

Jewish Continuity Through Non-Jewish Women

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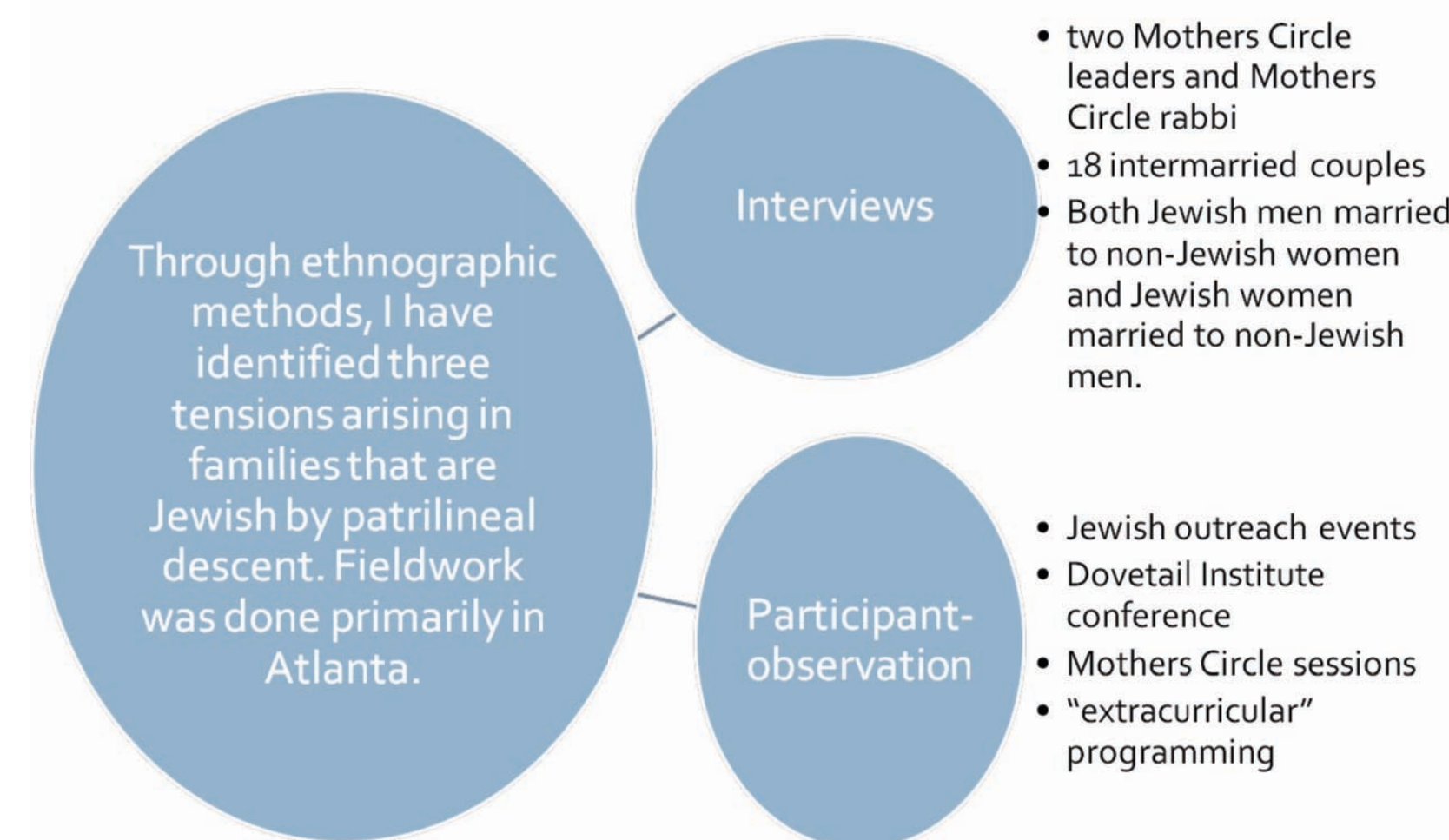
Introduction

What Makes a Jew?

