage rate among American Jews has climbed drastically over the course of the second half of the twentieth century. The intermarriage rate for Jews who married before 1970 stands at 13%, rises to 28% for those whose marriages started in the 1970’s, and then increases again to 38% for Jews married in the first half of the 1980’s. Today, the total is a massive 50%. Nearly all children (96%) in households with two Jewish spouses are being raised Jewish, compared to a third (33%) of the children in households with one non-Jewish spouse. (NJPS Report, 2001). The table below can put these numbers into visual perspective.

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Although there appears to be several problems that are the results of interfaith marriage, this paper will focus on the effects it has on the children of such unions. One of the problems is the effect on the Jewish community as a whole. The continuity of Judaism is threatened as more and more Jews decide to marry outside of the religion. Since 1990, a majority of American Jews now chooses a non-Jewish mate, at a rate of 52% (Kosner, Goldstein, Waksberg, et al., 1991 p.73). This high rate of interfaith marriage has created changes in religion, cultural tradition, and even expectations of the Jews. People in such unions face a lack of understanding, and even negativity from friends and family. The reason that intermarriage threatens the continuity of the Jewish people, and religion, is that the children of these marriages are not being raised as Jews. This obviously has a negative effect on the population of Jews. Many talk about Jews marrying non-Jews as if it was the reincarnation of the Nazi gas chambers. “The intermarriage process will take everything Jewish in its wake”, stated Rabbi Pincher Stolper, the Executive Vice President of the Orthodox Union, “It will grow until it engulfs the entire community. It is another Holocaust” (Goldberg, 1992). These are very strong words brought on by very powerful emotions. Today, there are approximately 13 million Jews in the world. Before the holocaust, there were 18 million.

Another ill effect that intermarriage has on the Jews is within the family itself. Marriages between Jews and non-Jews tend to be less stable. The divorce rate of an intermarried couple is almost 50 percent, as compared to only 7% when both partners are Jewish. This statistic alone shows that there must be problems in these intermarriage unions. Misunderstanding and miscommunication often occur in such relations. Psychologists, and authors of Counseling with Interfaith Couples: Individual Psychology, Daniel Greenstein, Jon Carlson, and Candace Ward Howell state the following:
The problems of understanding one another and effectively negotiating issues are extremely complex. Rather than simply discuss and negotiate issues that all couples need to confront, interfaith couples can find themselves arguing over issues that involve the very nature of their identities and their heritages. The discussions may not be confined to the feelings and thoughts of each of the partners. The Jewish partner, for example may not be religious, but feel strongly that any children of this relationship be raised Jewish. The Christian partner may perceive this as a hypocritical and selfish demand. As the conflict continues, the Christian partner may become convinced that the Jewish partner is stubborn. This insistence also raises a central paradox in interfaith marriages: if Judaism means so much to one partner, then why didn’t the Jewish partner marry a Jew?

(Greenstein, et al, 1993)

In addition, many parents of children who intermarry ask themselves that very question. They also worry that their grandchildren won’t grow up as Jews. And how will they deal with the “December Dilemma”? During the month of December, interfaith couples and their families are forced to address questions concerning holiday observances. The basic problem facing these families is how to bridge religious backgrounds with differing holiday traditions in a way that integrated respect for each partner’s needs, heritage, and identity. This may be a time of conflict and tension (Horowitz, 1999).

Lastly, and possibly most specifically, research will need to examine how intermarriage of Jews and non-Jews affect the children being raised in such unions. All parents have a sacred responsibility for the spiritual upbringing of their children, but "interfaith couples have a doubly
important responsibility", because of the possibility of causing religious confusion in their children's lives. If adults can feel torn by religion, it is easy to imagine how much more children can feel two religions pulling on them. Some children of interfaith parents experience overwhelming sadness because they are not like other children whose parents share the same faith. Some children in interfaith homes don't want to be a part of any religion when older because of the conflicted feelings they experienced while growing up (Yob, 1998, p. 15). As previously stated, almost all children of in-married couples are raised Jewish, while only about one-third of children on interfaith marriages are being raised Jewish. (NJPS Survey, 2001). This can be seen on the graph presented below.

Many questions arise in the thoughts of these children, that there must be answers to. What religion will I be when I grow up? Will I Have a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, or will I be confirmed? These questions may lead one to look into the works of Erik Erikson. Erik Erikson’s psychosocial theory on social development is an approach to the personality that extends Freudian psychosexual theory. Erikson's theory is unique in that it encompasses the entire life cycle and recognizes the impact of society, history, and culture on personality. Erikson is best
known for his concept of the identity crisis. This idea may have stemmed from a personal identity crisis he experienced at a young age. He once wrote, "No doubt my best friends will insist that I needed to name this crisis and to see it in everybody else in order to really come to terms with it myself" (Erikson, 1975, p. 84).

