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CREATING JEWISH MOTHERS: A FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHIC INVESTIGATION OF THE MOTHERS CIRCLE OF COASTAL VIRGINIA AND THE INTERFAITH PARENTS CIRCLE

Amy K. Milligan

This feminist ethnographic investigation of the Mothers Circle of Coastal Virginia and the Interfaith Parents Circle utilizes the lens of feminist folkloristics to analyze the role that women have had in the foundation and evolution of the groups. Ultimately, this essay argues that the Mothers Circle of Coastal Virginia / Interfaith Parents Circle create a space for women to navigate the tensions faced by southern Jews; that they center Jews-by-choice and non-Jewish mothers parenting Jewish children by creating safe spaces for caregivers; and that, through a horizontal peer education model, these groups offer a sustainable and transferable model of programing for other Jewish groups that wish to lift the voices of Jews who often exist on the margins of their communities.

Introduction

I was brand new in the Hampton Roads area of southeastern Virginia and was working to establish myself in the local Jewish community. Everyone told me that I must meet Amanda (a pseudonym), a woman who has her finger on the pulse of local Jewish life. Over lunch, we chatted about many things, including some of my research interests. She leaned excitedly across the table and said, “I’ve got just the topic for you!” As my fellow ethnographers can attest, this remark is usually followed by a well-meaning suggestion that is unlikely to be actualized in academic writing and research. I braced myself and smiled. “You should write about our Mothers Circle. They are an amazing group of women, helping to support non-Jews and Jews-by-choice who have Jewish kids.” I asked a few follow-up questions and,

in amazement, agreed to think about it. As I came to know Amanda and the other women involved with the Mothers Circle of Coastal Virginia and the Interfaith Parents Circle, it became increasingly clear that her idea was one that actually spoke to my overarching research. For those who know her, it will come as no surprise that Amanda was spot on with her suggestion. Just as she is able to build bridges through her work in the Jewish community, so, too, she was able to connect me to this innovative group of caregivers.¹

This essay begins with a description of my research, followed by an introduction to the Mothers Circle program pioneered by the Jewish Outreach Institute and to interfaith demographics for Jewish families in the United States. Zeroing in on the local community, I trace the evolution of the Mothers Circle of Coastal Virginia from its beginning as part of the national Big Tent Judaism program to its becoming the locally rebranded Interfaith Parents Circle of southeast Virginia. Ultimately, I argue that the Mothers Circle of Coastal Virginia and the Interfaith Parents Circle (henceforth: the Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle) create a space for women to navigate the tensions faced by southern Jews; that they create a safe space for Jews-by-choice and non-Jewish caregivers parenting Jewish children; and that, through a horizontal peer education model, they offer a sustainable and transferable model of programming for Jewish groups wishing to incorporate individuals existing on the margins of their communities.

Methodology

The research for this essay was carried out in 2018 and 2019 using a hybrid methodological approach that included traditional in-person qualitative ethnographic interviews, digital ethnography and group observation. The subjects were found using the snowball method, and the data was analyzed by means of qualitative ethnographic thematic analysis. This type of analysis is well suited to feminist research, in that it is grounded in empathetic listening; it approaches an individual or group without preconceived hypotheses; it documents, assesses and accesses experiences and interactions that might otherwise be overlooked; and it recognizes that the researcher herself is part of both the “scene” she encounters and the research process in which she engages.

Utilizing a feminist folkloric lens situated in vernacular religious cultural transmission, rather than a halakhic, theological or ontological approach to religion, this essay probes expressive forms of Jewishness and the transmissions of Jewish identity in ways that exist outside of religious institutional practice. Far from being confined to traditional beliefs, myths, tales and practice, contemporary folkloristics encompasses the study of group dynamics, the evolution of perceived self and group identity, and, as evidenced in this study, the transmission of those values between community members. The feminist folkloric lens used here centers the voices of

women and the unofficial ways, often overlooked in larger formal or institutional studies, in which they shape their community and family religious experiences.

Initial research inquiries were sent via email, text message and Facebook messaging to five women who had participated in the group and were suggested by the previous group leader. All five women agreed to meet for face-to-face interviews and, at my request, suggested ten other group participants, seven of whom agreed to speak with me, two for face-to-face interviews and five via email, text or Facebook messaging. As a traditionally trained ethnographer, I recognize the potential hazards of relying heavily on the use of technology for ethnographic fieldwork; however, I also understand the many directions in which women are pulled with their time. By discussing their experiences digitally, the women were able to answer my questions between their job and family commitments. All of the women who chose to be interviewed digitally work full time outside of the home.

In total, I interviewed twelve women, representing nearly half of the individuals who had participated in the program. They are identified herein with pseudonyms, and, at their request, I do not offer other identifying information beyond their words, as the Tidewater Jewish community is small, and they would be easily recognizable. At the time of their interviews, the participants, all of whom identify as cisgender women, ranged in age from 32 to 48. Only two of the women are originally from Coastal Virginia. Eleven of the twelve identify as white, while one chose not to answer. All were in relationships with or married to cisgender men, though two of the women also identified as queer,² and they all had children, ranging in age from 3 to 19.

All twelve women told me that they were raising Jewish children and identified their homes as “Jewish homes.” Seven of them, six of whom identified as having been raised in Christian homes, had converted to Judaism. Two identified as Jews but had not converted and were unsure whether they would undergo official conversion, while two identified as not Jewish and one as “not yet Jewish.” Ten of the women were married to men who identified as Jews, and two were married or partnered with non-Jewish men.

This research has not deliberately excluded the voices of male or non-maternal participants in the Interfaith Parents Program. However, all of the men, when approached, suggested that I interview their wives or partners. This reaction suggests that they still see their wives’ participation as primary and their involvement as secondary, despite their accessibility to full inclusion.

As an ethnographer, I identify as a member of a Reform synagogue in the South, a professor of Jewish Studies and Women’s Studies, a cisgender white woman in her late thirties, and as a feminist and folklorist. I entered this study as a known entity to the women I interviewed. Although I had not previously met all of them, my name was familiar from the local community, which aided me in gaining their trust. The group presently meets in the synagogue in which I hold membership, aiding in my familiarity with the group, its members and its geographic location.