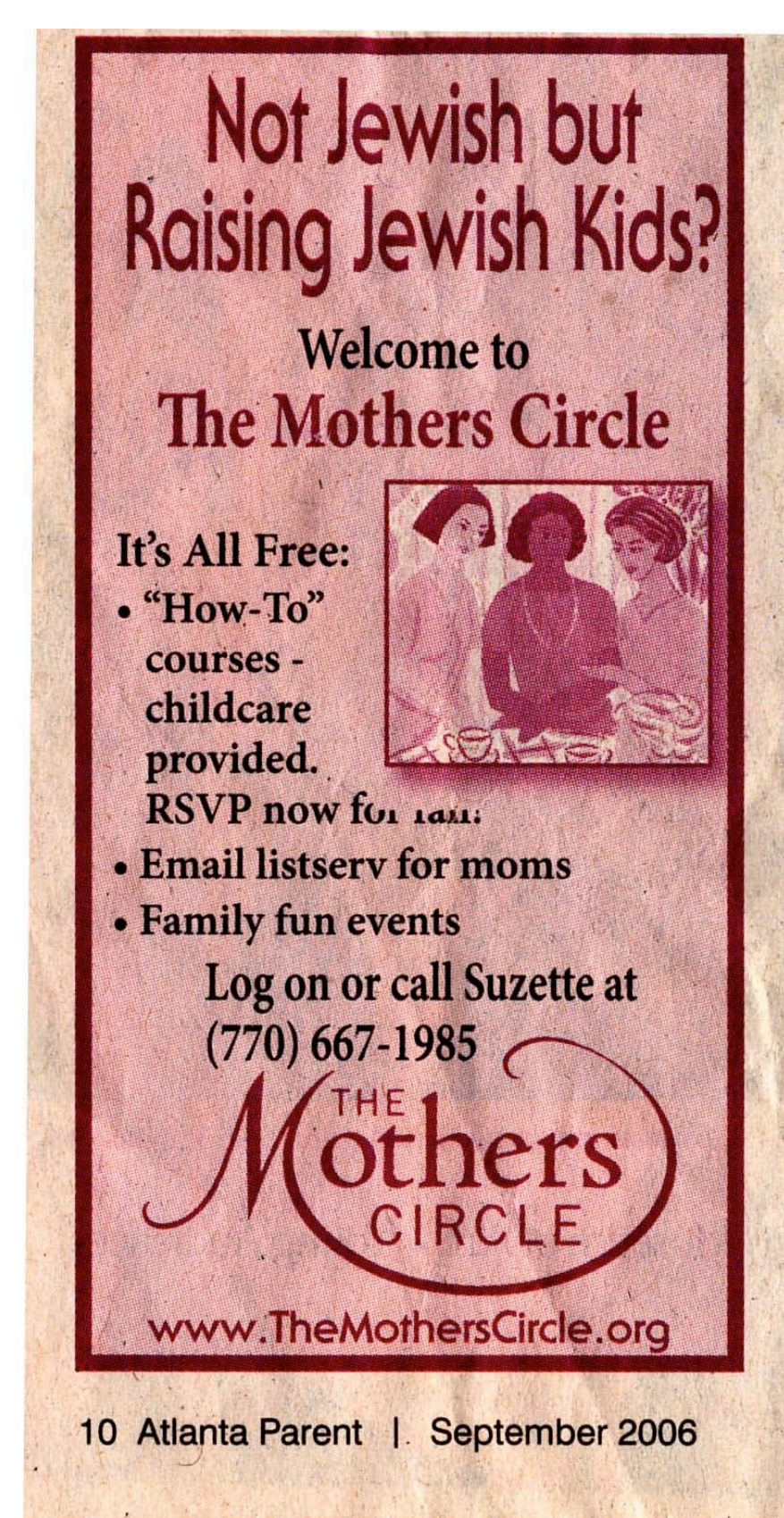
- Jewish tradition holds that Jews are produced either by birth through a Jewish mother or by conversion.
- According to the Reform movement, having one Jewish parent and a Jewish upbringing also produces a Jew.
- The introduction of “patrilineal descent” set off enormous controversy.
 - “Realistic” response to rising intermarriage?
 - Role of *halakhah*?