Erikson said that humans develop in psychosocial stages. He emphasized developmental change throughout the human life span. In Erikson’s theory, eight stages of development unfold as we go through the life span. Each stage consists of a crisis that must be faced. According to Erikson, this crisis is not a catastrophe but a turning point of increased vulnerability and enhanced potential. The more an individual resolves the crises successfully, the healthier development will be (Erikson, 1950, p. 134). However, with no strong foundation given to these children by their possibly conflicted parents, how can we except healthy psychological development to occur? For example: Identity versus Identity Confusion or Role confusion is Erikson's fifth developmental stage. This is the stage where the teenager begins to seek their true identities and a sense of self. This may be through sex roles, politics, occupation, or religion. The central question of this stage is of course, "Who am I?". Again, not having that basic background of one stable religion may not help this child find the answer he is looking for. Another example taken from Erikson’s stage theory is Intimacy versus isolation. This is Erikson’s sixth developmental stage, which individuals experience during the early adulthood years. At this time, individuals face the developmental task of forming intimate relationships with others. Erikson describes intimacy as finding oneself yet losing oneself in another. If the young adult forms healthy friendships and an intimate relationship with another individual, intimacy will be achieved; if not, isolation will result. It can be very pressing on an individual when one's perspective partner has certain spiritual needs that are not comprehensible. It will be
virtually impossible for one to achieve this level of intimacy, according to Erikson, when spiritual concepts are either ignored or misunderstood.

As this has become such a problem in the Jewish community, several foundations, organizations, and outreach programs have already been set up to deal with this very issue. This paper will look at the research that has already been done to help children and families that are in such a situation.

To help alleviate and possibly even eliminate the previously mentioned problems that can stem from interfaith marriages, this paper will explore several plausible solutions. These will include, but will not be limited to: counseling options for individuals and families, outreach programs, and educational opportunities for the involved members of the families. It is important to note that counseling should be done both before the wedding day for the couple, and after, for both the couple and the future children of this union.

The first solution focuses on the counselors. Therapists, and counselors alike, especially individuals practicing in the Jewish Social Services, although they need not be Jewish, need to be prepared when approached by an interfaith family. Since this paper is from the Jewish perspective, however, it will look at counselors who are working in the Jewish Social Services, or Jewish family services forum, including office-holding members of synagogues such as Rabbi’s, Cantor’s, and educators, as many congregants look to them for counsel. The first notion to remember, and maybe the most important is this: intermarried couples need to be welcomed into the community, not judged.
Dr. Egon Mayer, a sociologist whose main interest was the ever growing phenomenon of intermarriage in the Jewish culture, has identified the proto-typical Jewish professional that interfaith families may turn to in times of need. According to a survey with 377 respondents, sponsored by the Jewish Outreach Organization, Dr. Mayer’s findings of Jewish social workers and their clients were as follows:

This person has been employed in a various Jewish organizations for at least eighteen years, had earned a Masters degree, is married to a spouse who was Jewish by birth, and was a synagogue member. More than 93% percent felt it was somewhat or very important that the Jewish community provide outreach programs to interfaith couples and their children. They reported that half of their clients are either intermarried or have close family members, including children, grandchildren, parents or siblings who are intermarried. (Mayer, 1997, p. 29).

While the numbers of intermarriage within the social workers themselves are at impressive rates, a huge majority report receiving little or no training on how to direct, and advise the clients coming to them with such needs. The major reason for this was budgetary. Another finding from the survey was that only 5% of the overall budget was being used for training, and eighty percent of the respondents would like to see an increase in amount of money spent on such endeavors.

The Jewish Social Services, an entity within the Madison Jewish Community Council (MJCC) in Madison, WI would benefit greatly from a finding an efficient, inexpensive program in which to train the staff of social workers to work with interfaith families. “Counselors are often unaware of the unique problems which threaten the relationships of interfaith couples.
Common marital problems are complicated by sociological and historical factors” (Greenstein et al, 1993 p. 12). In a recent interview with Barbara Spierer, the Associate Executive Director of MJCC, when asked her yearly budgetary allowance for programs or counseling of interfaith couples, her answer was none. This fact is quite alarming, as this is the only social service organization for Jewish families in the entire population of southwestern Wisconsin. There are approximately 2400 Jewish households, of which over 60 percent are interfaith families, which the MJCC serves. This does not include the transient student population of the University of Wisconsin, which is over 5000 Jewish students. (Spierer, 2012). With such a huge number of potential clients, it’s extremely unfortunate, that not even one percent of the budget is allocated towards programs for the interfaith families.