Interfaith Families in America and the Mothers Circle

American Jewish folklore and popular culture is filled with warnings of the demise of Judaism at the hands of interfaith marriage.³ In the last fifty years, the United States has seen a gradual increase and acceptance of interfaith partnerships across religious identities. Interfaith partnerships have grown from 1960, when only 19% of marriages were classified as interreligious, to current estimates that 39% of Americans are of different religions than their spouses. Increasingly, these “mixed marriages” are between a partner who identifies with a particular religion and one who identifies as religiously unaffiliated. Within the Jewish community, the 2013 Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews averred that 44% of all Jewish adults were intermarried at that time, representing 61% of all marriages in which at least one Jewish adult was in the partnership.⁴

Although it might be easy to write off intermarriage as the cause of fewer families raising their children as Jews or to blame interfaith families for declining synagogue membership, American demographics suggest that younger generations across all religions are increasingly secular and disinterested in religious affiliation. Thus, Jewish statistics align with the experiences of many other American religious groups, suggesting that, whether there is a direct causal connection or not, secular Jews are more likely to intermarry.⁵

It is widely assumed that interfaith families are disinterested in raising Jewish children, that an intermarried person will necessarily cease to be Jewish and that a non-Jewish partner will refuse to raise Jewish children.⁶ However, Jewish educators Jody Passanisi and Shara Peters suggest that blaming intermarriage for all of contemporary Judaism’s struggles is “similar to taking an abstinence-only approach to teaching sex ed: it’s not working.” They go on to explain that the key to interfaith family involvement in Jewish life is radically welcoming them into Jewish spaces. Likening the acceptance of interfaith Jewish families to other diasporic adjustments Jews have made, they identify interfaith families as *not* the exception but rather representative of the face of change and the next generation of Jews.⁷ Statistics documenting lower synagogue membership among interfaith families fail to take into account the dearth of outreach to the intermarried and the lack of non-judgmental and supportive resources for interfaith families. As explained by the Jewish organization “Interfaith Family”:

Major Jewish figures have been harshly critical of intermarriage and view outreach to the intermarried as a waste of limited communal resources. Major Jewish organizations see promoting Jewish in-marriage as one of their explicit or implicit fundamental goals ... [but] writing off intermarried families may mean writing off a Jewish future. Intermarriage can be an opportunity to sustain and even grow the Jewish population both quantitatively and qualitatively. If more than 50% of interfaith families raise their children as Jews, interfaith families will actually increase the size of the Jewish population. But intermarried couples

will only make Jewish choices if the Jewish community genuinely welcomes them.⁸

As demonstrated in this study of the Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle, it is one thing for a community to say it is welcoming of interfaith families, and another for it to create the resources that interfaith parents and caregivers need in order to feel integrated enough to affiliate with Jewish institutions.⁹

The original Mothers Circle, a project of the Jewish Outreach Institute, later renamed Big Tent Judaism, was described as “an umbrella of free educational programs and resources for non-Jewish women raising Jewish children within the context of intermarriage or a committed relationship.”¹⁰ Founded in 1988, the Jewish Outreach Institute was the first Jewish organization dedicated to the support of interfaith or intermarried families, and it pushed for Jewish organizations, leadership, clergy and synagogues not merely to tolerate but to integrate and accept Jewish intermarried families. Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky, the leader of Big Tent Judaism during its final sixteen years of operation, summarized its goal as shifting the conversation from “should we serve” interfaith families to “how should we serve [them]?”—and from “who are people marrying” to “how are they raising their children?”¹¹

The programmatic goal of the Mothers Circle was to help women choose Judaism for their families and to create space for them to identify as part of a Jewish household, rather than a “mixed” or interfaith home.¹² Although structured in its curricular approach, the program invited conversation and sharing, allowing the women involved to shape the direction of the sessions. Big Tent Judaism piloted its first program in Atlanta, Georgia, in the early 2000s, to support and educate non-Jewish women who were raising Jewish children. The program eventually spread to include more than two dozen other locations across the United States. Although each group was given a curriculum, individual Mothers Circles were self-led by facilitators and coordinators within their communities. Some Mothers Circles were supported by Jewish Federations or Jewish Community Centers; others were housed within synagogues or other community organizations.¹³ Each Mothers Circle assumed its own expenses and was self-governed. Women who could not or chose not to attend an in-person Mothers Circle were also invited to participate in an online listserv, where conversations were led by mothers and a moderator from the Jewish Outreach Institute. Prior to its closure in 2016, Big Tent Judaism also piloted a Single Jewish Moms’ program in San Francisco, as well as programs for the grandparents of children in “interfaith or conversionary marriages.”¹⁴

The Mothers Circle of Coastal Virginia and the Interfaith Parents Circle

What is known as the Tidewater or Hampton Roads area lies in southeastern coastal Virginia and northeastern North Carolina. It includes several large cities—Norfolk,

Virginia Beach, Chesapeake, Newport News, Hampton, Portsmouth, Suffolk and Williamsburg—and some smaller adjacent towns. The region is home to over 1.7 million individuals and is characterized by its harbor, shipyards, military presence, and waterfront and beach areas.

The South, broadly conceived, is home to 23% of American Jews;¹⁵ of these, some 95,000 live in Virginia, the majority (70%) in the greater Washington, D.C. metropolitan area.¹⁶ Jews have been part of the Hampton Roads community since the early eighteenth century, establishing formal communal institutions as early as 1840. The region is presently home to several congregations, including Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Chabad, an independent chavurah, and a Jewish military chapel in the naval base. The local Jewish community also supports the United Jewish Federation of Tidewater, the Tidewater Jewish Foundation and the Simon Family Jewish Community Center, as well as the *Jewish News*, a newspaper serving southeastern Virginia. Nevertheless, Jews comprise only 0.65% of the overall local population. A 2001 survey documenting a 13% decrease in Jewish households in the Tidewater region from 1994, leaving 5,400 Jewish households,¹⁷ predicts a trajectory of “slow decline” and continued decrease;¹⁸ however, it does not account for a recent increase in the local Orthodox population. Indeed, in 2009 Norfolk was listed by the Orthodox Union as one of the top spots for Orthodox Jews to relocate,¹⁹ suggesting that the overall number of Jews in Hampton Roads likely will remain steady.

The Mothers Circle of Coastal Virginia (sometimes also vernacularly referred to as the Tidewater Mothers Circle or the Mothers Circle of Hampton Roads), founded in 2015, was born of a conversation between two women—representing, respectively, Norfolk’s Reform and Conservative synagogues—while dropping their children off at the Strelitz Early Childhood Education Center. One of the women had converted to Judaism before she had children, while the other was raising Jewish children but did not identify as Jewish. The founders had learned about the nationwide Mothers Circle programs from an email listserv and were eager to implement the program in Hampton Roads. They hoped that the program would help “non-Jewish spouses feel engaged and educated” and thus more likely “to feel comfortable with Jewish culture and religion and make informed choices with their Jewish partners.” As they described the group in their promotional materials, the Mothers Circle set out to “create comfortable spaces for women to learn about Judaism, explore Jewish holidays and rituals, discover how to enrich their families’ Jewish experience and deepen their connection to the religion of their husbands and children—and to do so with peers so they’re not all alone ... no prior Jewish knowledge is required.”²⁰

The co-facilitators began by compiling a list of interfaith families, focusing on those in which the mother was not Jewish or had converted. Between them, they contacted each family by both phone and email to offer a personal invitation. As Amanda, one of the founders, recalled, “We were very intentional. We really reached out to people and put ourselves out there so that they could see we were

super-serious.” Together, they worked to build coalitions across nearly all of the local synagogues, as well as with the local United Jewish Federation of Tidewater, the federation’s Young Adult Division, the Simon Family Jewish Community Center, the Strelitz Early Childhood Education Center, and the Hebrew Academy of Tidewater. Scott Katz, Director of the Simon Family Jewish Community Center from 2013 to 2016, endorsed the effort, “Our hope is that all these organizations working together give this clear message to non-Jewish wives and mothers: As a community we welcome you and we will provide you tools to understand Judaism if you would like to learn.”²¹

The first Mothers Circle of Coastal Virginia cohort comprised eleven women participants and the two facilitators. The group met every other week for one year at the United Jewish Federation of Tidewater in Virginia Beach, Virginia, which is housed in the same building as the local Jewish Community Center.

