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How Important is Marrying Within the Faith? Conversations with Canadian Jewish Singles

Abstract

This article explores the factors that Jewish singles consider when selecting an intimate partner. It assesses the degree to which they take into account whether potential mates are Jewish. Using data collected through in-depth interviews with Canadian Jewish singles, the study seeks to shed light on the values that guide individuals in their decisions regarding relationships and marriage, as well as the challenges they encounter in pursuing those values. The findings reveal that although attitudes and perceptions towards endogamy change as people age, endogamy and Jewish particularism are still important considerations for Jewish adults. Situating this finding in the larger context of debates around Jewish continuity, the article argues that these patterns help to mitigate assimilation in the Canadian Jewish community.

Résumé

Cet article explore les facteurs que les personnes célibataires juives prennent en compte lors de la sélection d'un partenaire intime. Il évalue dans quelle mesure iels tiennent compte de la judéité des partenaires potentiels. À l'aide de données recueillies lors d'entrevues approfondies avec des célibataires juifs canadiens – hommes et femmes –, l'étude examine les valeurs qui guident les individus dans leurs décisions concernant les relations et le mariage, ainsi que sur les défis qu'ils rencontrent dans la poursuite de ces valeurs. Les résultats révèlent que bien que les attitudes et les perceptions à l'égard de l'endogamie changent à mesure que les gens vieillissent, l'endogamie et le particularisme juif restent des considérations importantes pour les adultes juifs. Situés dans le contexte plus large des débats sur la continuité juive, l'article soutient que ces modèles aident à atténuer l'assimilation de la communauté juive canadienne.

Marriage within the same ethnic group has always played an important role in preserving the continuity of collective identities and as a basis for solidarity and affiliation within the group. However, during the last few decades there has been a decline in racial and ethnic endogamy across all groups in most post-industrial countries. Sociologist Matthijs Kalmijn refers to several central factors that shape the process of choosing a mate in the context of endogamy. The first is the importance attributed by the individual to finding a racially or ethnically similar partner. Another is the parents' degree of involvement and to what extent they are willing to prevent inter-ethnic marriages. In particular, if the children have not adopted the preferences of their parents and want to marry outside the group, their parents may impose sanctions that will discourage them from doing so. This suggests that the more homogeneous the contexts in which the parents are embedded, the higher the chances their children will marry within the group. Those contexts include friendship networks, ethnoreligious organizations and schools, which are referred to as secondary socialization agents. They promote endogamy by providing a homogeneous pool of candi-

dates from which to choose. In this context, it should be taken into account that the size of the potential marriage pool is also a determinant of the likelihood of meeting someone from the same ethnic group. Finally, there is the degree of exposure to people from other social groups. In other words, remaining within the confines of one's ethnic community and having less exposure to other ethnic groups will increase the chance of marrying within the group.¹

Based on Kalmijn's analysis, Michael Rosenfeld claims that endogamy is on the decline because young people today have more opportunities to travel and meet potential partners outside the supervision of their parents. Furthermore, many of them choose to study at a location distant from their parents.² Therefore, an increase in enrollment in higher education means that more individuals are moving outside the boundaries of ethnic enclaves.³ This further weakens the possibility of parental supervision and increases exposure to people from different backgrounds. Marc Frenette suggests that at the same time, the trend of moving away from a parental house in favor of post-secondary education may differ by distance to school, family income, parental education, and sex. Moreover, the extent of the geographical separation and the probability of this choice still differs among countries. For instance, in Canada, individuals often opt for colleges and universities a few hours away from their parents, while in the United States, the trend is towards greater distances.⁴

The decline in endogamy can also involve normative changes that strengthen individualism and free choice. While in the past the marriage market was regulated on the basis of religious and ethnic homogamy and parents were significantly involved in the choice of a partner, today the prevailing discourse emphasizes the individual's free choice in selecting a spouse.⁵ This approach emphasizes love as the foundation of partnership and marriage, and therefore many young people today are unwilling to compromise in their choice of a partner for the sake of marrying within their group.⁶

There is also evidence that in recent decades there has been a stronger tendency towards educational homogamy at the expense of ethnic homogamy, that is, people tend to marry partners with a level of education similar to their own rather than a partner with a similar ethnic background.⁷ Feng Hou and John Myles report that the occurrence of educational homogamy has risen in both Canada and the US since the 1970s. These trends were predominantly influenced by shifts in preference in the selection of partners, rather than shifts in the availability of marriage prospects linked to the increasing alignment of educational accomplishments among young men and women.⁸