The first solution proposed is using technology to facilitate a learning experience/environment for these workers, may be a way to cut expenses that an agency may incur when hiring an individual to visit their facility for workshop learning. Web-centered, and computer centered learning environments are not only easily facilitated in the workplace; they are cost effective. “Businesses have done their homework and know that conventional classroom instruction costs hover at about $75 an hour, with full-week programs costing $3,000 to $5,000”. Online training costs about half that amount (Mottl, 2000).

An online tutorial/power point presentation, with workbook, designed by social workers, counselors, and research experts, with input from interfaith couples and families, may be an ideal answer to this predicament. With online learning, a social worker can access the learning materials without ever leaving their desk. Therefore, location and distance are never an issue. Also, a worker can learn at their own pace, accessing the information either on the job, or from home, alleviating the stress of balancing schedules, and clients.
Online information can be updated, as the ever changing needs demand, making information both useful and current. The possibility of linking site addresses of experts to the worker can also be explored for any questions or suggestions the worker may have on the materials.

“Neither placing information on the Web nor linking to other digital resources on the Web constitutes online instruction. Online instruction occurs when learners use the Web to go through the sequence of instruction, to complete the learning activities, and to achieve learning outcomes and objectives” (Ally, 2002).

A second solution that this paper will propose is couples counseling. As previously mentioned in this paper, research has shown that the divorce rates are higher in interfaith marriages than religiously homogamous marriages. “Most couples, including interfaith, overlook or avoid many important issues during the excitement of courtship, and often find themselves later embroiled in emotionally charged conflicts characterized by misunderstanding, miscommunication, resentment, anger, and guilt” (Greenstein et al, 1993, p. 428).

These counseling sessions need to be done early in a relationship, before marriage, as specific decisions will have to be made by the couple years before they even seem relevant to the couples’ lives “When you bury something that is really important to you, all you're doing is building up a kind of pressure within the family relationship, which becomes a source of tension, which ultimately becomes a time bomb. If there's any reason why intermarriages break up, it's because of that time bomb” (Olitzky, 2003, p. 64).

Questions such as, “Will there be a Christmas tree or a Menorah in my house in December?” may seem trivial, but these symbols are the actual basis to much deeper questions, and future conflicts that the marriage may face.
During the interview with Barbara Spierer, she notes that “A problem the interfaith married couples have is that they don’t address or understand their own religious needs, as individuals, before even considering how to intertwine those needs with a partner or family” (Spierer, 2004). Rabbi Kerry Olitsky, of the Jewish Outreach Organization suggests that couples where one partner is Jewish, but both agree to reside in a Jewish household, be asked several questions in these pre-marital counseling sessions.

- How important is religion to you?
- Are you willing to learn what you do not know
- Are you prepared to create a Jewish home together
- Can you respect each other’s religious feelings

By asking these questions, the counselor, in essence, brings to light important concerns that the couple may have never even thought of own their own. Communication techniques can be taught to the couple by the counselor, in order for each partner to not only understand the others needs, but to acknowledge them as well. If the couple is truly committed to their marriage, they will be motivated to communicate successfully with each other. Again, it is important for couples to understand each other’s spirituality before the decision to have children is even to be thought of. Once children are in the picture, a whole new set of conflicts will present themselves. However, these will only be conflicts, if they are not addressed ahead of time. As emphasized previously, it is never too early to make future decisions in an interfaith marriage, this is especially so when it comes to raising the children. Rabbi Olitzky is quoted as saying, “Don’t just say, ‘We’ll wait and let our kids decide later’. A link to a specific
community will benefit your children wherever life takes them. You aren’t forcing their future adult decisions if you provide them with experiences and give them information, but you will force a decision if you don’t’” (Olitzky, 2003 p. 37).

Esther Perel, a psychotherapist in New York City, who specializes in working with interfaith married couples, reminds us, “All marriages entail the discovery of and discussions about differences. Interfaith marriages will just entail more of both. Your life together awaits you. You have plenty of time to continue to discover each other. Take the time you need, and use it wisely” (Perel, 1991, p. 144).

Finally, a third solution will be presented. This solution gravitates toward group therapy sessions in the forms of meetings, workshops, and activities for interfaith families in the Jewish community. These meetings need not be facilitated by a professional in the field of counseling, or even an office-holding member of the synagogue. Many families may feel more at ease in an environment that is less religious, and less confrontational. The programming can vary from therapy-style discussion, support groups, to even such activities as holiday baking workshops or life-cycle event commemorations.