Lauren: [The weekday morning meetings were] ideal for anyone who was a stay-at-home mom or who could make it work with a flexible schedule. We met right after drop-off for people dropping off for preschool or elementary school.
Amanda: We got the JCC to take kids for babysitting, too. They already have babysitting there for people who are working out [in the gym], but if you were coming to Mothers Circle you could take advantage of it, too, because we knew that would be important for moms.

In its first year, the group adhered closely to the curriculum distributed by Big Tent Judaism, exploring topics like: Making Jewish Choices; Effective Jewish Parenting; From Mitzvah to Mensch, Ages and Stages; Making a Jewish Home; Festive Celebrations; Shabbat; Passover, When Children Ask; Ask a Rabbi; High Holidays; and Next Steps. As a facilitator, Amanda explained, “I followed the curriculum to a T. This was my first time, and I really wanted to make it good.” The participants described the participants’ strong sense of commitment, both to the group and to each other:

Carrie: Mothers Circle was this really beautiful experience. It was very pro-woman. I’m still best friends with many of the women in the group, ‘cause they became my tribe.

Erin: For me, one of the biggest powers of this group and the curriculum was the homework ... I realized, my husband didn’t even have the language to know how to ask these questions about Judaism or to say these things, because his knowledge of Judaism isn’t really that solid.

This experience parallels that of many women who took part in the Mothers Circle programs across the country. In her larger study of intermarried couples, ethnographer Jennifer Thompson relates of the participants in the Atlanta’s Mothers Circle:

[They] sought to understand how their husbands saw Jewishness. Some Christian women, seeing their husbands' lack of Jewish education, felt that it was up to them to learn and teach what some of them called the "strong traditions" of Judaism to their children and husbands so that their family's Jewishness would have integrity.²²

This also included discussions of how to navigate religious tensions or moments of perceived hypocrisy or contradiction, especially around holidays or religious practice.²³ As Thompson describes,

the women frequently wondered how their husbands could be ambivalent and apparently indifferent towards Jewish practice and beliefs while vehemently protesting any Christian symbols in their homes. Over the course of the year, they came to understand, gradually and tentatively, that for their husbands Jewishness meant "what you are" rather than "what you believe."²⁴

These same tensions manifested in the Mothers Circle of Coastal Virginia:

Ashley (a founder): It's clear there are many women like me who are struggling to understand their husband's Jewish religion. It can be difficult for husbands to explain the "who, what, and why" of a culture they've been part of from birth. The Mothers Circle is a way for women to learn together what Judaism is about and to figure out with their spouses how Judaism will be part of their families.²⁵

At the completion of the year-long program, many of the women chose to remain involved with future iterations of the group, serving as facilitators or guest speakers. Likewise, as they told me, the bond shared by the women in the Tidewater Mothers Circle continues.

Lauren: You know that saying, "it takes a village to raise a child?" Well, the Mothers Circle gave me my village in Hampton Roads.

Carrie: This group was really helpful when we all had little kids, but now I wish we had like an official Mothers Circle 2.0 so that we could talk about things like how to navigate b'nai mitzvah, or, honestly, just squirrely teenagers!

Jennifer: I've gotta plan a bar mitzvah next year and I've never been to one. You bet I know exactly who I'm gonna call. The rabbi and cantor can handle the Jewish education stuff, but I gotta call my girls for the nitty gritty.

Melissa: The group is like having another mom look you in the eye and say, "You're okay. You've got this."

In 2016, the group reconvened, retaining one of the initial co-facilitators, Amanda, and adding Lauren, a new co-leader. This time, however, the group had a slightly

different target demographic, which was recruited through word-of-mouth, advertising in the *Jewish News* and social media invitations.

Amanda: We thought that it would be a good idea to capture the women who were working and who did not have flexible schedules. Meeting during the work day at the JCC was hard for them, so we decided to meet during Sunday religious school at the Reform temple, but it was open to everyone from any of the synagogues.

Lauren: The JCC is in Virginia Beach, and that is a shlep for most of us. Our homes and our congregations are here in Norfolk, and driving 45 minutes out there is just too much in an already busy week. But the temple is in my neighborhood, so it was easier.

The second Mothers Circle followed the same structure of meeting every other week over the course of the year. They covered the same program, although the facilitators expressed a sense of greater flexibility:

Lauren: We didn't feel like we had to do it exactly by the book this time. We knew the material, and we just added and subtracted based on what felt right. Like, there wasn't a section in there on being a Jew in the South, but our group wanted to talk about that, so we added a session.

The second cohort also had a somewhat different group dynamic than the first. While the first group had consistent participants who attended nearly every meeting, the second group struggled with consistent attendance.

Amanda: There was a much larger audience of people who were interested and could potentially come. We still had meaningful experiences, but it was frustrating that people didn't always come. Still, we always had all the chairs filled—but those faces rotated a bit.

Lauren: This isn't a class, where you pick and choose what you want to learn. It's a community, and to really build the community, it would have been easier to have a smaller group but one where the same people always came.

Neither the facilitators nor the participants doubted the success of the second cohort, but they felt that they could learn to manage attendance better with the next cohort.

In 2017, the Mothers Circle of Coastal Virginia rebranded itself as the Interfaith Parents Circle. Still meeting at the Reform congregation, but open to the entire community, this cohort represented a shift from the initial Mothers Circle design. It was formed after the closure of Big Tent Judaism, the parent organization of the national Mothers Circle program and listserv. While the Interfaith Parents Circle retained many of the same lessons and discussion topics, its target demographic was broadened to include all caregivers. The two co-facilitators, Carrie and Jennifer,

had both participated in the Mothers Circle of Coastal Virginia. The group met every other week for one school year during Sunday religious school, and it also offered babysitting for children who were not enrolled in religious school, giving non-affiliated families the opportunity to participate in the group. Having learned from the attendance frustrations experienced by the previous cohort, the Interfaith Parents Circle urged (but did not require) participants to commit to regular attendance. Ultimately, eight to ten families participated each week.

The group aimed to be inclusive of anyone who identified as a caregiver to a Jewish child:

Carrie: We made it inclusive of men, and really any caregiver, raising a Jewish child. For example, stepparents who were stepping into a situation where they were marrying a Jewish man who has kids living with his ex-wife, so they wanted to be on board with what everybody was doing. We just opened it up like that.

Jennifer: We recognize that families don't look one particular way, and we want to honor that. We are open for LGBTQ parents to join, too, like, what if a Christian guy marries a Jewish guy, and he's trying to figure out how to parent his Jewish child? How is he supposed to find his footing if the Mothers Circle excludes him?

In their interviews, the co-facilitators specified that the group holds space for trans parents, single parents, grandparents, non-Jewish families where only one individual has converted to Judaism, foster parents, and any other iteration of caregiving.

The group did see an increase in some heterosexually partnered Jewish husbands attending with their non-Jewish or recently converted wives, but it still predominantly comprised heterosexual cisgender women who identified as mothers. Nevertheless, adhering to a philosophy of "if you build it, they will come," the broadening of the group was seen as successful, because it demonstrated the women's desire to be inclusive and open to all forms of caregiving. The co-facilitators expressed the importance of having this openness at the group's core:

Jennifer: If you wait for someone to ask before you put in a ramp to your synagogue, you don't know how many people couldn't get to the door. This is the same. We aren't waiting for someone to ask; we are saying, you are already welcome here.

