

FORUM II

The Demographic Imperatives of Outreach

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The centrality of the demographic experience for any society is acknowledged by most scholars, but it is even more critical for a people such as American Jews. As an essentially voluntary community in a free society, America's Jews are not only a biological population subject to change in the ratio of births to deaths but also a social population. Nobody can be sure that his or her biological descendants will be Jews. Moreover, as the sad history of the twentieth century has shown, the terms of Jewish group survival can also be dramatically altered by cataclysmic political change. Jews are therefore better termed a biosocial population, since the crucial demographic process of family formation—marriage at both the individual and mass levels—is influenced by sociological, psychological, anthropological, historical, and religious factors.

This article outlines some of the socio-demographic facts that describe in broad terms the American Jewish family structure. Its objective is to set the parameters of discourse about the prospects of American Jewry in the face of current intermarriage trends.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In historical terms, the change in the demography of the Jewish people in the twentieth century is not only unparalleled but also catastrophic. In 1900, only three generations ago, world Jewry was significantly younger than today, its core was centered between the Oder and Dnieper

rivers in Europe, and it had a rate of growth of nearly 1.5 % per annum, close to that of present-day developing countries. In 1920, numbering 16 or 17 million, Jews were more numerous than Mexicans, Vietnamese, Egyptians, or Canadians. There was one Jew for every five Latin Americans; today there is only one Jew for every fifty Latin Americans.

In one of the most significant changes the world has seen this century—the more than doubling in the world's population to over four billion, despite war and natural disasters—the Jews have had the opposite experience. The Jewish population has shrunk to under 13 million people in 1989. Of all the peoples who suffered losses in World War II, the Jews alone have failed to recover. The remaining Jews just did not have the demographic reserves to make up for the losses of the Shoah. Moreover to their biological losses, Jews have added social losses resulting from the loss of the loyalty of born Jews.

Unless the erosion of Jewish numbers (through a downward geometric progression) can be halted, the Jews are destined for the future of an endangered species. Living organisms either expand and grow. If they stop growing, they begin to die. In both the biological and economic worlds, stasis or zero population growth leads to decline or the euphemism of negative growth.

AMERICAN JEWRY IN PERSPECTIVE

The prognosis for American Jewry, which now comprises nearly half of world Jewry, is only a slightly grayer version of the black picture described above. Although immigration has increased since Roosevelt's days, lack of sufficient population growth has

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reduced American Jewry's relative proportion of the total American population by one-third. Biologically there is zero population growth. Thankfully there is now again a healthy flow of Soviet emigrants, young families who will be needed for the future viability of American Jewish communal institutions. Yet, they are probably not sufficient to stem the tide of Jewish population attrition in this country, even if they do choose to identify as Jews.

Recent surveys of the American Jewish population at the local and national levels have shown that Jews are the population with the largest proportion of one-person households and the smallest proportion of households with children. Only one-third of Jewish households contain a person under 18 years of age. What the Jewish community lacks most is that which inspired our ancestors and lightened their oppressed and tedious lives—children. Despite all the cultural myths about the vaunted Jewish family, Jews are becoming the least familial group in the nation.

It is highly doubtful that any amount of social engineering by Jewish voluntary agencies will change contemporary Jewish social patterns, particularly marriage patterns. The mass of Jewish young adults will not be persuaded to marry younger or only to marry born Jews, nor can one hope to inspire Jewish women to have larger numbers of children. However, there may be a window of opportunity that could reverse the erosion of the Jewish population base.

At this time the relatively large Jewish demographic cohorts of the Baby Boom aged 25–35 are beginning to settle down, marry, and produce children. Of course, it is also this group that is intermarrying at record levels. Among Baby Boomers at least 37% of the married men and 24% of the women are in interfaith marriages. These figures can be compared with the 14% of men born between 1925 to 1945 and the 7% of men born before 1925 who are intermarried (Kosmin et al., 1989).

However, in theory intermarriage need not lead to Jewish population losses. From

a halachic perspective the child of a Jewish woman is Jewish. So even if all Jewish women intermarried, all their children would be Jewish and there would be no intergenerational loss of numbers, at least according to traditional Jewish law. Moreover we know that Gentile women married to Jewish men are far more likely to convert than are Gentile men married to Jewish women. The increasing incidence of intermarriage among Jewish women and the disproportionate rate of conversion to Judaism among Gentile women may in fact result in an increasing number of Jewish children.

