

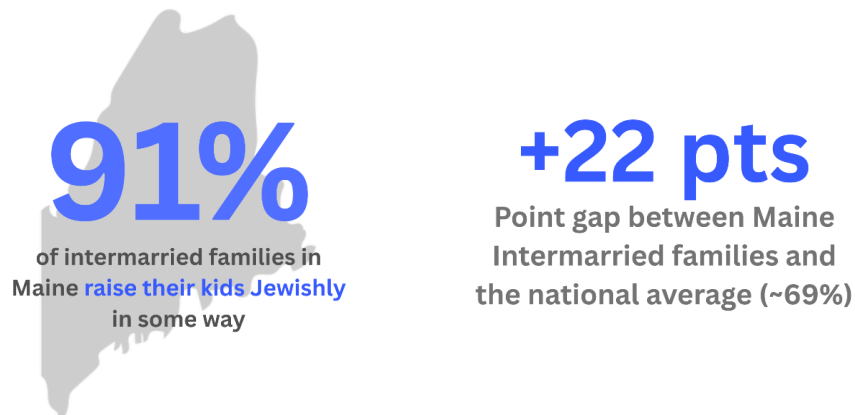
The Maine Difference: Raising Jewish Children in Intermarried Families

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Introduction

Intermarriage, when a Jewish person marries a non-Jewish person, is often framed as a challenge to Jewish continuity; a demographic trend that pulls families away from religious life. The belief revolves around the idea that if the children of Jewish families grow up without a strong Jewish identity amongst intermarried parents, the community shrinks over time as families drift away from Jewish practice and are less likely to pass Jewish identity on to the next generation. The data from Maine pushes back on this stereotype in a meaningful way.

Nationally, roughly 69% of intermarried families raise their children with some form of Jewish identity, whether it be Jewish only or Jewish and another religion. In Maine, that figure rises to 91%. That 22-point gap is not a statistical anomaly. It instead reflects something real about how Jewish identity is being built and passed on in Maine amongst intermarried families, and it's worth understanding why.



Maine is, by any measure, a small Jewish community. Based on the recent 2024 survey of Maine's Jewish community, there are roughly 19,100 Jewish individuals living within 10,600 Jewish households. These households are concentrated mostly in and around the greater Portland area, with smaller pockets spread out across the rest of the largely rural state. Outside of the Portland area, each of these communities has a Jewish population of under 5,000. According to

the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA), communities of this size nationally have the highest concentration of intermarried couples, with over half of all mixed-heritage Jewish couples in the United States living in communities this small. One might expect that the combination of smaller communities with high intermarriage rates would correlate with lower Jewish upbringings within these families. The data completely suggests otherwise, as Maine's intermarried families are raising children with Jewish identity at rates that exceed the national average by a wide margin.

Part of what the data reveals is that intermarried families in Maine feel connected to Jewish life in ways that often go unrecognized. When asked about belonging to the local Jewish community where they live, 68% of intermarried adults in Maine reported any sense of belonging to their local Jewish community, compared to 78% for inmarried adults. That 10-point gap exists, but it's not statistically significant and what's more striking is how narrow that gap truly is. The Maine Jewish community is not being experienced as foreign to these intermarried families, but rather something they have access to and are taking part in. This sense of belonging appears to be a significant part of why so many of these families are choosing to raise their children Jewishly, and the stories of two intermarried families in Maine give even more insight into the strength of community connection and inclusion.

“I know I wanted my kids to have a better understanding of Judaism than I did growing up... I want my kids to have access to that community in order for them to decide how much it means to them.”

- Jenny Ngidi-Brown on raising children in Waterville, ME

Jenny Ngidi-Brown moved to Waterville in 2020 with her husband, who is not Jewish, and two young children. Growing up in an interfaith family in Blue Hill, she had no formal Jewish structure to fall back on, and she was deliberate about wanting something different for her own kids. The turning point came from an encounter on a Waterville playground, where she heard another parent calling to children with Hebrew names, struck up a conversation, and met Rabbi Isaacs where she then found the connection to the local synagogue, Beth Israel.

"I just appreciate the sense of community through a religious lens. It feels old-school... you show up because something outside of you drew you to the door, and you're welcomed when you arrive."

- Jenny Ngidi-Brown on the Maine Jewish Community

Jenny described a “come as you are” community built by Rabbi Isaacs, one where her family was immediately welcomed, regardless of the fact they were interfaith. There wasn’t any pressure for her husband to convert and her family felt immediately at home. Her children now attend Hebrew school weekly and participate in a summer Hebrew camp, and she credits much of her family's engagement and strong sense of belonging to the Jewish community she found in Waterville.

Priya Natarajan’s path into her local Jewish Community in South Portland began similarly to Jenny’s, and outside of any formal institution. Priya moved with her husband to Portland in 2002. As being the non-Jewish partner, and herself being Hindu, Priya realized quickly that the closest Hindu temple was over an hour away. Fortunately, through a birth class and then a book club, she fell into a tightly-knit group of intermarried couples all raising children at the same time. The intermarried families then found Bet Ha’am, a South Portland synagogue that had a reputation for being open to intermarried families. Priya recalled feeling immediately welcomed, a contrast to the discomfort she had felt at a few synagogues in the Boston area when it came to being an intermarried family. The community she found stuck for her family, and her son was raised through the synagogue, attending Sunday school from age four through his bar mitzvah.