One area identified for growth in future iterations of the group is the recruitment of a more diverse group of participants. Interviewees felt that they had worked to build the framework but expressed a desire to be more intentional in inviting those who might otherwise be overlooked in traditional recruitment strategies—for example, those based on synagogue membership, which might exclude non-affiliated families. Although they did not have an answer yet for how they envisioned future

recruitment, participants affirmed that they felt confident that the group would be a safe space for the participation of any caregiver wanting to discuss raising Jewish children.

The Interfaith Parents Circle most recently met in the 2017–2018 school year. Both the Mothers Circle of Coastal Virginia facilitators and the Interfaith Parents Circle facilitators agree that the groups seem to be most successful when run every other year, allowing for new members to enter the community, new families to form, and a break for the facilitators. At the time of writing, there was discussion about what the next iteration of the group might look like in 2020, although new facilitators had not yet been named.

Analysis

The Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle took a unique approach to creating a safe space for women to navigate the tensions faced by southern Jews. Ultimately, I argue that it is the peer-facilitated approach of the group that has allowed it to evolve successfully and sustainably, as it pushes back against a top-down religious model intrinsic to many Jewish community structures, thereby role-modeling a transferrable program for other Jewish groups.

Parenting Jewish Children in the South

One of the difficulties articulated by the interviewees was that, as non-Jews or Jews-by-choice, they have to learn not only to parent Jewish children, but also to parent Jewish children living in the South. This manifested in two primary ways: learning southern Jewishness and learning to live as a Jew in the larger southern context.²⁶

Several of the women articulated a tension in learning southern Jewishness. One of the difficulties faced by American Jews living outside of the Northeast is an unrecognized bias rooted in the presumption that there is a monolithic Jewish experience, predicated on both an Ashkenazi and an American “northeasterness.”²⁷ Likewise, when discussing Jewish life in Virginia, the experience of Jews in the Tidewater Region is not analogous to that of Jews in the greater Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. Nestled just above the North Carolina border, the Tidewater region does not characterize itself as mid-Atlantic or “nearly northern”; it is fully and proudly southern.

The women interviewed felt that the materials and guidance offered by many organizations for interfaith families or for Jewish mothers were northern-biased and did not reflect their stories or experiences.²⁸

Lisa: So here’s the thing, like, I see these [depictions of] Jewish families, and I’m like, okay, but we don’t really do bagels and lox here. And then I’m like, okay,

how do I make barbecue or collards kosher, or do I have to give up that stuff? Because the food that the Jewish cookbooks show me? No way!

Katie: Someone told me once that I needed to teach my kids better. Turns out their accent in saying “Yiz-rull” made them think my kids didn’t know how to say “Israel.” I felt like an idiot, but then I got mad, ‘cause Jews don’t just sound like they’re from New York. I’m proud that my kids sound like me!

The women told me that many of the resources they found online suggested a greater variety of access to Jewish agencies and community structures than they experienced. Although the Tidewater region is home to an active Jewish Federation, the Jewish world described in their internet searches still felt, as Lisa explains, “like they all want to be in New York or the tristate area.”

The physical location in the South also matters:

Carrie: The first time I wanted to build a sukkah²⁹ with my kids, I read all the blogs and stuff online. You know what they don’t talk about? How to build a sukkah during hurricane season in the South!

Julie: I read all the stuff on the internet about how to do these beautiful things in the fall, but I live at the beach. How the hell am I supposed to manifest an apple orchard at the beach?

In these descriptions, the women struggle to see their literal regional and geographic positionality depicted in guides to Judaism, which, as Katie explains, “just makes it harder to see yourself as Jewish, you know?” Turning to each other, they found ways of making their experiences feel both Jewish and southern. For example, Amanda related that the group helped her feel confident enough to invent her own family rituals and then share them with others in the community.

Amanda: We live at the beach, so having havdalah or tashlich at the ocean are really beautiful ways to honor both our experiences and shared landscape.³⁰

Marissa: We made these really cute crafts with our kids that say “shalom, y’all!” We wanted to make them proud of their [southern] accents and of their Jewishness.

Karen: We eat hoppin’ john on Rosh Hashanah, because that’s what you eat on the New Year in the South. But without the ham, ‘cause, well, you know!

Perhaps even more importantly, the women declared that the Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle helped them learn how to navigate parenting Jewish children in the South. The Tidewater area is unique in that it is both distinctively southern and composed of several transient non-southern communities. Home to the largest naval base in the world and to stations for every other branch of the US military, and to several large universities and medical centers, the region sees a high residential turnover. This is not to suggest that the region is in any way unstable,

but it does mean that local religious organizations experience frequent changes in membership, and that Jews from all across the United States come together in Hampton Roads, sometimes living for the first time in the South.

Julie: When we first moved here, I realized, I'm sending my Jewish kids to school here. And I barely knew how to navigate sending Jewish kids to public school in the Northeast, and I most definitely didn't know how to do it in the South!

Amanda: As a Jew-by-choice, I didn't have to navigate this stuff as a kid. And my husband grew up up north. The first time Christmas rolled around, and our kid was in a school Christmas pageant, we were both at a loss.

Erin: The first time we had to ask about my kids not attending school on Rosh Hashanah, my husband said, "Wait, they don't get those days off?" And I was like, "honey, you aren't in [New] Jersey anymore!"

As they turned to each other for support, the Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle helped the participants learn how to talk about the needs of their Jewish children. Whether it was approaching schools about being excused for the High Holy Days, navigating classroom Christmas craft projects, or discussing how to talk to children about being the only Jewish student in their class or school, the women found that the group held space for these conversations. Similarly, and perhaps even more importantly, the relationships that grew out of the group formed a support system for discussions of contemporary antisemitism.

Jennifer: You've picked this religion for your child, and you know that they are going to face hatred for it. I don't know how to navigate it, because I've never been the only Jewish kid in school. I turn to these other mamas to tell me that it's going to be okay, to help me figure out how to do this. [...] We live in a world where being a Jew compromises that safety. And that scares me.

Lisa: No one has ever evangelized to me, because I'm Christian. When it happened the first time to my kid, I was at a loss. There's no guidebook for that—what to do when people try to convert your Jewish kid to Christianity, but you're his Christian mom and are trying to stop it from happening. Weird, right?

The women and caregivers share a unique positionality. When they encounter antisemitism, sometimes even encountering it personally for the first time, the bonds facilitated by the group offer coping strategies. Even if their children are in different schools, there is a shared understanding of parenting Jewish children in the northern part of the Bible Belt.

The Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle afforded the women a unique space in which they were able to discuss the tensions they perceived in being Jews in the South. As Amanda describes, they were "trying to blend two things which [are] positioned by society to be at odds with each other." By working together with other caregivers facing the same tensions, they were able to affirm their southern and

Amy K. Milligan

southern Jewish identities in the face of what they perceived as the critical stance of northerners and northern Jews. Retaining their southern roots allowed the women to affirm their own culture as part of their child's development, allowing southernness to function in tandem with, rather than being replaced by, Jewishness.