Educational homogamy has become more widespread in most post-industrial societies, mainly because education is seen as a significant indicator of a potential partner's professional success and earning capacity.⁹ Furthermore, Kenneth Wiik points out that young people today are looking for a partner with a socioeconomic

profile similar to or better than their own in order to reduce the possibility of downward mobility.¹⁰

Changes in the structure of the labor market, a more consumption-oriented culture and the rise in expected standard of living have increased the need for two breadwinners in a family. Thus, women and men alike are looking for partners who will contribute to the economic well-being of the family.¹¹

While we have described the structural forces that influence endogamy versus exogamy, less is known about attitudes and expectations towards endogamy and, in particular, during the period before couples enter into a relationship. This article focuses on the Canadian Jewish community, which on the one hand is considered more traditional than other communities, such as the US, with respect to the centrality of the family, and on the other hand is experiencing an increase in rates of intermarriage, especially among young adults.¹² This article attempts to determine the considerations of Jewish singles when choosing a partner by examining their life experiences, values, beliefs, and interactions with each other.

Homogamy and Intermarriage Patterns in the Jewish Community

The Jewish community attributes great importance to the institution of marriage as a basis for its collective identity. This strong marriage culture is based on the religious foundation and traditional orientation of the Jewish population. It is also rooted in the ideology of Jewish nationhood, which views familism as a national asset that serves political and other goals.¹³

It is no surprise therefore that intermarriage is a growing concern. It is a quintessential Jewish fear, as is assimilation, and they are both considered a threat to the future survival of the relatively small Jewish collective.¹⁴ Intermarriage has always existed, but it is only in the last several decades that the statistics have raised communal anxiety to a level where a response is being discussed as part of the community's strategic planning.¹⁵

The main concern is that intermarried couples are less likely to raise their children as Jews, with the possible consequence of Jewish ethnic erosion. Moreover, children who were raised by intermarried couples tend to be less engaged in Jewish life and demonstrate weaker Jewish identification compared to children who were raised in families in which both spouses are Jewish.¹⁶ Many scholars of Jewish life and leaders of the Jewish polity thus perceive intermarriage to be a serious threat to Jewish continuity, not only from the demographic perspective but also with respect to the loss of Jewish identity, which leads to a weakening of social and religious cohesiveness in the community.¹⁷

Some scholars argue that Jewish out-marriage may be a positive development for the Jewish community, since it encourages non-Jews to embrace Jewish culture.¹⁸ Furthermore, it creates more “Jewish households” (those with at least one Jew) in the aggregate, and serves as a signal of diminishing animosity or mistrust between Jews and non-Jews.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the mainstream strategy in most Jewish communities has been to prevent intermarriage, while in recent years some communities have invested resources in integrating intermarried couples into the Jewish community. Further discussion on this important intermarriage debate will be provided later in the article.

Given that the Jewish population constitutes only a small minority of the total population everywhere except Israel, the likelihood of meeting a suitable non-Jewish partner outside Israel is therefore enormously greater than that of meeting a Jewish one. This situation is exacerbated by low birth rates among Jews, which have led to a shortage of young people of marriageable ages and increasing difficulty in finding a Jewish spouse.²⁰ An imbalance between the two sexes can also constitute a barrier to finding a heterosexual Jewish partner (referred to as a marriage squeeze), a problem made worse by the tendency of men to marry younger women.

Studies of intermarriage typically focus on couples, their involvement in Jewish life, and how they raise their children. Others have examined the link between socioeconomic characteristics and the likelihood of intermarriage. The focus of the current research is to examine the attitudes toward and perceptions of intermarriage among Jewish single men and women who have never been married or been part of a long-term partnership, with the goal of revealing their preferences for a potential partner and describing their process of mate selection. The goal is to understand the values that guide young people in their relationships and marriage decisions and the challenges they face in realizing those values. The study examines the extent to which endogamy is still a dominant consideration in choosing a partner among young people in the Jewish community, particularly in light of the problems they encounter in the Jewish marriage market.

