Jews and the Jewish Birthrate

Jack Wertheimer

NOT LONG ago, a Manhattan rabbi stunned his congregants by informing them that the future of the Jewish people would be secured not through trips to Israel, not through the battle against anti-Semitism, and not through the continued upward mobility of Jews, but in the bedroom. What shocked his sophisticated Upper East Side audience had nothing to do with his allusion to sex; these days, it is perfectly acceptable to speak in public about intimate behavior. What is not permissible in polite Jewish company is an allusion to the decisions people make about their own family lives, or to the impact of those decisions on the ability of the Jewish community to sustain itself.

It is not as if the contours of today's demographic crisis are hidden from view. "American Jews See Population, Birthrate Drop," screamed a recent headline in the *Los Angeles Times*. "Low Fertility Key to 2000 Census," proclaimed a front-page story in the country's largest-circulation Jewish newspaper. By the year 2006, according to a policy institute in Israel, the American Jewish community, hitherto the world's largest, will for the first time fall behind the Jewish community of Israel in size.

Nor is it as if Jewish leaders are unalarmed. Last spring saw a series of private meetings, including one called by the president of the state of Israel, to discuss the demographic situation and what to do about it. Thus far, the result has been much hand-wringing and little action. This is hardly surprising: the problem of Jewish population decline is complex, and huge difficulties lie in ambush for any plan aimed at reversing it. But an even more intractable obstacle lies elsewhere. Until it is confronted, there is little prospect of accomplishing anything beyond hand-wringing.

HOW MANY Jews are there in the United States? That in itself is not a simple question. Indeed, the very process of counting has become wrapped in controversy. The most recent National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), conducted under the auspices of the federations of Jewish philanthropies in the years 2000-01 with guidance from a stellar team of scholars, was blemished by a series of polling mishaps. Damagingly, the survey stretched out over a two-year period, some data were lost, and some respondents were never asked the full battery of questions.

Even before this, however, demographers had come to an impasse over whom to count as part of the Jewish population—a question necessitated by the increasingly porous nature of American society and the country's generally high rates of intermarriage. For example, should an individual raised as a Christian or as an adherent of an Eastern religion be considered a Jew if he or she had one Jewish

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parent? What if a born Christian who has never undergone any type of formal conversion asserts an identification with the victims of the Holocaust or in some way claims to have joined the Jewish people? What about the very common situation of a Gentile not married to but living in the same household with a Jew? What about the children and the grandchildren of intermarried Jews? If they were not raised as Jews, should they nevertheless be considered part of the Jewish population?

The result of all this confusion is disagreement as to the total size of the American Jewish population. Although most scholars have settled on a figure of between 5.2 and 5.5 million, a few, counting both Jews and the Gentiles living with them, would add as many as 1.2 million more. On the basis of the consensus figure of 5.5 million, the Jewish population of the United States has, at best, remained static for the past 50 years, despite the influx during that same period of at least a half-million Jewish immigrants.

If there is debate over absolute numbers, there is far wider agreement on the patterns of behavior within the Jewish population—behavior confirmed by dozens of community studies and separate opinion polls. Two trends are particularly telling. First, in terms of median age, Jews are seven years older than other Americans. Second, even by the most cautious figures, at least half of all marriages involving a Jew are to non-Jews. Neither trend suggests demographic vitality.

A NEW REPORT by Tom W. Smith documents the first of these tendencies. Entitled *Jewish Distinctiveness in America: A Statistical Portrait*,* it marshals considerable evidence for the relatively advanced age of the American Jewish population. Among religious groups, only liberal Protestants exceed Jews in this regard; among ethnic groups, only Americans of British ancestry do. Among Americans of all kinds, moreover, Jews have the fewest number of siblings, the smallest household size, and the second lowest number of children under eighteen at home.

Smith's study also makes plain why the Jewish age structure has become so skewed. For one thing, as the 2000-01 NJPS confirms, Jews marry later than other Americans, with the greatest disparities occurring in the age group between twenty-five and thirty-four. For Jewish women in particular, late marriage means lower rates of fertility compared with other Caucasian women—who themselves are barely producing babies at replacement level (figured at 2.1 children). The fertility gap is especially enormous among Jewish women under the age of thirty-five; even though the gap narrows considerably over the course of the next ten years, at no point do Jewish women attain the fertility levels of their non-Jewish peers or bear children in numbers sufficient to offset population losses from natural causes.