A Safe Place for Caregivers

The Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle creates a safe space for caregivers in three particular ways: in its horizontal peer model of education; in its evolution toward honoring all forms of caregiving; and in its centering of women's voices, empowering them as religious agents.

Although several of the women interviewed commented that they felt empowered as maternal figures to have religious agency in the home, they expressed frustration around their Jewish roles:

Amanda: We want mothers to raise Jewish children, but we don't give them much support or power in the religion. On the one hand, I feel empowered in my role as a mother, which I love having a religion that celebrates that part of my life. But on the other hand, it really gets under my skin that my husband is supposed to have all of this knowledge and power, that he gets to supposedly impart that to me and the kids. No way. I want to raise my kids in a Judaism that treats us as equals.

Stacey: So, you want me to raise a Jewish kid and run a Jewish home, and you put a lot of pressure on me to do that. But put your money where your mouth is! It's like they're saying that interfaith families are destroying Judaism, but they aren't willing to let us in the door and include us in the community.

This frustration highlights one of the key tensions experienced by the group. The Mothers Circle program in its initial nationwide and local iterations placed the onus of Jewish development and transmission on the mother. The evolution of the Interfaith Parents Circle is a reaction to that inequitable distribution of responsibility. Instead of expecting a disproportionate engagement and workload of the mother in raising Jewish children, the Interfaith Parents Circle calls for all caregivers to be involved and encourages interfaith couples to attend together. Although most of the women said that they were sad to lose the intimacy of a woman-only space, the Interfaith Parents Circle represents a feminist response to the power dynamics experienced by most of the women in their interfaith homes, unintentionally undergirded, as they see it, by the group's previous iteration as the Mothers Circle.

Stacey: How can we expect our husbands to be fully involved in parenting if we deny them involvement in this parenting group? I'd love to see a men's group

spin off, but I also know that's unlikely, so I'll take what I can get if my husband will join me here.

This sentiment was echoed by several other women, all of whom supported the evolution of the group to include more caregivers, but who also craved female-only spaces in which they could discuss their struggles intimately.

Lauren: We're in a constant state of evolution, and that's what's cool about this group. So maybe next time in 2020 we'll do it differently. We try things, we see how it goes, and we edit.

The Interfaith Parents Circle's call for a more broadly defined understanding of caregiving was not meant to diminish or dismiss the work of the Mothers Circle; rather, the group discussed the importance of having both female-only and mixed-gender spaces as necessary for building strong Jewish families, with careful attention to power and work distribution across family economies.³¹ Still, even in the mixed-gender Interfaith Parents Circle, most of the women articulated that they still felt that it was they who were responsible for attending, initiating homework and prompting follow-up discussions at home. This did not diminish their desire to participate, but it highlighted their experience of gendered familial and religious labor.

As the women discussed their own Jewish education, one of the main sources of dissonance was in resource allocation.³² Several of the women in the group commented that they had been given some helpful instruction during their conversion classes, but not all of the women had converted or were planning to convert. Some had also taken an "Introduction to Judaism" class, which they found helpful in learning theoretically about Judaism, but they struggled with how to enact what Lauren calls the "literal nuts and bolts of Jewish practice with kids in the mix."

Katie: It's one thing to learn about what a Seder is. And I think that's super important! But you know what we didn't talk about [in my Introduction to Judaism class]? How to make all the food for the Seder when you work full time, have kids screaming at your feet, and are trying to pull together a whole dog and pony show as a one-woman army.

The Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle helped fill this gap:

Jennifer: One of the things that the Mothers Circle did for me that was super important was that they gave me the permission to try things out. This meant that I burned kugel recipes. I tried a thirty-minute Seder with my family where we use finger puppets. I experimented to figure out what actually would work for my family. It isn't that those classes were unhelpful, but I needed some more practical tips that would work with my kids.

Stacey: It is one thing to talk about what a bris is, and it's another thing to be like "am I supposed to serve food at this thing or what?" You can't expect someone to know how to do algebra if you don't teach them. Even Einstein took math in school. You can't expect me to know how to raise Jewish kids if you don't ever talk to me about it.

Shannon: Listen. We get it. You want us to raise Jewish children. But this is us saying, how do we actually do it? We're asking questions because we're trying to figure it out.

The Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle thus became a space for peer-to-peer education.³³ The women discussed how they felt intimidated by the institutional structures of Judaism. They questioned where they fit, and with whom they could have honest discussions about their questions.

Shannon: I'm not Jewish and I'm not going to convert. I don't feel like it's my place to go and ask a rabbi to help me with my questions about whether or not I can breastfeed at a Jewish wedding. But I am still raising Jewish children, so there's that.

Melissa: I'm not going to call up a rabbi and be like, "So, how do you keep your kids engaged at the Seder table," because even I'm kinda bored! So I ask my fellow mamas, because that's where I don't have to be embarrassed.

Julie: So much of Judaism is cultural. Would you call up the rabbi or cantor and ask why your brisket is dry?

In this horizontal space, women empower other women as religious agents and as mothers. Lauren, describing the group's model of education as being from the ground up and not from the top down, calls this "holding space for each other"—an unintentional feminist turn of phrase. Other interviewees agree:

Jennifer: So much of Judaism is defined for us externally and usually by men. This is us, defining ourselves, defining our Jewish families, and we do that by building the community we need and want to be a part of.

Amanda: The Mothers Circle becomes the first Jewish space that you can claim as your own.

One of the ways that feminist coalition-building functions is to question "who is the we?" When a group says, "we believe," who is included? The premise of both the national Mothers Circle program and the local Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle challenges the established "we" of the Jewish community. The groups push back against who is considered a Jewish mother or who is generally accepted as part of conversations about raising Jewish children. In line with feminist coalition-building models that question whose voices are afforded agency,³⁴ these spaces acknowledge that not all women parenting Jewish children identify as Jewish

or were raised as Jews; nonetheless, they are actively involved in raising Jewish children and represent part of the shifting experiences of contemporary American Judaism and Jewish family life. This expands the concept of Jewish mothering to include Jews-by-choice as well as non-Jewish women who are actively participating in Jewish homes, raising Jewish children, or in partnership with a Jew.

As we have seen, eventually members of the Mothers Circle of Coastal Virginia felt a disconnect, because they saw their group's success coming at the exclusion of other individuals who are raising Jewish children. The Interfaith Parents Circle again expands the "we"—opening the door to the multitude of families that make up the rich tapestry of contemporary Jewish life.

The participants articulated that they tried not to shy away from difficult or controversial topics. This meant that conversations were, as Melissa put it, "not always comfortable, but always safe." In particular, she remembered a difficult discussion about Israel and Palestine, where the participants struggled to navigate their own divided feelings about Zionism, Israel and politics. In the end, she said, the group agreed that "just as we were all different, we could have different opinions, as long as we were respectful." Affirming that "We have different opinions of what it means to be a mom and how our families should be run," Carrie recalled some of the tensions between stay-at-home parents and working parents; but, she said, the group focused on listening rather than reacting. Because they were not intent on refuting an argument or forming an opinion, the participants could "take in someone's truth and accept it even if it was different than our reality."

