

Single and Jewish:

**Conversations with Unaffiliated
Jewish Singles**

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THE WILLIAM PETSCHKE NATIONAL JEWISH FAMILY CENTER

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The William Petschke National Jewish Family Center was created by the American Jewish Committee in 1979 as an expression of its commitment to the family as the indispensable social institution for maintaining and enhancing Jewish identity, communal stability and human fulfillment. Its goal is to promote research on family problems, help clarify family values and stimulate the development of innovative programs to help meet the needs of parents, would-be parents and their children. It also strives to encourage an awareness and responsiveness to those needs in the Jewish and general communities.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Two striking population trends in the United States in recent decades have been the increase in the number of Americans who either delay first marriage or who never marry. Among 25-to-29-year-olds, the percentage of never-married women increased from 11 to 23 between 1970 and 1982; the percentage of never-married men in the same age group rose from 19 to 36.

Sociologist Steven Cohen, reporting the results of a national survey in the 1983 American Jewish Year Book, estimates that 21 percent of adult American Jews have never married. Robert Leifert, chairman of the Task Force on Jewish Singles of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, has estimated that there are 200,000 to 300,000 Jewish singles in the New York metropolitan area alone.

These statistics do not bode well for the vitality of the Jewish community because prolonged singlehood postpones and may reduce childbearing and, by every measure of Jewish identification, singles are much less active in Jewish affairs than are married couples.

Singles have long complained of feeling alienated from the synagogue and other Jewish communal institutions, whose activities are typically family-centered. Such complaints have spurred the Jewish community to try to address the needs of singles. While many Jewish singles do affiliate with synagogues and havurot and actively participate in Jewish communal life, the large numbers of unaffiliated Jewish singles suggest that the established institutions are not meeting the needs of a significant segment of the Jewish population. These unaffiliated singles are lost to the Jewish community, at least temporarily, and no one is sure why.

The Jewish community lacks information about unaffiliated Jewish singles. This study was designed to begin to learn something about their backgrounds, characteristics, values, and life styles. What do unaffiliated Jewish singles think about marriage and family? Is religion a consideration in their dating? If they marry, do they plan to join a synagogue? Do they intend to have children? Do Jewish institutions meet their present needs? What additional services would encourage Jewish singles to move closer to the Jewish community?

Thirty unaffiliated Jewish singles in the New York metropolitan area -- 15 men and 15 women between the ages of 24 and 41 -- were interviewed between August 1983 and August 1984. Larger sample size was sacrificed for the benefit of the rich information to be gleaned from in-depth interviews. The subjects were selected through a "snowball" sampling technique in which one respondent recommended another, who recommended another, and so on. The 30 men and women located in this way represented a wide range of occupations, income

levels, and religious backgrounds.

Subjects selected in this manner do not, of course, constitute a representative sample of unaffiliated Jewish singles. Still, their responses to the interviewer's questions provide suggestive insights that may enable community leaders to better understand some of the concerns of this growing segment of the American Jewish population.

The Respondents

Backgrounds

The respondents in this study were single adults who identified themselves as Jews but were not affiliated with any Jewish communal organizations. All but two had never been married, two were divorced, one was engaged; none had children. Only one set of parents had been divorced. Most of the respondents had one or two siblings; a few had none or as many as three. Many of the siblings of marriageable age were also single.

One respondent had been born and raised in Canada, all the others had been born and raised in the United States. Three had grown up in California or Texas; the remainder had been born and raised in New York City or nearby suburbs or states.

The youngest woman in the sample was 26, the oldest 40; the youngest man was 24, the oldest 41; the average age of the entire sample was 31.

As a group, the respondents were highly educated. Ten held professional degrees. Of the women, one had a Ph.D., another was a lawyer, a third a physician. Three men were lawyers, three were

physicians, one was a podiatrist. Six women and two men held at least one master's degree. Only two respondents had not graduated from college.

Occupations and Incomes

Most of the respondents were ambitious and committed to achievement in their occupations or professions. All but five worked full-time. Most held white-collar or professional positions. Six worked in health care, five in business or finance, five in television, four in law, three in public relations, one in music. Two women and one man were full-time graduate students, one woman worked part-time and another was about to start a new job in another state.

Aside from the students, who had no earned income, the lowest annual salary was \$10,000 (earned by a part-time beauty consultant), the highest \$250,000 (earned by a 27-year-old stockbroker). The average income was \$37,566 -- \$25,400 for women, \$49,733 for men. Two-thirds of the women earned between \$20,000 and \$40,000; only two earned more than \$40,000 and none more than \$47,000. Six men earned between \$40,000 and \$60,000 and three more than \$60,000.