Method

Ethnographic Methods

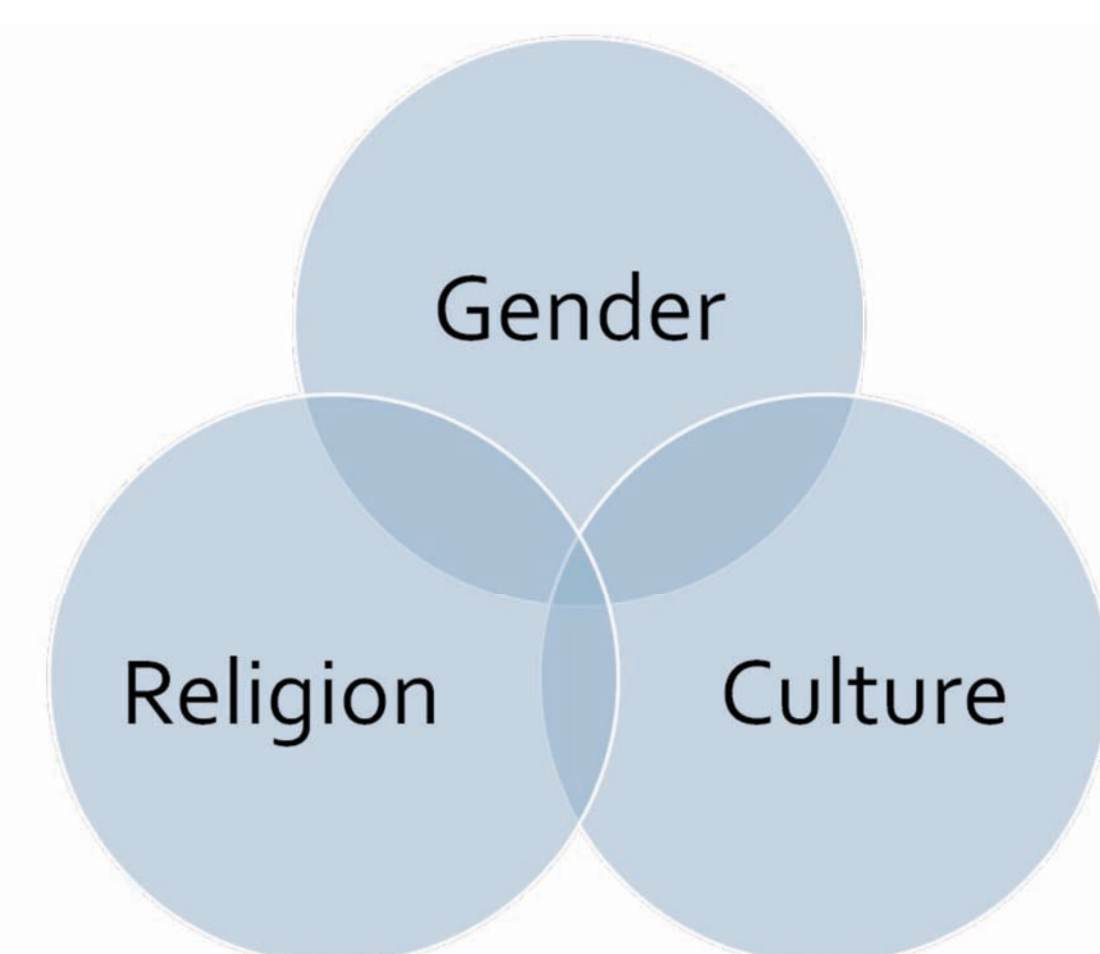


- This poster focuses on one subset of my sample: the Mothers Circle.
- The Mothers Circle is an educational support group for non-Jewish women raising Jewish children
 - Teaches “how to create a Jewish home”
 - Avoids talk of conversion
 - Follows set curriculum
 - Created in Atlanta and adopted by the Jewish Outreach Institute
 - Now runs in 26 cities in the United States
- Mothers Circle members do not necessarily represent all intermarried non-Jewish women.