Positioning the group in such a way made it a place for yet more coalition-building:

Lisa: I came into the group as a convert, and they supported me as a Jewish mom. But what was even more important was the support that I found in the group as a parent of a child with special needs who also has to exist in Jewish spaces.

In these ways, the group facilitated conversations about other overlapping identities, including navigating the world as a multiracial family, accessibility of Jewish spaces for children with special needs, and participating in synagogue life for those struggling financially. These intersectional³⁵ conversations fueled other synagogue and Jewish community committees and discussions, creating a crucial space for addressing the different needs and experiences of both the individual Jews and the Jewish families that make up a community.³⁶

Lauren: We can't just be about moms anymore. This is about recognizing that caregiving takes a lot of different forms, and it's on us now to do better because we know better.

Melissa: I learned a lot from these other parents, and now I know I need to show up for them, too. Once you know something, like for example how inaccessible the synagogue is, we have to speak up. All of the kids in this group become "our" kids.

Shannon: Money is uncomfortable to talk about. But my family is very comfortable, and I don't take that for granted. But one of the other moms in my group, she never brought her kids to stuff at temple. At first, I thought it was just because she wasn't into it. But then I found out it was because of the ticket prices. So now I'm trying to make sure our programs are affordable for everyone.

Success of the Program

Much of the research and discussion of Jewish interfaith parenting has focused on the role of the Jewish parent in ensuring a Jewish upbringing for his or her child. This research is still very important; however, it does not speak to the experiences of the caregivers in the Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle. Moreover, from a demographic point of view, households in which one of the parents has converted to Judaism and is partnered with a Jew are considered Jewish households rather than interfaith households. This distinction is understandable when doing demography; however, for the women interviewed, it is this very assumption of their Jewish fluency that further marginalizes them. Notwithstanding their Jewishness and the knowledge they have gained on the way, if they are excluded from interfaith programming, the homogenization of their experience with that of Jews-by-birth excludes them from support structures and educational opportunities that might otherwise strengthen their Jewish identity or alleviate some of the stressors they experience as Jews-by-choice.

What happens when non-Jewish women's and caregivers' voices are centered in discussions of interfaith parenting? Big Tent Judaism completed an assessment of their Mothers Circle program and found that "even five or more years after completing the program, these mothers are engaged in Jewish life and affiliated with Jewish institutions at levels similar or higher than that of the general Jewish population." There was a nearly 25% increase in synagogue membership after completing the course; one third were "much more engaged," and a further third reported being "slightly more engaged" with their local Jewish community after participating in the Mothers Circle program. Forty-three percent of the respondents in the study also reported that, as a result of their own participation in the program, their spouses were also more engaged in Jewish life. Success was also demonstrated by their increased participation in congregational leadership, increased rates of providing Jewish education to their children, and higher participation in celebrating Jewish holidays at home, and by more individuals reporting that they had meaningful connections and friendships with other Jews.³⁷ These results parallel other studies of interfaith parents that have found that Jewish women who intermarry and choose Jewish education for their children actually expose their children to greater Jewish influence and opportunities than they themselves experienced, being raised in a solely Jewish household.³⁸

A longitudinal study of synagogue participation by those who have taken part in the program has not been completed in the Tidewater region, but qualitative information on the Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle suggests parallel trends. The women who participated in the group related that their husbands have journeyed with them, even though they did not attend the meetings. Moreover, the women have taken on numerous leadership positions in their synagogues, up to and including temple president. Those with whom I spoke reported that they had become increasingly involved in synagogue life. Most often this began with volunteering in the religious school, which led several of the women to become involved with other synagogue planning committees. From there, they rose into leadership positions in the Sisterhood, temple education councils, and temple committees, leadership and boards.

Amanda: I never would have thought that a Jew-by-choice could be involved in temple leadership. My confidence came from being in the Mothers Circle.

Lauren: A lot of us now teach religious school or are involved in synagogue programming. And it really shouldn't be surprising that many of us choose to be on the membership or the welcoming committee. We are building the Jewish community that we needed when we first joined.

Because of the horizontal peer education model utilized in the program, stories like these were retold within the group as inspiration for other women to become involved in leadership. The bonds forged in the group not only made these committees feel more welcoming, but they sometimes resulted in direct calls for participation.

Stacey: I hadn't ever thought about being involved with the membership committee, but when Amanda asked me, I decided to give it a try.

Indeed, through their involvement with the Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle, participants have re-entered Jewish communities or joined them for the first time. In doing so, with newfound confidence, they feel that they are reshaping Jewish life for their families and their larger communities. No longer peripheral voices, they now see themselves as central to the welcoming message of a new American Judaism.

Conclusion

Sitting in one of the empty classrooms of the synagogue, Liz muses, "I can't believe someone is actually asking me about raising Jewish kids. I guess the bottom line is, you don't have to know the answers, you just have to ask the questions." She goes on to say, "Don't feel like you can't do XYZ because you haven't done it

before. Just do it, try it, learn alongside of your kids, and be transparent about it. You're actually all becoming more Jewish in the process." What she articulates is the religious agency described by nearly all of the women who participated in the Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle. The groups empowered the participants to claim agency regarding the Jewishness of their families and, in some cases, their own personal Jewish identities.

One of the hallmarks of feminist ethnography is the ability to translate the research back into the community that helped produce it, rendering it useful to the individuals who participated in the research, their community, and their broader network. In doing so, the researcher acknowledges the labor and vulnerability of the research participants, the ways in which she herself has taken from the community, and the transferability of research beyond academe back into the community. In the end, the feminist ethnographer must grapple with the ways in which she has used and changed her subjects, and, in an effort to balance power structures, what her research offers them in return for their participation.³⁹ As feminist ethnographer Patricia McNamara puts it, "effective participatory action research should make a difference (for the good) in the lives of the participants." This application of feminist ethnographic methods calls on the researcher to focus not on "influencing those who conduct the research or examine its findings from an academic or political perspective," but rather to articulate the research findings in a way that can be reabsorbed helpfully by the community researched.⁴⁰

Feminist ethnography, which is foundationally positioned to tell a rich narrative alongside critique of power structures and knowledge production,⁴¹ recognizes the ethnographer's ethical task as one of utilizing her research to support the community she has studied,⁴² assigning value to voices that may have been overlooked, and challenging the established canon of the community narrative in which they exist.⁴³ Accordingly, this essay concludes with a discussion and application of the horizontal peer education and feminist coalition-building models employed by the Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle, arguing that they represent a transferable model of programming for contemporary synagogues, as well as non-affiliated Jewish groups. This transferability can be seen in two primary ways: in the decentralization of a monolithic Jewish experience and in the pushback against a top-down religious model.

First, one of the strengths of the Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle has been its ability to integrate additional concerns and needs into their curriculum and discussion, and to center the regional identity of the group participants. The group became a space for addressing not only Jewish parenting, but also other overlapping identities that do not find voice in other contexts, including southernness, race, ability, socioeconomics, gender identity and sexuality. Jewish experience is not monolithic, and the Mothers Circle's evolution into the Interfaith Parents Circle demonstrates a recognition of the multiplicity of Jewish identities. Although participants were most vocal about the need to discuss southern Judaism, the name change of the group, as well as the facilitators' articulation of the need to hold space for LGBTQ Jewish families and all forms of familial caregiving, demonstrate a core

understanding of new approaches to transmitting Jewish identity within broadly conceived family units.