The Case of the Canadian Jewish Community

The Canadian Jewish community is still perceived, on the whole, to be a cohesive society with a high level of religious and ethnic retention.²¹ Canadian Jews remain relatively traditional in their practices, with marriage considered to be the most valued form of family life and the legitimate arrangement for forming long-lasting partnerships and bearing children. However, in recent decades Canadian Jews have rapidly achieved upward mobility and have increasingly gained acceptance by the Canadian mainstream. These social processes also reflect some loosening of traditional community boundaries and the strengthening of individualization, leading to transformations in the institution of marriage and in family patterns. This situation

is manifested in a decline in marriage rates, an increase in the proportion of singles, higher rates of divorce, lower marital fertility, and rising rates of intermarriage.²²

In Canada, intermarriage rates are increasing for all ethnic and religious groups, though at a much faster rate for Jews than for non-Jews.²³ Today, the intermarriage rate among Canadian Jews is estimated to be 25 percent and is highest among Jews in the youngest age cohort (nearly one-third among those aged eighteen to twenty-nine). It is more common among men than women, although the difference has narrowed in recent years. Furthermore, the intermarriage rate tends to be inversely proportional to the size of the community, that is, it tends to be lower in areas with relatively large Jewish populations. While in the largest Jewish communities of Toronto and Montreal the rate of intermarriage is 22 percent and 26 percent respectively, in Winnipeg it stands at 49 percent and in Vancouver at 60 percent, a phenomenon explained by the lack of potential mates in small communities.²⁴

The intermarriage rate among Jews in Canada is similar to the rate in the United Kingdom and Australia but only about half the US rate. There are several factors that can explain this phenomenon. First, Canada is a multiethnic society known for its support of ethnocultural diversity. Thus, the attractiveness of group identity and ethnicity remain the primary status affiliation for many people in Canada. The promotion of diversity, as evidenced by the state's financial support for Jewish institutions, contributes to greater participation of Jews in community life and in turn to endogamous marriages. Second, the percentage of Orthodox Jews, among whom intermarriage is less common, is higher in Canada than in the US. Third, religious institutions in Canada are less likely to accept intermarried couples and their children, especially if the mother is the non-Jewish spouse.²⁵

Nonetheless, the rate of intermarriage in the Canadian Jewish community is persistently increasing, especially among the youngest cohorts who are less connected to institutionalized religious Judaism and whose identification with Judaism as a religion is on the decline. Furthermore, Canada, as a multicultural and pluralistic country, is known for promoting the legitimacy of less conventional ways of life and family forms.

Method

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of in-depth semi-structured interviews with forty-five heterosexual and queer men and women aged twenty-one to fifty-one (two-thirds of whom were above the age of thirty) among different affiliation groups, who have never been married and were not partnered at the time of the interview. The age range made it possible to distinguish between younger and older singles while at the same time focusing on the ones who are in the stage of life when social pressures to marry are particularly high. Participants were recruited

first through personal contacts and later through snowball sampling and ads posted on social media. The interviews were conducted by the first author in 2021 and 2022. The vast majority of the interviewees were happy to have the opportunity to talk about the topic and share their experiences, and willingly cooperated even when delicate issues were raised. Nearly 70 percent of the participants were women. Of those, five defined themselves as queer. Seven of the interviewees defined themselves as religious or Orthodox. Two of the interviewees were newly religious (not religious from birth) and three were converts to Judaism. The majority of the interviewees were from a middle-class background and were highly educated. One-fifth of the participants lived with their parents at the time of the interview, while the remainder lived alone or with roommates. Thirty of the participants lived in Toronto at the time of the interview, ten lived in Montreal and five lived in Vancouver. The participants were asked if they are interested in a relationship and about what kind of a partner they are looking for, as well as the reasons for their preferences. They were also asked about previous romantic relationships (if any), and how they had affected their views on the subject.

The interviews ranged in duration from one to three hours and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The analysis was based on an inductive approach in which the extraction of themes and the formulation of theoretical claims are based on findings from the field with few preconceptions. This research approach allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences of the research subjects and the meanings they attribute to their experiences.

The interviews were conducted and analyzed until the point where the same themes and ideas were heard repeatedly so that there was little new information to be gleaned. The analysis included identifying thematic categories by cross-referencing information from different interviewees and finding repeated patterns of meaning. We used several strategies to ensure the quality and credibility of the analysis including presentation and deliberation of interim findings among researchers at various qualitative discussion forums.

