

## **For 2013, A Marriage Agenda** *Editor's Notebook*



THINKSTOCK

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Judging by the amount of money spent, and organizations created, and words expressed, you would think that the most serious problem facing the American Jewish community is the waning attachment to Israel among young adults. But that's not what keeps me up at night.

What haunts me and the many parents I know who have children in their twenties and thirties is whether they will marry and, if so, whether they will marry Jews.

The fact that this concern is rarely discussed publicly by the organized Jewish community highlights the disconnect between our so-called leadership and how most of us live our lives. And it reflects the extreme reluctance liberals feel to express out loud what may be perceived as a traditional, even intolerant point of view.

But we ignore this issue at our peril. If current trends continue, worrying about whether our children hear an anti-Israel slur in the college dorm will be the least of our concerns.

In writing this I realize that I risk sounding like a Jewish version of Jane Austen's Mrs. Bennet, whose sole preoccupation is marrying off her five daughters, no matter who will have them. (I have three daughters, and so far one Jewish son-in-law, so I shouldn't complain.) As a committed feminist, I struggle with over-emphasizing traditional marriage and child-rearing at the expense of other paths to self-fulfillment and service, for men as well as women.

But I am also a clear-headed journalist who pays attention to what she hears and examines facts without bias. And I'm hearing a great deal of anxiety from deeply identified, non-Orthodox Jews whose children are dating or marrying non-Jews, or who are not dating or marrying at all.

The facts bear me out. Here's what the sociologist Steven M. Cohen told me: "Based upon a review of recent Jewish population studies, it appears that the age at which about 50% of non-Orthodox Jews are married is about 31 for women and about 34 for men. In other words, for the non-Orthodox, we can expect that about half the women will be married by age 31, and that about half the men will be married by age 34."

Think about this. Most Jews in America are not Orthodox. These numbers suggest that half of those women over 31 and half of the men over 34 are not even married. And of those who do marry, between one-third and one-half are wed to non-Jews, depending on the survey. (Among the Orthodox, marriage occurs at a much earlier age and the intermarriage rate is put at 1%.)

As a result, the non-Orthodox birthrate in America is far below replacement level. As Jews marry later and give birth later, they also risk having babies with far more serious medical conditions. (For more, see Judith Shulevitz's disturbing recent story about the consequences of older parenthood in *The New Republic*.)

In this and so much else, most younger Jews in America simply reflect trends in the larger society, where highly educated people are marrying later, giving birth later, and living in a far more pluralistic environment than even a generation ago. This is what we've wanted, isn't it — to be open-minded and accepted, to be integrated into the American mosaic? (Consider what Hillary Rodham Clinton and Joe Biden have in common: Jewish sons-in-law.)

But this acceptance — some call it assimilation — comes at a price we are not willing to acknowledge, which I believe endangers the future of egalitarian, progressive American Judaism. And we don't know what to do. Parents do not want to alienate their children with what may seem like outdated prejudices, while religious authorities, such as they are, are reluctant to judge for fear of rejection. We hope that those coming into our community will compensate for all who leave, but they won't. We pour money into free 10-day trips to Israel with the not-so-hidden agenda of promoting inmarriage, and they do a little. But such "success" comes at a huge monetary cost, with the added risk of tying Jewishness only to Israel — hardly a winning argument in today's political environment.

We need to figure out how to honor individual choice and the desire to move beyond ghettoization with the communal need to promote marriage as the foundation for a healthy Jewish culture. Perhaps we straight folks can learn something from the gays and lesbians who have fought so bravely for the right to marry — a right, a duty, a joy and a privilege we are allowing to slip away.

Read more: <http://forward.com/articles/168529/for--a-marriage-agenda/#ixzz2HLmIx0hS>

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