Living Arrangements

Eleven respondents lived with parents or roommates. Four working men in their twenties (no women) lived with parents for financial reasons -- all earned less than \$20,000. Most respondents who lived with roommates did so also for financial reasons. One man and two women had same-sex roommates; one man and two women lived in platonic

relationships with members of the opposite sex; and one man had an "on-again-off-again" romantic relationship with a roommate.

The other 19 respondents lived alone, with varying degrees of satisfaction. Among these, a 39-year-old man, earning \$60,000 a year, was one of two men who said they did not want to marry or have children; both said they enjoyed living alone. On the other hand, a 31-year-old graduate student also living alone expressed greater loneliness than any other respondent; to assuage it, she said, she "eats, gets out of the house, exercises, and phones people."

Leisure Activities

These singles might have been expected to join community, social, or special-interest organizations, but few did so. Of the 22 respondents who belonged to any organizations, most were involved with only professional or sports groups.

Most respondents had one or more hobbies or leisure-time activities in addition to their full-time jobs, but eight said their jobs were so demanding that they didn't have time for hobbies or sports. The most common leisure activity (14 respondents) was athletics. Some singles preferred solitary activities -- one man was "passionately" involved with his personal computer. Reading was the primary leisure activity for four men and four women. Five women and one man were involved in writing, arts and crafts, or photography.

Only two respondents spent part of their leisure time in volunteer or community service activities. One woman worked with disadvantaged children, another did administrative work for an organiza-

tion serving a handicapped population. One man and one woman participated in a neighborhood organization.

Although parties and socializing were high on the list of leisure activities, the respondents reported little "at home" entertaining. It was difficult to tell if this was due to small apartments and tight budgets or to discomfort in the role of host.

Many respondents said they were too busy with work or school to take advantage of the city's cultural offerings. Only a few (three women and two men) cited movies, museums, theater, or concerts as primary leisure-time activities.

Love and Friendship

Almost all the respondents agreed that at this stage in their lives friends were more important than family for companionship. Those whose romantic lives were less than satisfying found solace in friendship. Only two male respondents said they did not have even one "best friend"; most men and women (22) said they had two or more best friends.

In terms of their romantic attachments, the respondents seemed to fall into three groups: those who were "involved" and satisfied, those who were dating but were not satisfied, and those who neither dated nor actively sought partners.

Almost all of the women and most of the men said they wanted to marry, but only six men and four women were currently romantically involved. Indeed, three women and two men had not had a single date in the previous year. The remaining 15 respondents had dated from one

to 12 different people, some once or twice, others in fairly serious short-term relationships. Few respondents wanted to date someone more than three times if a relationship did not develop. Also, once "regular sex" was introduced into a relationship, most respondents stopped dating other people.

Although the limited involvement of many respondents in long-term serious romantic relationships might suggest possible problems with intimacy, only three respondents verbalized a belief that psychological difficulties might account for their single state. One woman revealed that she had underlying conflicts about intimacy and marriage, another said that her low self-esteem made her pick "ineligible" and "inappropriate" men, and a man admitted that he was still "looking for perfection."

Marriage

All the women (except one who felt that, at 26, she was too young to marry) seemed eager to be married. When asked, "Would you like to get married?," many answered "Absolutely!" rather than simply "Yes," as did most of the men. In fact, two women confided that their biggest worry was that "I'll end up by myself the rest of my life."

Only one woman said she did not want children; 12 said they did, and two were unsure. Most of the men (11) also expressed a desire for children; two said they wanted none, and two were unsure.

Most of the respondents had very high expectations about future spouses. Although only a few of the respondents were especially attractive, almost all the men wanted "great looking" wives who had

careers. The women were less concerned with looks than with personality and rapport, but they also had high expectations in these areas.

The majority of the men and women said they wanted to marry Jews if possible. The longest romantic relationship of a 35-year-old man had been a four-year affair that ended, he said, because he realized he could not marry a non-Jew. Thirteen respondents said they would not (or would prefer not to) marry a non-Jew but were encountering great difficulty in finding Jewish mates. "Where can I meet eligible Jewish men?" one woman asked; and a man with a non-Jewish girlfriend complained, "It's not hard to meet women, just good Jewish women." Eighteen of the 30 respondents said they dated non-Jews; five said they never did, and three said they sometimes did. Fourteen respondents -- almost half the sample -- said they would marry a non-Jew; eight said they would not, and five said perhaps.