Three main patterns regarding views toward intermarriage emerged. In the first scenario, interviewees expressed a strong desire to be in a long-term relationship with a Jewish partner. In the second scenario, the interviewees, most of them over thirty, would consider being in an intermarried relationship. In the third scenario, the interviewees previously dated non-Jews or been in a long-term relationship with one but were currently looking for a Jewish partner. Overall, the findings reveal that endogamy is still an important consideration for Jewish adults and many of them devote a lot of thought to this decision. Furthermore, attitudes and perceptions towards endogamy change over time—as people age and as they accumulate dating and relationship experiences. Finally, any tendency towards or away from endogamy is usually justified on several grounds. When people are asked whether it is import-

ant for them to be with a Jewish partner, they usually do not provide a single answer but rather several complex narratives that are woven together from a number of considerations, constraints, and opportunities. These are expressed from a personal, family, or collective perspective, and sometimes from all three.

Findings

Desire to find a Jewish partner and the difficulty in doing so

Many of the participants wish to be with a Jewish partner. At the same time, it is difficult for them to find a good match.

Ryan (a twenty-seven-year-old man) describes his desire to be with a Jewish partner and the importance of marrying a Jewish woman for personal, family and collective reasons:

It's very important in my family. You know, I want to marry Jewish for myself for various reasons and I've thought about it a lot...It's also very important for my family, especially my mom; my grandfather was a Holocaust survivor. So my mom feels very strongly about this. I can't say that hasn't influenced me. Of course it did. But I have my own reasons for wanting to marry Jewish.... I don't feel there's an external force forcing me to do it. But, certainly, there's been discussion and there's been that kind of haze around growing up—Jews should marry Jews. You know, we're a small community, and to pass on their culture and traditions, it's easier to do that when you marry Jewish.

On the one hand, Ryan expresses his desire for a Jewish partner, but also says that this is based on messages he received at home and in the community over the years. Consistent with Kalmijn's theory, Ryan is motivated by the importance of being with a partner similar to himself, strong family pressure, and socialization processes.²⁶ Moreover, Ryan emphasizes the expectations he has of potential partners, and of the marital relationship, which is in line with the high expectations individuals have today of the conjugal relationship. Young people expect to grow within a conjugal relationship and to experience deep intimacy through open dialogue and mutual emotional expressivity.²⁷ Ryan continues:

I am looking for someone Jewish and besides that, somebody who is compassionate, warm and empathetic, and somebody who I guess shares my love of languages. I mean I need a lot of quality time. Somebody who is able to really think deeply about things, work through things and be very open to, you know, I guess being vulnerable.

Similar to Ryan, Rebecca (a thirty-six-year-old woman) also states that it is important for her to be in a relationship with a Jewish partner.

I am looking for someone who's very intelligent, somebody who I get along with, somebody who has similar values to me, and somebody who's Jewish.

Did you ever go out with someone non-Jewish?

Not really, maybe a date here and there but not seriously.

Why it is important for you to be with a Jewish guy?

I mean, there's different reasons. I think, for me, obviously, I was always raised Jewish, I was raised in a very, you know, Jewish household. And so that's important for me to continue. And I also like being Jewish, and I think it's really important to continue the community; you know, we're so small, and there's so much intermarriage and people are not really religious anymore. And I think, if I can do my part to continue on, then that would be good. I think also what makes it important for me to absolutely marry somebody who's Jewish is that my dad grew up in a Holocaust family, and my grandfather lost pretty much his whole family and it was very omnipresent in my dad's life. So that idea of, you know, replacing all those people who died and all that kind of stuff, that's the thing that weighs really heavy on me.

Rebecca finds it important to be in a relationship with a Jewish partner and also gives reasons on the personal, family, and collective levels, including the importance of Jewish continuity. However, she also mentions the difficulty of finding a Jewish partner who will meet her expectations as a partner:

But in terms of myself, I just feel it's really challenging. Because the Jewish community is so small. So for me, and anyone who's dating, it's challenging, everybody's trying to find a needle in a haystack. But especially when you're trying to find somebody who's Jewish, plus all the things that you're looking for. It's like, extra, extra, extra challenging.

Many interviewees also describe the tension between their desires to be finally in a relationship and settle down versus the wish to be with a Jewish partner and the fear of disappointing their parents by dating non-Jewish partners. This tension is the outcome of a limited pool of Jewish candidates in addition to high expectations from the potential partner as indicated above.