Second, the Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle demonstrates a model of unthreatening, horizontal peer education that trains and raises up leaders from within the group. Far from sidelining synagogue programming and education, the Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle offers a complementary alternative that has increased the participants' interest and willingness to broaden their participation in the local Jewish community and its programming. Throughout their interviews, the women referred to their need for something to "meet them where they were at." Instead of relying on the larger, more formalized Jewish synagogues or institutions, they created a "soft landing" for themselves.

Program participants noted a number of reasons why Jewish spaces can feel intimidating, including language barriers, fear of making a cultural faux pas, lack of familiarity with customs, and tensions with navigating their own religion or religious upbringing within the larger Jewish collective. Having a space to explore these feelings of vulnerability has proven essential to their experiences of Jewishness. That these conversations occur without a rabbi, cantor or formal Jewish educator being present has been essential in the authenticity of the dialogue. The women's ability to claim ownership of their experiences of Judaism is influential in their later desire to become affiliated with Jewish institutions.

The Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle's approach could offer the following four transferable guidelines to other Jewish groups. First, they do not demand synagogue membership. Rather, they hold space for individuals and families to explore their Jewishness without the pressures of doing so in a prescribed way. Second, they allow for the group to self-define and bring pertinent topics into discussion, based on their own concerns or experiences. Third, the group offers connections to other Jewish agencies, groups and events, encouraging participants to attend them, making these events less intimidating and more accessible. At the same time, this points to the importance of all these groups demonstrating their mutual commitment to each other. In other words, their framework calls for the Sisterhood, the Men's Club, the Young Adult Division, or any other Jewish group to move away from a "yours and mine" mindset and into a collective coalition of "we." Finally, the way that communities and institutions raise up leaders is by offering individuals the chance to lead. Leaders raised up from within their own group are more likely to move into leadership roles across Jewish institutions.

As plans move forward for the next iteration of the Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle, the one certain thing is that it will continue to listen to the voices of Jews on the margins of the community.⁴⁴ The group offers a fresh and vibrant alternative to Jewish community structures, calls attention to other disparities the community faces, and, as Lauren says, empowers caregivers to "radically choose Jewishness for their families." By creating spaces in which non-Jews and Jews-by-choice are allowed to explore how they can cultivate a Jewish home authentic to themselves and their family, the participants in the Mothers Circle / Interfaith Parents Circle have

Amy K. Milligan

been actively doing the work of holding space, affording agency and empowering a new generation of parents and caregivers in the Jewish community.

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Notes:

1. Throughout this essay, I use the terms mother, parent and caregiver. This language is reflective of the conversations and identities articulated by the individuals interviewed, and they are not meant to categorize or privilege any one form of caring for children over another. Families and adult-child relationships come in many forms, and this language should not detract from the fact that not every child has a parent, a mother, a familial caregiver, or a caregiver. Families, as understood through this lens, consist of any combination of adults and/or children (as families do not necessitate children in order to be relationally familial) who care for each other or feel a kinship bond, whether biological, legal or relational.
2. I use the widely accepted acronym LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) for ease of readership, though I recognize that it does not fully represent all queer identities and that it does not represent the full spectrum of sexuality and gender identity. Likewise, I use the term "queer" as a synonym for LGBTQ, in line with this word's contemporary use within the LGBTQ community, as it offers a wider umbrella for community identification. Recognizing that this word's context varies by generation, context and intent, I use it here as a reclaimed, positive and inclusive descriptor of LGBTQ identities.
3. For nuanced discussions of how these stereotypes have impacted Jewish interfaith families, see Keren McGinity, *Marrying Out: Jewish Men, Intermarriage, and Fatherhood* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), and eadem, *Still Jewish: A History of Women and Intermarriage in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2012). These stereotypes are also discussed in Esther Benbassa and Jean-Christophe Attias, *The Jews and their Future: A Conversation on Judaism and Jewish Identities* (New York: Zed Books, 2004).
4. Luis Lugo, Alan Cooperman and Gregory A. Smith, "2013 Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews: A Portrait of Jewish Americans – Complete Report," Jewish Data Bank, 2013, at: <https://www.jewishdatabank.org/databank/search-results/study/715> (accessed October 3, 2019).
5. Pew Research Center, "A Portrait of Jewish Americans," Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life, October 1, 2013, at: <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/> (accessed October 3, 2019).

58 • *Nashim* 37 (2020)

6. For more on this, see McGinity, *Still Jewish* (above, note 3), p. 7.
7. Jody Passanisi and Shara Peters, “We’re Not an Exception: Intermarried and Jewish,” eJewish Philanthropy, August 9, 2019, at: <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/were-not-an-exception-intermarried-and-jewish> (accessed August 29, 2019).
8. InterfaithFamily, “Synagogues and the Jewish Community: Jewish Inter-marriage,” InterfaithFamily, Spring 2011, at: https://www.interfaithfamily.com/news_and_opinion/synagogues_and_the_jewish_community/jewish_intermarriage_statistics/ (accessed October 3, 2019; at a later date this site was no longer available). For more on the struggles faced by Jews-by-choice, see Brenda Forster Joseph Tabachnik, *Jews by Choice: A Study of Converts to Reform and Conservative Judaism* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav, 1991); and Egon Mayer, *Love and Tradition: Marriage between Jews and Christians* (New York: Springer, 2013).
9. For more examples of these experiences, see Julie Wiener, “But Will the Chicken Soup Taste as Good? Gentile Mothers Raise Jewish Kids,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 4, 2008, at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB120728465441589315> (accessed August 13, 2019); Johanna R. Ginsberg, “Jewish Kids, Non-Jewish Moms,” *New Jersey Jewish Times*, January 25, 2012, at: <https://njewishnews.timesofisrael.com/jewish-kids-non-jewish-moms/> (accessed September 13, 2019); and Michelle Shain, Leonard Saxe, Fern Chertok, Graham Wright, Shahar Hecht and Theodore Sasson, *Beyond Welcoming: Engaging Intermarried Couples in Jewish Life*, (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 2019), pp. 1–158.
10. To read more about the types of questions addressed by the program, see Rena Segall, “Big Tent Judaism Launches Tough Questions Mothers Circle Moms are Asking,” eJewish Philanthropy, October 15, 2017, at: <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/big-tent-judaism-launches-tough-questions-mothers-circle-moms-are-asking/> (accessed August 28, 2019).
11. Kerry M. Olitzky, “Success and the Sunset,” eJewish Philanthropy, December 23, 2016, at: <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/success-and-the-sunset/> (accessed October 7, 2019).
12. Jennifer A. Thompson, *Jewish on Their Own Terms: How Intermarried Couples Are Changing American Judaism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), p. 84. In the later iteration of the Interfaith Parents Group, there has been a shift away from this model. While the focus remains on raising Jewish children, there is greater emphasis on navigating an interfaith home.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 84–85.
14. Olitzky, “Success and the Sunset” (above, note 11).
15. Pew Research Center, “A Portrait of Jewish Americans” (above, note 5).
16. Ira M. Sheskin and Arnold Dashefsky, *United States Jewish Population, 2017* (Current Jewish Population Reports, no. 19; New York: Berman Jewish Data Bank–Jewish Federations of North America), at: https://www.jewishdatabank.org/content/upload/bjdb/US_Jewish_Population_2017_AJYB_DataBank_Final.pdf (accessed October 7, 2019).
17. This is the most recent comprehensive data for the region, but the survey data is over 18 years old. A new community survey is being launched for 2020, implemented by the United Jewish Federation of Tidewater through the Melior Group of Philadelphia. Betty Ann Levine, CEO of the United Jewish Federation of Tidewater, writes that the survey will focus on community and not just demographics. For more on the initial conversations about this survey, see Terri Denison, “Jewish Tidewater: A Survey for