There are four Jewish synagogues in Madison, one representing each movement of Judaism; Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstuctionist. Just like the Jewish Social Services, at the current time, not one house of worship offers any kind of outreach towards couples and families of interfaith marriages. It should be of note that both the Conservative and Orthodox movements, in general, do not support interfaith marriage, thus it is understandable that there is no such program in place at these houses of worship. However, as previously noted, the majority of households that hold membership in either the Reform, or Reconstuctionist
synagogues, are interfaith families. With such numbers, the need for some support, and education for these families cannot be ignored.

The specific synagogue in Madison, WI that might benefit most, as it does have the highest numbers of interfaith families, is Temple Beth El. If a concern of the synagogue is that trained psychotherapists conduct the majority of group sessions, they must understand that there is no reason why programs cannot be modified for a layman to conduct. Of more importance is the feeling of support, the sensitivity of the needs of others, and the overall atmosphere of togetherness. Sharing stories, and experiences, will help other families know that they are not alone. Members can learn from each other, and help each other through the specific life cycle events that all Jewish families face.

As mentioned, Temple Beth El does have the highest number of interfaith families, but these meetings need not be restricted to temple members only, or temple facilities. This type of programming would benefit families who are not members of any specific temple as of yet. Temples, churches and family counselors in the community could be made aware of such programs in order to refer potential participants to them.
CHAPTER 3
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, either of the last two solutions, couples counseling or group therapy sessions in the form of monthly meetings, if actually implemented in the community, would help the relationships within families grow; will help couples respect one another’s needs, and overall provide the needed support for interfaith families, that they may not get from even their own extended families. However, the latter two solutions will not work if counselors, social workers, or even office holding temple members do not have the basic foundations and education by which to help these families. Many people look to Jewish Social Services to provide just that…a service. If workers are not fully trained to handle the unique and sometimes complex circumstances that such unions present, the couples may not look elsewhere for help, feeling as though this is the one place they should be getting their needs met. This is why the initial solution, to educate counselors will be most effective.

A proposal for implementation of solution one, the computer based counselor education option, would consist of three modules. This program will incorporate both power point slides, and online links for further learning. There will also be lists of Jewish Agencies across the country that implement interfaith counseling. By doing so, a learner can contact a specific agency for “live” answers to counseling questions. The first module will entail basic Jewish traditions, and customs. This will include holidays, life-cycle events, and basic Jewish customs. This will be geared toward the non-Jewish or uninformed Jewish learner. The first step to counseling an interfaith couple is understanding the basics of the religion.. The next two modules will be designed to help the learner counsel the couple depending on what stage of the relationship the couple is in at the moment. If partners seek counseling before marriage, the worker needs to make them aware of the possible implications that they may face in the future.
Couples need to be informed, in order to make knowledgeable decisions regarding their marriage, and possibly the children they may have. Therefore, the goal of this module is to have the counselor start dialogues between the couple using pre-determined questions that will, in essence, force the couple to explore situations they may be involved in during the course of their marriage. Anticipating these problems early in a relationship can prevent a multitude of grief in the future. These questions may include:

- Will you celebrate both faiths in your relationship and in your home?
- What are your hopes for your children concerning religion?
- Will you be attending temple or church, alone or together?
- Are either of you willing to convert?
- Can you share and live your religious lives without trying to change one another?

The third module will be designed for counseling the couple or families who are already well into their marriage, and have children. This will be used for the individual, the couple and for families. The goal of this module will emphasize the importance of communications skills, and parenting skills. The key element, of this module, is for the counselor to understand that these are family units, and all its members should be welcomed. The problems that these families have are not unlike others, but these families also have the additional trials and tribulations that come with being in an interfaith union. Therefore, as mentioned previously, communication skills, and parenting skills will be of utmost importance in order for these family to grow in a healthy mental environment.
Budgets need to be revised, to include this training. Whether the agency chooses the online web-based educational tools that this paper proposes, or another means of educating their workers, they need to somehow meet this demand. When an agency is serving a Jewish community where the majority of families are interfaith, at over sixty percent, this should be of high importance. Interfaith couples and families need a resource to turn to, and an educated advocate where they feel welcomed not excluded. Potential clients will need to be taught to develop skills to improve communications, resolve conflict, and establish bonds of trust and intimacy. These concepts should be taught with confidence on the part of the social worker. Becoming educated on the subject of interfaith marriage and all its intricacies is the key factor to a workers confidence. By doing so, the hope is to help couples build strong and caring relationships that will be the basis for raising the children they will have in the future. And by which, these children will build their own foundations.