For example, Daniella (a thirty-two-year-old woman) explains that she is looking for someone Jewish but at the same time someone who has already figured out what he is doing in life:

I'm probably looking for a man who is Jewish. And someone who wants to be a parent, someone who, you know, has their life somewhat figured out, right? They're not sort of aimless.

She explains that when she goes out with someone non-Jewish it makes her feel uncomfortable:

If I go on a date with someone non-Jewish or if I am asked out on a date or whatever, I kind of always panic and then end it. I try to rationalize it and say, oh, it's maybe okay for this reason or that, but then, I just kind of panic and think this isn't a good direction for my life and I don't do it just for my parents, but I can't really picture myself saying to my parents: "Oh, I'm dating someone who's not Jewish." Like, I think I do it for myself. But I also know that's part of it.

Daniella says that her parents never said that they expect her to be only with a Jewish partner, but at the same time she would find it difficult to tell them that she is in a relationship with a non-Jew. Thus, even if the issue is not explicit, there are norms and expectations that reflect cultural beliefs. Following her sister's experience with a non-Jewish partner, a relationship of which her parents did not approve, Daniella realized that the price of deviating from the usual norms will lead to sanctions that she is unwilling to endure. This is in line with Kalmijn's theory that one of the main mechanisms encouraging endogamy is the parents' stance and the extent to which they are willing to prevent an interethnic marriage.²⁸

Overall, it appears that considerations at the collective level are still relevant in explaining the desire for an ethnically similar partner, as is the desire for a culturally similar one. At the same time, the interviewees describe the challenges in finding a Jewish partner and cite the small pool of potential partners. Furthermore, there are other expectations of what a potential partner will provide, such as deep intimacy through open dialogue and mutual emotional expressivity. These expectations reflect the prevalent conception of marriage as an intimate institution in which spouses are expected to fulfill their partner's social and emotional needs.²⁹ People are also looking for someone whose life path is already clear, in addition to an emphasis on physical appearance. The overall high level of expectations increases the difficulty in finding a partner.

Openness to a relationship with a non-Jew

Some of the participants, regardless of gender, started to become more open to a relationship with a non-Jewish partner once they reached their thirties and forties. Nonetheless, they feel it is important that a potential partner will have the same connection to Judaism or at least have an open mind and be accepting of Judaism.

Bella (a forty-three-year-old Conservative woman) states that her family is highly involved in the Jewish community and that she feels a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish community and the desire to engage in Jewish life. Bella explains that in the past it was important for her to be in a relationship with a Jewish partner, but that today she is looking for someone who is only oriented toward Judaism:

When I was thirty, I had a boyfriend who was so loving and supportive, really emotionally available and attuned. And I always said, I just wanted to find a Jewish version of him, and we broke up because we had differences of religion. So today I don't know if I need a Jewish partner; I need a partner who's interested in knowing about Judaism, because it's a big focus of mine. And like, if I were a poet, I would expect a guy to be interested in poetry. If a guy can't be interested a little bit, we're not gonna have a real common base. So does he have to be Jewish and practicing? No, but he has to be open to it and interested.

Amelia (a twenty-nine-year-old woman) is already starting to think about the option of a non-Jewish partner:

I'm always on the fence about this because I feel if I met someone who I was otherwise into, I'm not sure that the Jewish thing would be a factor. I think it would be difficult if I would date someone who's Catholic and wants me to go to mass every weekend or whatever. But if someone was kind of agnostic, and a lot of people are in this category, and they're not really doing a whole lot with religion, then I could deal with someone like that—if they're curious and engaged enough to sort of want to find out what I'm doing. Yeah, at this point, I'm not sure it would be a deal breaker, but it would depend on the circumstances. Especially because my kids will be Jewish. My brother's wife is non-Jewish and now they have to figure out how to convert the baby, which is more annoying. Whereas, obviously, my kids will be Jewish no matter what, which makes things a little bit easier.

Amelia refers to secularization trends, which increase the possibility of finding a partner without a strong religious identity, thus removing a potential source of friction in a relationship. Moreover, she says that her brother has already married someone who is not Jewish but who is very connected to Judaism. Thus, the legitimacy of a mixed marriage has already been established in the family, and even though his children are not Jewish according to Jewish law, this makes things simpler for her as her children would be considered Jewish. At the same time, she later describes the difficulty her brother and his wife encounter in their attempts to integrate into the community and notes that they are not really accepted:

But it's so annoying, because the community, I think, is still not super accepting of intermarriage. And in some congregations, it feels like if you're not Jewish, you can come but you can't really be part of things.