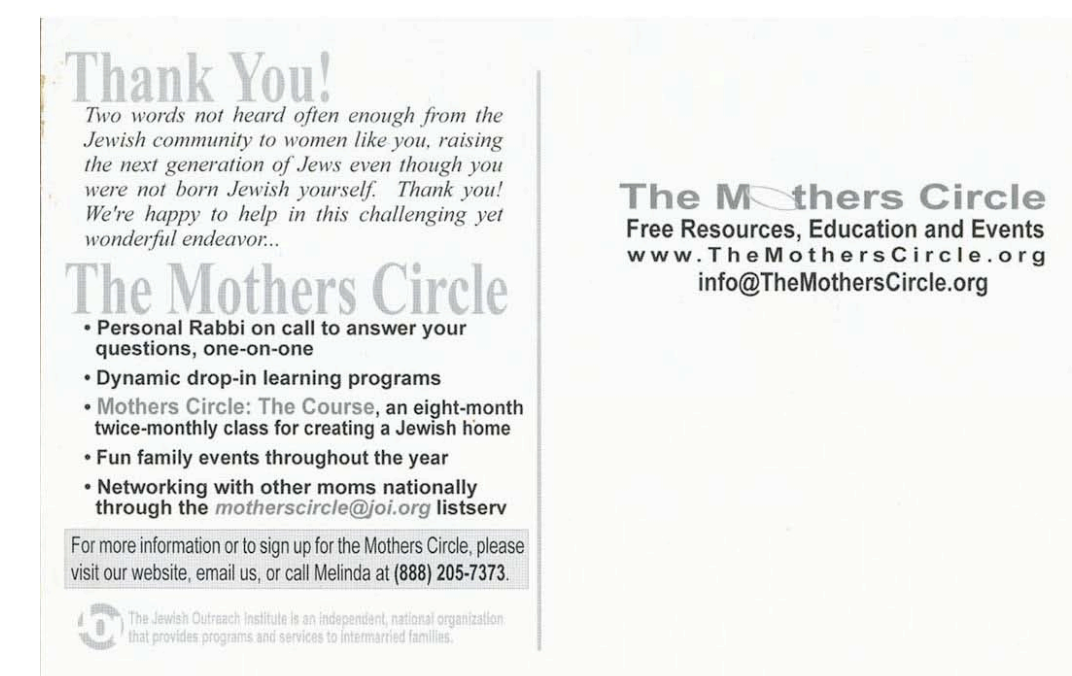
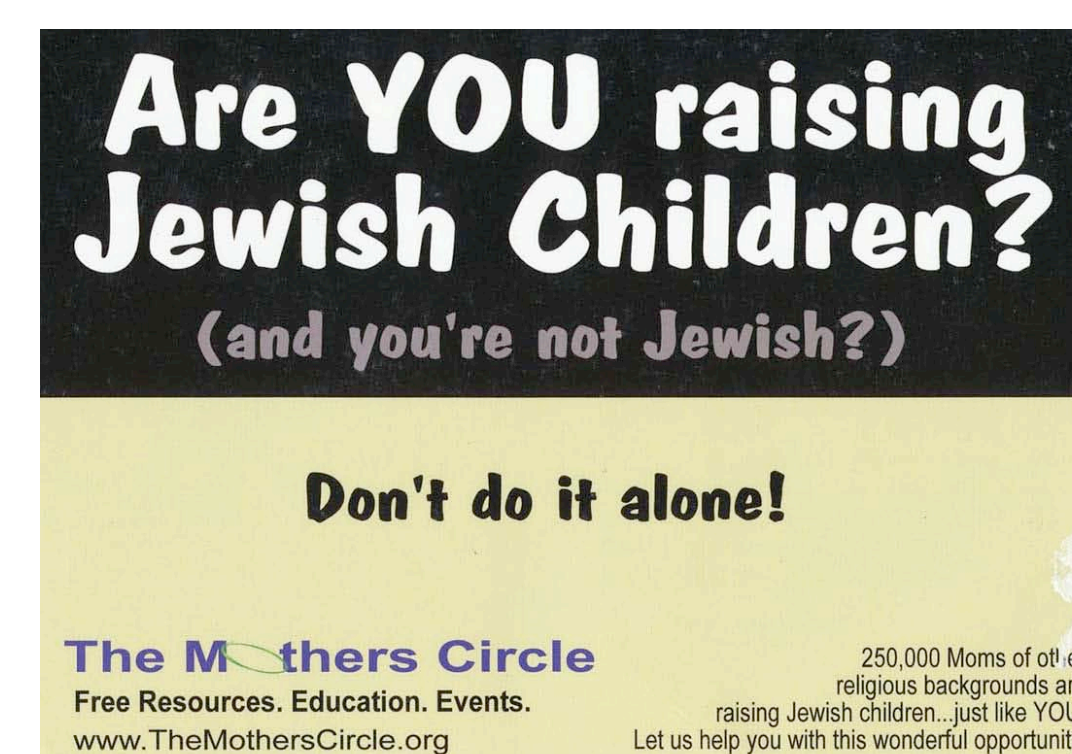
Results