“We happened to find this group of friends. Some of them had already kind of gravitated towards Bet Ha’am in South Portland... It had a good reputation as being pretty open to intermarried couples and for having a rabbi who was very friendly and great with kids. So, we decided to check it out.”

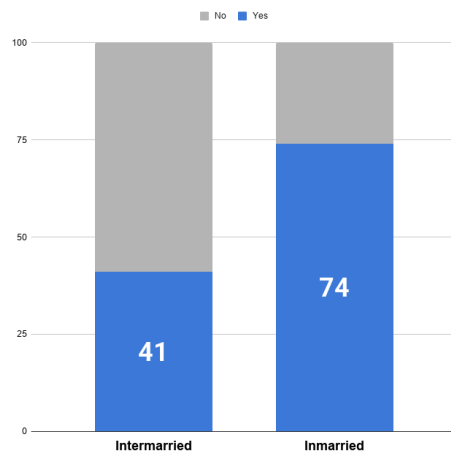
- Priya Natarajan on being part of Temple Bet Ha’am in South Portland, ME

Both of these stories have the same underlying driving force: Maine’s intermarried families are raising their children Jewishly at high rates not despite the size of local communities, but because of the warmth, inclusion, and accessibility that these small communities produce

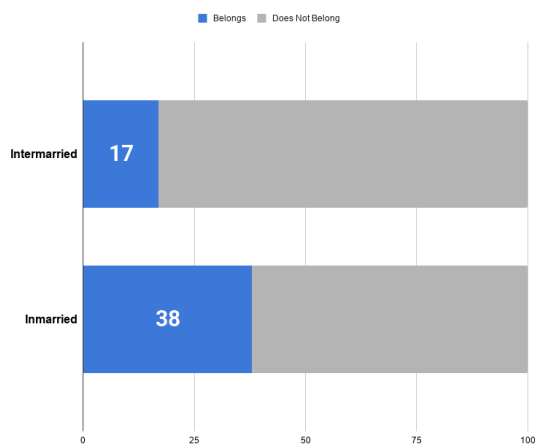
What the Data Complicates

While the 91% figure is incredibly notable, the rest of the data from the 2024 Maine Community Study initially complicates it. The data shows that intermarried families within the state enroll their children in Jewish education at lower rates than inmarried families, and they are roughly half as likely to belong to a congregation. Even though the vast majority of intermarried couples in Maine raise their children with a Jewish identity, they are not necessarily doing so through synagogue membership or formal religious education.

Maine Intermarried Families Enroll Their Children In Jewish Education



Intermarried Families Are Roughly Half As Likely To Belong To A Congregation



It's important that this data is understood not as a contradiction but rather as an important question raising detail. The 91% figure shows that intermarried families are raising their children with a Jewish identity, but it does not capture how intensively they are doing so or through what channels. It's easy to imagine that without Jenny’s interaction with Rabbi Isaacs on the playground, her family would still be contributing to the 91% but through at-home practices and community gatherings while never becoming a part of a congregation. Therefore the data about

congregation attendance and Jewish education enrollment raises an interesting question: if intermarried families are raising their children outside of formal structures in Maine, what's making it stick?

The Power of Choice

Pulling from her 2013 study *Jewish on Their Own Terms: How Intermarried Couples are Changing American Judaism*, Jennifer Thompson offers a framework that helps answer the previous question. The families Thompson studied in her book approached Jewish observance as a deliberate and negotiated choice; one that was grounded in the families own personal conviction rather than a default set of inherited rules and requirements. One of her subjects puts it directly, stating “Judaism should be whatever I think is meaningful to me. I decide what rituals I’m going to do, and I decide what they mean.” To another one of the families Thompson studied, keeping kosher meant sourcing humanely raised meat even if it lacked formal kosher certification, another example of a choice connected to Jewish values that was adapted for their families own terms.

Thompson argues that within intermarried couples, a Jewish identity has to be actively decided rather than passively absorbed. This act of deciding, she goes on to argue, might in fact produce more intentional and durable forms of transmission than default observance in inmarried households. Simply put, Thompson's framework works to change the previously stated narrative; that intermarriage is a challenge to Jewish continuity and leads to less engagement within religious life. Thompson believes that because intermarried families have to deliberately choose the way they raise their children, they do so with more intentionality and purpose even if it means less formal engagement. The Maine data is consistent with that argument, especially because 91% of intermarried families within the state have made that deliberate decision.

For intermarried families navigating these questions, that distinction matters. When Thompson's framework is applied to the data, it suggests that formal affiliation is not a prerequisite for raising children with a Jewish identity. What appears to matter more is the

decision itself; that deliberate choice to engage, to build community, to come together for holidays and at-home practices, and to make Jewish life present within households, regardless of the geographical proximity to the closest synagogue or Hebrew school. One way or another, because these intermarried families are making choices, the transmission is much more likely to stick. This in turn means that because so many intermarried families are choosing to raise their children Jewishly, there will be a lasting positive impact on Maine's Jewish community.

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