On the one hand, Amelia explains that given her age, she is more open to a non-Jewish partner, but on the other hand, she is aware of the accompanying difficulties. Chertok and Brookner indicate that although there has been some evolution in Jewish communal policy in Canada and there is more acceptance of intermarried couples, many of the couples that they were interviewed indicate that they feel not fully accepted by the community. Particularly, couples with non-Jewish mothers expressed concerns about the possibility of not being fully embraced by communal institutions. Furthermore, several interfaith couples in Toronto reported encountering pressure from family, friends, and religious figures, urging the non-Jewish partner to undergo conversion to Judaism.³⁰ In our sample, the respondents did not express their wish or the expectation that their partner would convert. In addition, it can be said that many of them lowered expectations and strived for a partner who would have an open mind and be accepting of Judaism with the understanding that it is not possible to demand the spouse to convert or they did not see it as necessary. At the same time, it may be that the issue of conversion arises and becomes more relevant only after the relationship is further established.

Amelia also states that a mixed marriage is already considered legitimate in her family, although she also describes her parents' difficulty in accepting her brother's marriage to a non-Jewish woman. Kalmijn et al. study the importance of the family of origin in mate choice with a focus on the partner choices of sibling pairs. Given that siblings share their parents and the circumstances of their upbringing, sibling similarities in marriage choices should reflect the influence of family background. They find that if a Jewish individual has a Jewish partner, then there is a likelihood of 71 percent that his or her younger sibling will as well. If the individual does not have a Jewish partner, then the likelihood of the younger sibling having a Jewish partner is only 20 percent.³¹

Altogether, Bella's and Amelia's accounts correspond to Oppenheimer's claim that as people get older, the likelihood of a heterogamous partner increases.³² It also illustrates the difficulty of disentangling marriage market effects from purely individual considerations in decisions about who to marry.³³

Julie (a 47-year-old woman) says that throughout her adulthood there has been pressure from her parents to be in a relationship with a Jewish man. She recounts that over the years she dated Jewish men but without success and when she brought non-Jewish men home to her parents, they did not approve.

I think that's a tough one for me to answer simply because I'm not very connected to my Judaism anymore. Like in a sort of concrete, traditional way. I do still feel like there's this sense that I should have met and gotten married to a nice Jewish boy a long time ago; there's a kind of pressure. But I mean, my parents stopped nagging me about finding a nice Jewish boy years ago. I had non-Jewish

boyfriends but my dad never liked who I picked. And so it was discouraging, for sure. But yeah, when I was younger, I was told to only date people who are Jewish. It was a big deal. Yeah, and when I was a teenager, I really only wanted to date people who are Jewish, because I was so involved in the Jewish community and the older I got, I really dropped that. It's horrible to generalize because obviously all Jewish guys are different, but I felt like I never got along with them.

Julie explains that at this stage in her life she is less connected to Judaism than in the past and that she has not been able to find compatibility with a Jewish man. She has already passed the normative stage in which according to her she should have already been in a relationship with a Jewish man and today she is open to a relationship with a non-Jew. Nonetheless, and as in the case of the previous interviewees, she would like her potential partner to accept Judaism and support the Jewish way of life.

Overall, it seems that as people get older simply being in a relationship becomes more important than the normative imperative to be in a relationship with a Jew. Their singlehood becomes a private thing and many of them don't feel as much a part of the community as they did before. As a result, they don't talk about relationships in collective terms and there is less commitment to the Jewish family and Jewish society in the context of finding a Jewish partner. However, it is still important to them to be in a relationship with someone who will enable, and participate in, their Jewish way of life. A similar approach is presented by Schnoor and Weinfeld in their research among gay Jewish men. Schnoor and Weinfeld found that gay Jewish men who cannot find other gay Jewish men (due to small numbers or lack of social infrastructure) partner with non-Jewish gay men who have a favourable predisposition to Judaism.³⁴