Three Tensions in Intermarried Families



Gender Tensions

- Patrilineal descent emphasizes Jewish fathers’ role in producing Jews.
- Yet non-Jewish mothers bear day-to-day responsibility for family’s Jewish involvement.



Mothers Circle women...

- attend Mothers Circle every other week from October to May to learn about Judaism
- prepare for Shabbat, e.g. remember wine/juice, challah, candles
- shop for a synagogue
- drive children to religious school.

Their husbands...

- attend “Couples Havdalah” and family events with their wives and children several times per year.
- attend a “Fathers Circle” that meets two or three times per year

Mothers Circle Participants’ Experiences

“One time I said to my husband that we need to do Shabbat every week, and he said, ‘Why? You’re not Jewish.’” I said, ‘No, but my *children* are Jewish!’”

“Sometimes we order pizza. We say the crust is the challah; we light candles and do the blessing over the wine.”

“Sometimes we remember that it’s Friday after we’ve already started eating. My husband will go, ‘Oh well,’ and I’ll say, ‘No! Not ‘oh well!’ And I bring out the candles and the wine.”

- As the women teach their children about being Jewish, they are also to bring their husbands back to Judaism.
- One mother’s decision to convert to Judaism did draw her husband to Jewish rituals.
- “He grew up Orthodox, and he thought Shabbat was basically a bunch of meaningless technicalities—you wash your hands a certain way, you say certain things.
- “But now because he’s doing it with me, he’s starting to see it as more spiritual.”

Mothers Circle encourages women to model Jewish learning for their children and their husbands.

- One Mothers Circle woman worried that other Jews would not accept her child as Jewish:

- “How can anyone else judge my child without knowing what is in his heart?”
 - Protestant language, consonant with her own religious background
 - American language of choice and voluntarism
 - Conflicts with Jewish language of ascribed ethnicity and membership in the Jewish people.

- The Mothers Circle Rabbi:

□ “I emphasize to the fathers, ‘Do you know how incredibly important what your spouse is doing towards your Jewish family and towards the future of the Jewish people?’”

□ Often, the women have been raised in the church. “And therefore when they get this Jewish husband [they say], ‘What do you mean you’re not going to synagogue? That’s part of being Jewish. What do you mean you don’t want to go to Rosh Hashanah services? Are you out of your mind?’”

A Mothers Circle Leader:

- “My brother is a *kohein*.... He married someone who wasn’t Jewish. He’s now Methodist.
- “Technically, he’s still Jewish because you can’t leave Judaism once you’re born into it. His two kids go to Christian schools. They celebrate Christmas and Easter.
- “So why is he considered a Jew and he’s doing nothing Jewish, and my women are doing everything Jewish and they are not?”

Conclusion

- Mothers Circle women marry into Jewish families under the American kinship system
 - Relation by love/choice
- Jewish kinship involves
 - Ethnicity
 - Peoplehood
 - Ascribed identity
 - Conveyed by birth or ritual, i.e. conversion
- Moral and ascriptive formation of children through the mother requires at least pragmatic membership in the Jewish people.
- Mothers Circle leaders:
 - Mothers Circle women are Jewish in their “heart and soul”
 - Halakhic concerns are irrelevant
 - Future of Judaism depends on “welcoming” non-Jewish women.
- Mothers Circle women:
 - Feel that their children are Jewish
 - Say that no one else should judge their children’s Jewish authenticity
 - Feel that moral and religious formation of some kind is vital
 - Experience Jewish membership by default: practicing Jewishness without being Jews.

Acknowledgements

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