- the Future,” *Jewish News*, October 8, 2019, at: <http://www.jewishnewsva.org/jewish-tidewater/> (accessed October 21, 2019).
18. Ira M. Sheskin, “2001 Jewish Community Study of Tidewater” (New York: Berman Jewish Databank, 2001), at: <https://www.jewishdatabank.org/databank/search-results/study/398> (accessed October 7, 2019).
 19. Steven Vegh, “Norfolk Touted as Hot Spot for Orthodox Jews,” *The Virginian Pilot*, May 29, 2009, at: https://www.pilotonline.com/news/article_62e2e9c4-0408-5823-b2e9-d0aa521aabde.html (accessed October 8, 2019).
 20. “How to Raise Children in a Religion That Is Not Your Own: The Mothers Circle Comes to Tidewater,” *Jewish News*, September 19, 2014, at: <http://www.jewishnewsva.org/how-to-raise-children-in-a-religion-that-is-not-your-own-the-mothers-circle-comes-to-tidewater/> (accessed August 28, 2019).
 21. *Ibid.*
 22. Thompson, *Jewish on Their Own Terms* (above, note 12), p. 84.
 23. *Ibid.*, p. 85. See also, McGinity, *Still Jewish* (above, note 3), p. 191.
 24. Thompson, *Jewish on Their Own Terms* (above, note 12), p. 85.
 25. Quoted in “To Non-Jewish Mothers Raising Jewish Children, the Jewish Community Says, ‘Thank You!’,” *Jewish News*, October 3, 2014, at: <http://www.jewishnewsva.org/to-non-jewish-mothers-raising-jewish-children-the-jewish-community-says-thank-you/> (accessed August 28, 2019).
 26. The literature on southern Judaism is rich. A good starting point is Marcie Cohen Ferris and Mark I. Greenberg, *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New History* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2006).
 27. For an analysis of the “ashkenazification” of American Judaism, see David Sorkin, “The Port Jew: Notes Toward a Social Type,” *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 50 (1999), pp. 87–97. Ashkenazi Jews are those of European Jewish ancestry.
 28. Although not all northeastern American Jews experience Judaism in the same way, many have greater access to Jewish communal structures and see their cultural customs reflected as characteristic of American Judaism.
 29. A temporary structure erected by the family during Sukkot, the “Festival of Booths.”
 30. Havdalah is recited at the close of the Sabbath, in the evening, with blessings over a candle, spices and wine. Tashlich is an atonement ritual performed on Rosh Hashana, in which individuals “cast their sins” into a body of water.
 31. For additional comments by Jennifer Thompson on the distribution of family labor, see Samira K. Mehta, “Jewish on Their Own Terms: An Author Interview with Jennifer A. Thompson,” *Religion in American History*. February 7, 2014, at: <http://usreligion.blogspot.com/2014/02/jewish-on-their-own-terms-author.html> (accessed September 21, 2019).
 32. For more on interfaith educational models, see Sheila C. Gordon and Benjamin Arenstein, “Interfaith Education: A New Model for Today’s Interfaith Families,” *International Review of Education*, 63 (2017), pp. 169–195.
 33. See Alisha Ochoa and Lina Pershing, “Team Teaching with Undergraduate Students: Feminist Pedagogy in a Peer Education Project,” *Feminist Teacher*, 22/1 (2011), pp. 23–42; M. Candace Christensen, “Using Feminist Leadership to Build a Performance-Based, Peer Education Program,” *Qualitative Social Work*, 12 (2013), pp. 254–269; and Margot Rawsthorne and Sonia Hoffman, “Supporting Safe and Healthy Relationship Choices: A Peer Education Approach,” *Australian Feminist Journal*, 22 (2010), p. 28.

34. See Holly Jeanine Boux, "Towards a New Theory of Feminist Coalition: Accounting for Heterogeneity of Gender, Race, Class, and Sexuality through an Exploration of Power and Responsibility," *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, 10 (2016), pp. 1–22; Brenda Lyshaug, "Solidarity without Sisterhood? Feminism and the Ethics of Coalition Building," *Politics & Gender*, 2 (2006), pp. 77–100; and Nella Van Dyke and Holly J. McCammon, *Strategic Alliances: Coalition Building and Social Movements* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
35. Intersectionality, in its common academic usage, has come to mean any overlapping or intersecting identities. However, overuse of the term has resulted in its dilution and distancing from its original theoretical framework, as established by the work and labor of black feminists. Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and Leslie McCall, in "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis" (*Signs* 38 [2013], pp. 617–648), note that intersectionality is linked to our studies of power, and yet its dilution has led to it being used broadly to consider overlapping identities. As I use the intersectional framework here, I attempt to honor their original work by highlighting power differentials as experienced by non-Jewish women and Jews-by-choice in their quest not only to find their own voices but also to uplift the voices of others who exist on the margins.
36. For a nuanced discussion of overlapping parental identities, see Samira K. Mehta, *Beyond Chismukkah: The Christian-Jewish Interfaith Family in the United States* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018). In particular, her discussion of familial explorations of interfaith multi-ethnic experiences is helpful in framing discussions around how to conceptualize contemporary interfaith family dynamics.
37. Amanda Kaletsky, "Mothers of Other Backgrounds Raising Jewish Children Make More Jewish Choices after Participating in JOI's The Mothers Circle," eJewish Philanthropy, March 12, 2014, at: <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/mothers-of-other-backgrounds-raising-jewish-children-make-more-jewish-choices-after-participating-in-jois-the-mothers-circle/> (accessed October 15, 2019).
38. McGinity, *Still Jewish* (above, note 3), p. 178
39. Richelle D. Schrock, "The Methodological Imperatives of Feminist Ethnography," *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, 5 (2013), pp. 48–60, at p. 58.
40. Patricia McNamara, "Feminist Ethnography: Storytelling That Makes a Difference," *Qualitative Social Work*, 8 (2009), pp. 161–177, at p. 169.
41. Schrock, "Methodological Imperatives," (above, note 39), pp. 48–49.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
43. Kamala Visweswaran, "Defining Feminist Ethnography," in Yvonna S. Lincoln and Norman K. Denzin (eds.), *Turning Points in Qualitative Research: Tying Knots in a Handkerchief* (New York: Altamira Press, 2003), pp. 73–94.
44. Some discussions have addressed how the group might address interfaith marriages that are not Christian/Jewish; how to navigate being from two religions and one race vs. two religions and two races; and parenting Jewish children when one partner or parent is deployed with the military.