Stereotypes affected the respondents' attitudes toward Jewish members of the opposite sex. Two out of three men who said they might marry a non-Jew (though all said they would prefer a Jew, if only to please their families) defended their attitudes in terms of the "JAP" (Jewish American Princess) stereotype. A 24-year-old man, generally hostile to Jewish women, described JAPs as "snotty ... concerned about trivial things ... very self-centered." A 29-year-old man echoed these negative opinions about Jewish women: "They are unbelievably disappointing ..., selfish babies ... can't take criticism ... no depth." Another said that the characteristics of Jewish women that turned him off were "pettiness, pointless aggressiveness, silly materialism." Said another: "Mommy brought up her baby to expect the

best ... the most expensive ... and that makes the men feel constantly inadequate,"

Women offered the stereotype of the immature, dependent Jewish man. One respondent felt that "the notion of the Jewish mama's boy is almost as ingrained as the notion of the JAP and keeps people apart."

Jewish Issues

Jewish Identity

All the respondents identified themselves as Jewish -- 13 as "cultural" Jews, 11 as Conservative, five as Reform, and one as Orthodox. No one answered "yes" to the question: "Have you ever wished you had been born something other than a Jew?" One man gave a typical answer: "No, it has never occurred to me. I'm very proud of being Jewish." Moreover, of the 14 respondents who said they might marry non-Jews, 13 said that they preferred not to. This reflected in part a desire to avoid conflict with their parents. But one woman, whose older sister had intermarried, expressed concern for Jewish survival: "I want us to survive ... I want there always to be Jews. I'm so scared that there won't be."

The respondents distinguished between Jewish ethnic or cultural identity, which they all accepted, and religious belief and observance. Nine women and 12 men had attended Hebrew school; 13 men and two women had celebrated Bar Mitzvahs or Bat Mitzvahs, and two other women had been confirmed. But many had given up ritual observance, formal affiliation, and even religious belief by the time they began college or careers. Six said they had been raised in kosher homes,

but none currently practiced kashrut. For example, one woman brought up in a kosher home no longer kept kosher and was "uninvolved" with Judaism, but she had a "very strong feeling about being Jewish." A 33-year-old son of Holocaust survivors who had been raised as an Orthodox Jew considered himself "very religious but not observant." One man declared that he was agnostic but very conscious of his Jewish identity and aware of Jewish issues. Another wore a Jewish star although he had not been to a synagogue in years.

Although many respondents did not consider themselves observant, the majority celebrated holidays and observed certain Jewish rituals. Twenty-three of the 30 respondents attended synagogue on the High Holy Days and six on other festivals as well. Typical was one man who had been raised in a kosher home, had become Bar Mitzvah, and had attended Hebrew school throughout his high school years, currently was completely unaffiliated, but attended synagogue on the High Holy Days and Passover and sometimes lit Friday night candles.

Most of those who attended holiday services did so in their parents' communities rather than in local synagogues. When one man was asked if he would attend a seder for Jewish singles, he protested: "Passover is by definition to be spent with one's family."

For 21 respondents, Jewish identity included a feeling of support for Israel. Four women and three men had been to Israel and reported that their trips had been significant experiences in their Jewish identity. A 28-year-old woman who had spent four months on a kibbutz after college said the experience had been a turning point in her attitude toward Judaism: "I felt part of a culture ... I saw that

being Jewish is more complex than people praying and wearing yarmulkes." A 33-year-old woman who considered herself a cultural Jew had spent three months in Israel 12 years before and had been "very moved" by what she had seen.

Nearly a quarter of the sample -- seven respondents -- had not attended a synagogue in over 10 years. While identifying themselves as Jews, they felt far removed from Judaism, and even farther removed from synagogue participation.

Jewish Affiliation

Most of the respondents had dropped their affiliations with synagogues and other Jewish institutions when they went to college or started work. Some attributed their current alienation to feelings that they had been ostracized by the Jewish community because of their singleness. A man raised in an Orthodox home but now unobservant said he felt unwelcome when he occasionally went to services at the Lower East Side synagogue he had attended as a boy. He and others said they felt being single was a stigma in most Jewish institutions. A 40-year-old woman said that she had been made to feel "like a pariah, almost a leper, in the Jewish community," where it is "fairly socially unacceptable to consider something other than marriage important."