The real Jewish problem with intermarriage is not demographic. It is operational and sociological. The fact is that Jewish communal and religious organizations fail to capture their potential market because they completely ignore the intermarried and their children as a significant Jewish constituency. This has always been so, but the magnitude of the challenge has clearly grown.

CHILDREN—THE KEY TO OUTREACH

It is the sheer dimension of this challenge in the 1990s that makes it a make-or-break situation for American Jewry. The greatest tragedy of the Shoah was the murder of one million Jewish children. The challenge before American Jewry today is to save for the Jewish people one million potentially Jewish children, who are alive and well in the cities and suburbs across this continent at this moment.

There are approximately 850,000 Jewish young people under age 18 living with two Jewish parents. There is an even larger number with only one parent of Jewish extraction. Why are there more of the latter than the former? Not only do we have vast numbers of children from interfaith couples but we constantly add to the total when Jewish marriages are dissolved because 32% of in-marriers marry out on their second marriage, thereby creating blended

families. Yet, around 400,000 of these children of intermarriage without conversion of the Gentile spouse are Jewish according to the criteria of all Jewish denominations—they have Jewish mothers.

Now, if between around 33 and 60% of Jewish children (the proportion varies according to how one defines who is a Jew) are at risk, then outreach to the children of mixed and blended marriages should be a communal priority (from a demographic point of view). The need is even greater in the West and South, particularly in California and Texas, where the proportion of the next generation affected by intermarriage is higher than the national norm.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

How successful the organized Jewish community is in the task of recruitment, outreach, and conversion will decide whether in the year 2020 there will be an elderly, vulnerable, and fast-diminishing Jewish population of 4 million Jews in this country or a demographically well-balanced and expanding population of 7 million. To realize the latter scenario, American Jewish religious and communal institutions must recognize that they no longer have a captive market and that they must provide reasons and incentives for people to take up their Jewish option. They will also have to relearn the power of positive thought, regain their optimism, and become risk takers.

In our market society people consume goods and services that they regard as valuable and attractive and that make them feel good. By the nature of their education and incomes Jews are the most sophisticated consumers in the nation. They want quality products. One way they can be persuaded that the Jewish community is a worthwhile and quality product is by persuading high-status Gentiles that it is one. As Peter Berger (1979) suggested some years ago, the social psychology of a group such as the Jews means that if first you

convince the outsiders of its value then the insiders will buy into it. The Jewish community needs successful outreach for credible inreach.

The importance of this insight is magnified by a few facts from the early screening phase of the CJF 1990 National Survey of American Jews.¹ Our results suggest that there are 150,000 people who were raised as Jews who no longer identify as Jews in any way. About 100,000 say they are Christians, and the remainder have no religion or are agnostic. There are also several hundred thousand adults—children of intermarriage—with a Jewish parent who do not identify as Jews. Over 200,000 are now Christians, and 180,000 of them have no religion. These are all demographic losses. Yet, 230,000 have not transferred their loyalty to another brand of religion.

In addition, over a half-million Christians consider themselves "Jewish" by virtue of being married to a Jew. Some may be open to conversion through persuasion. More importantly, this finding suggests that they would react positively if their children were offered an exposure to Judaism. This also confirms some curious 1981 Canadian Census data in which hundreds of Gentile parents recorded their children as Jewish on their census forms, even when there was no longer a Jewish adult in the home, i.e., the biological Jewish parent was non-custodial. In Vancouver, British Columbia, a community of under 15,000 Jews, 305 Jewish children were in this category (Torczyner & Chatwin, 1985). Obviously some Gentiles have much less of a problem with Jewishness than many Jews.

Given the current rates of intermarriage by a sophisticated population of autono-

1. In this screening of a national probability sample of 100,000 randomly dialed American households the respondents are asked a series of qualifying questions: What is your religion? Do you consider yourself Jewish? Were you raised as Jewish? Do you have a Jewish mother or a Jewish father?

mous mature adults, we are long past the stage where we can invoke effective religious, communal, or familial sanctions against marrying those born into other faiths. However, we can be successful in outreach to these Jews and the conversion of their spouses and children if we can get "equal time" with the Christians and new religions. We shall need the kind of drive, enthusiasm, and communal support that Christian evangelism evokes in its constituency in order to achieve this goal. The demographic imperative for outreach and conversion necessitates our competition in the free marketplace of ideas; the challenges

of the 1990s offer American Jewry no other realistic alternative.

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