Desire for a Jewish partner after relationships with a non-Jew

Some of the interviewees stated that they dated a non-Jewish partner for years or they were in a long-term relationship with a non-Jewish partner and came to the conclusion that it does not suit them and they do not see themselves settling down with one. For example, Jack (a thirty-one-year-old man) explains that he realized after a long relationship with a non-Jewish partner that a non-Jewish woman does not suit him:

I was in a very long relationship with somebody who wasn't Jewish and there were many reasons why it didn't work, but my reaction to that over the past few years has very much been that Judaism is critical. And yeah, I would not date somebody who's not Jewish. Now, it's much more important to me, and I just can't imagine explaining all these things, you know, to someone else. And, you know, there are just so many background assumptions that Jews may generally share. Could I be happy with a non-Jewish person? Maybe. I'm not going to

seek them out. So yeah, I am looking for somebody who wants to build an active Jewish life as somebody who is engaged in social issues and can talk in a mature way about them.

Jack describes how he came to understand that values and a Jewish point of view are important to him in a relationship and a central part of his life.

Amanda (a thirty-nine-year-old woman) says that she did self-work in order to understand what kind of partner and relationship she wanted and who would be good for her, and describes in length what kind of partner she wants:

I did homework for my life. It's just paying off now. I want somebody tall, financially independent. I want somebody who's kind, patient, someone with a sense of humour. Someone who's Jewish, and I don't mean just Jewish by birth or Jewish by blood, but somebody who's actively Jewish in a way that I won't feel bad for wanting to have a kosher kitchen. Someone won't make me feel silly for reading Tehillim if someone is sick. I want somebody who's actively Jewish in that way.

Amanda describes how she dated non-Jewish men over the years and came to the understanding that she could not be in a long-term relationship with a non-Jewish spouse, partly out of concern not to disappoint her parents:

I used to go out with non-Jewish guys, and ... I never committed fully, because I always knew there would be an endpoint. I always knew that I would never take them home to my parents. And I always knew that I would never settle down with them for life. And so it's very easy to go into short-term relationships. Right? And after a year or two, it kind of, you know, it's reached its maximum because I can't go any further. I just couldn't do that to my parents with everything that they've invested [in me], and everything that they've been through, and everything that they've given, I just can't break their heart that way.

Amanda also talks about the need to be with someone with a similar ethnic background identity and similar life characteristics who shares the same norms, beliefs and traditions.

Discussion

The analysis of the interviews reveals three patterns in relation to endogamous partnership. Some of the interviewees describe their commitment to the endogamous marriage model primarily on the basis of cultural similarity, an obligation to the Jewish collective and to the Jewish family, and a desire to avoid their parent's sanctions or disappointment. Alongside their wish to be in a relationship with a Jewish partner, they also describe the challenges of finding a suitable partner, the lack of

available Jewish partners and the high expectations of a relationship, such as emotional connection, socioeconomic expectations and physical appearance, which raise the bar for finding a partner and thus increase the difficulty of finding a relationship.

The second pattern demonstrated that with age some of the participants started to date non-Jews because being in a relationship itself became more important to them. They have already crossed social boundaries and challenged the traditional family norms by not getting married at a younger age to a Jewish partner and having kids. They now feel less social pressure to be with a Jewish partner and more freedom of choice in mate selection. It can also be argued that with age their singlehood becomes a more private issue and is viewed less in terms of the collective. The result is that decision-making becomes more personally oriented and as a result aspirations for a culturally similar partner and endogamy diminish. Their singlehood means they are no longer fully part of the ethnic group because they did not meet the group's expectations.

Some of the interviewees view themselves as having more freedom in mate selection while others feel that their families and the community have given up on them for not having followed the conventional path, i.e. getting married at a younger age to a Jewish partner. Some declare that they are not "very connected to their Judaism anymore" nor to the Jewish community or they are no longer as religious as previously, with the result that they do not feel a strong obligation to be with a Jewish partner. Therefore, the desire for a Jewish partner varies according to the level of religiosity and connection to the community, although it is not clear whether their singlehood and lack of a Jewish partner leads to a distancing from religion and the community or whether the community has abandoned them for being single. Both processes are likely at play. Other interviewees base the legitimacy of an interfaith relationship on another family member who has already married a non-Jew. At the same time, it is important to mention that many of those who have given up on the idea of being with a Jewish partner consider it important to find a partner who will share their Jewish lifestyle and sensibilities.