Other respondents attributed their lack of affiliation to faults they perceived in the Jewish institutions. One man said that "self-righteousness" and "homogeneity" were characteristics that turned him off. Others were put off by what they called the "hard sell" tactics of the Jewish community: one man said he encountered pressure to marry

and have a family even at the Y. A number of women complained of "sexist" elements in Judaism; others said that "fanaticism" and "fighting among the sects" alienated them from established Judaism.

A number of respondents believed that Jewish organizations were more interested in raising money than in encouraging active participation. These unaffiliated singles felt doubly unwelcome at High Holy Day services, first because they were unmarried but also because they were not paying members of the congregation. Those for whom the cost of membership was a problem proposed a sliding scale of membership fees depending on marital status and family size. Others, however, were reluctant to make the commitment of formal membership. They wanted a "loose affiliation" with "nonjoiners" like themselves whose commitment to Judaism was "not excessive or obsessive."

Most of the respondents saw themselves as "nonjoiners." They had made little effort to learn about any nonprofessional groups in New York, including Jewish groups, and had outdated notions about them. Only a few had inquired about more than membership fees and privileges at local synagogues. Few knew of the singles groups at the Brotherhood Synagogue on Gramercy Park, the Sutton Place Synagogue, and other institutions.

Nevertheless, almost all of the respondents said that organized religion would be important after they married and became parents. When asked if they would send their children to Hebrew or Sunday school, only two among those who wanted children answered "No" or "Don't know"; 16 said "Yes." Some respondents had been single long enough to believe that they would never marry and wondered how they

could become more closely affiliated and more observant now. Respondents who were not seriously involved with someone, or actively dating, wanted Jewish institutions to fulfill the social functions that those institutions had fulfilled during their formative years; they were critical if they were disappointed in this expectation. Yet a number would not attend singles functions at synagogues because they conjured up "the picture of fat homely women and nebbishy men." One man, who considered himself Conservative, said: "There's very little they can do for me as a single ... So long as the word Jewish is used it would tend to scare off those people with whom I feel closest." To counter these negative stereotypes one woman proposed that the organizations actively encourage "super-dupers" to get involved in Jewish singles organizations, making them the "in" groups to join.

Not all the respondents were estranged from Jewish organizations, however. A man who had moved to New York from the West had met his best friend at a singles function at the Sutton Place Synagogue. He felt that "lectures on Judaism or Shabbatons -- Sabbath services and luncheons -- are very good. Not a dance at a nightclub, but something with a cultural aspect to it, a lecture on something related to Judaism or a service." His feelings were echoed by another man who had been active in an organization of young Jewish professionals in Boston but had not joined a similar one in New York. He suggested that Jewish organizations and institutions sponsor lectures on contemporary Jewish topics to attract singles who felt, as he did, that this would not be "like walking in with a sign 'I want to meet someone.'"

A woman agreed that opportunities to meet fellow Jews in "less obtrusive ways" were needed. She suggested that established Jewish organizations provide interesting lectures on non-Jewish topics. She also emphasized the need to reestablish a sense of community, which she felt was missing in New York.

Conclusions

Although the sample of unaffiliated Jewish singles living in New York City selected for this study was small, and not necessarily representative of all unaffiliated Jewish singles, it provides a few clues to understanding this segment of the American Jewish population.

First, the members of the sample were not only unconnected with Jewish communal institutions and organizations, they were rarely connected with any communal institutions and organizations. When they did join an organization, it was generally for instrumental purposes -- career advancement or self-improvement. Apart from work or school, their lives centered on friends and "dates."

Second, all felt positively about their Jewishness. For many, this took the form of an ethnic or cultural identification unrelated to community affiliation or religious observance. Yet many had had a significant measure of Jewish education, still celebrated at least the High Holy Days, and were concerned about the State of Israel. Most hoped to marry Jewish partners and raise Jewish children, expecting to return to the Jewish community at that time.

Third, members of the sample tended to explain their lack of affiliation less as a result of their own alienation than in terms of

the ostracism by the community they perceived they had experienced --that is, they found fault with Jewish institutions but they also believed that the institutions were critical of them. For most of the sample, agreeing to be interviewed for this study was their first effort in recent years to know or understand the Jewish community. They eagerly look forward to the results of this study, hoping some of the failings they pointed to might be corrected and a place for them carved out, whether or not they marry and have children.

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