In the context of the third pattern, some participants used to date a non-Jew or were in a long-term relationship with one and later came to the understanding that it doesn't suit them. According to Arnett, the late teenage years to the mid-twenties have become a period in which "various possibilities in love, work, and worldviews are explored" (p.469). This is a new period of development in which young people are no longer teenagers, but not yet adults, a phase Arnett calls "Emerging Adulthood". There is growing evidence that this period has lengthened in recent years, as indicated by the current study's findings. Arnett's theory can also explain why many of the interviewees dated non-Jews during their twenties and early thirties and tested a variety of relationships, but at some point came to the realization that it was not right for them. It also explains the particularly high rate of intermarriage among

the young cohort in the Jewish community. It is also important to note that some of those who are characterized by the first pattern (wanting a relationship with a Jewish partner but having also dated non-Jews), describe the need to test and experiment and only then to make their decisions regarding relationships and mate selection.³⁵

Over time, some of the interviewees changed their position regarding endogamous relationships. Thus, it appears that for most of the young today, the attitude towards endogamy is not fixed, but rather depends on the level of religiosity, social norms, family dynamics, age, life-course development and the situation in the marriage market.

Our findings reveal that parents still significantly influence their children's decisions, and the interviewees attach a great deal of importance to their parents' expectations of them. Thus, although the choice of a partner is more individualized than in the past and parents have less control, many interviewees still take their parents' expectation into account to a large extent when making decisions about how much Jewish content they wish to include in their lives.

The findings indicate that although endogamy is on the decline it is still a central consideration in mate selection that inevitably looms in the minds of many Jewish singles. Even for those who are open to a relationship with a non-Jew, that option is usually not their first choice. For those who have given up on the idea of being with a Jewish partner, most find it important to find a partner who will share their Jewish values and lifestyle, thus highlighting the importance they still place on Jewish particularism.

For those Jews who do decide to marry non-Jews it is important to keep the reality of intermarriage in proper perspective, especially in the Canadian context. Indeed, some analysts who measure the health of the Canadian Jewish community purely through statistical rates of intermarriage have a misconception about what an intermarriage necessarily signifies. We know from the work of McGinity that the meaning of intermarriage is quite different today than it was several decades ago.³⁶ Whereas the decision to marry a non-Jew at the beginning of the last century signified a clear departure from the Jewish community, intermarriage today often has no such implication. As this paper has shown in great detail, there can be varied reasons for marrying out, most of which are not motivated by an active desire to separate from the community.

Indeed, as Fern Chertok and Melissa A. Brookner have demonstrated, the effects of intermarriage on the Canadian Jewish community are not the same as the American Jewish community. In other words, national context matters. Compared to intermarried couples in the US, intermarried couples in Canada engage more deeply in a range of normative Jewish behaviours, such as lighting Shabbat candles, belonging to a synagogue, donating to Jewish organizations, and sending their children to Jewish day schools.³⁷

By uncovering the attitudes and values of Jewish singles before they partner, our research helps to reveal why this is the case. We have highlighted some of the key characteristics of Canadian Jewish traditionalism and familism. We have mentioned the Canadian Jewish trend of university students often travelling only two or three hours away from school.³⁸ Indeed many of the participants in this study were living in their parent's city at the time of the interview and several mentioned during the interviews that they could have chosen to live in other regions or countries but opted to stay close to their families. With this family support in close vicinity, compared to intermarried couples in the US, intermarried couples in Canada have significant Jewish ethnic cultural and religious capital to help them live engaged Jewish lives. This may include participating in family holiday dinners, joining their extended families at synagogue, being made aware of local Jewish events, and the like. Furthermore, with the growing trend in the Canadian Jewish community towards welcoming—rather than shunning—intermarried couples, there will be more opportunity for these families to live more robust Jewish lives, which includes raising Jewish children.³⁹

To conclude, the findings provide a broader and deeper understanding of the significance attributed to endogamy and the considerations of Jewish adults in seeking a partner. They also reveal the challenges associated with mate selection today. In sum, the three observed patterns indicate that the desire to meet social expectations and to seek a relationship with a Jewish partner is still present and that a relationship with a Jewish partner—or living a Jewish life with a non-Jewish partner—is still seen as important for many Jewish singles. It is these patterns that can help mitigate the challenges of assimilation in the Canadian Jewish community. Further quantitative and longitudinal analyses with a larger and more diverse sample are recommended to further explore patterns found in our data.

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