It is true that low fertility rates among Jewish women are not a new phenomenon. Economic advancement, the availability of birth control, and rising educational achievement caused Jewish fertility to start dropping as long ago as the middle of the 19th century in Europe and later in other modernizing societies like the United States. Nor, as is well known, is the phenomenon limited to Jews, or to the U.S.; in contemporary Europe and Japan, it has reached proportions that threaten catastrophe.

Still, Jewish women in the United States are significantly less fertile than their white, Gentile counterparts. To explain this fact, the demographer Frank Mott has pointed to the extraordinary rates of educational achievement among Jewish women, who spend significantly more time than their Gentile peers in programs of higher learning. For many of them, still more childless years follow as they work to advance their careers.

Add to all this the losses sustained through the high rate of intermarriage. Once upon a time, it was thought by at least some sociologists that intermarriage could prove to be a demographic boon. In the aggregate, said the optimists, it would take fewer intermarried Jews producing children identifying themselves as Jews to result in a net gain. But nothing of the sort has happened.†

Not only does the birth rate among intermarried Jews tend to be even lower than among in-married ones, but nearly three-quarters of children raised in intermarried families go on to marry non-Jews themselves, and only 4 percent of these raise their own children as Jews. As for their links with Jewish life, only a minority of children raised by dual-religion parents identify themselves with Judaism or with the institutions of the Jewish community. Although a number of adult children of intermarriage do express "somewhat" of a connection with the Jewish component of their identity, such feelings are rarely translated into behavior. Like their parents, most tend *not* to join synagogues, contribute

* Based on surveys conducted by the National Opinion and Research Center, the report was released earlier this year by the American Jewish Committee.

† In what follows I draw from the as yet unpublished research of the sociologist Bruce Phillips.

to Jewish causes, visit Israel, or participate in Jewish rituals nearly as much as do the adult children of in-married families.

THE CUMULATIVE effect of these demographic trends is now being felt and will only become amplified as time goes by. In a community that has long since ceased to replace its natural losses, continued low fertility rates mean that the number of children in the communal pipeline will soon drop sharply, causing a decline over the next decade in enrollments in Jewish schools and other institutions for the young. This will be further accelerated by the losses through intermarriage. Before long, as Bruce Phillips has concluded, "there will be fewer practitioners of Judaism" in the United States, and "this development will at some point become evident in the number and/or size of synagogues and other Jewish institutions."

But this brings us to the one major exception to the general rule—namely, Orthodox Jews. Not only do the Orthodox suffer many fewer losses from intermarriage, but their fertility rate is far above the Jewish norm. As against the overall average of 1.86 children per Jewish woman, an informed estimate gives figures ranging upward from 3.3 children in "modern Orthodox" families to 6.6 in Haredi or "ultra-Orthodox" families to a whopping 7.9 in families of Hasidim. These numbers are, of course, difficult to pin down definitively, but anecdotal evidence is compelling. In a single year, according to a nurse at one hospital in the Lakewood, New Jersey area serving a right-wing Orthodox population, 1,700 babies were born to 5,500 local families, yielding a rate of 358 births per thousand women. (The overall American rate is 65 births per thousand women.)

The statistical evidence behind these birthrates is laid out in the 2000-01 NJPS. Orthodox adults are younger on average than other American Jews, with more than half falling between the ages of eighteen and forty-four. As for children eighteen and under, these make up 19 percent of the Orthodox community; the figure for the total American Jewish community (including the Orthodox) is only 12 percent.

It does not take a prophet to discern the eventual impact of these trends. The Orthodox are the smallest of the three major denominations; in numbers, the Conservative and Reform movements far outstrip them. But among synagogue-affiliated Jews, the Orthodox sector contains more children than either of the other two. If the Orthodox continue to retain the loyalties of their young people, as they have mostly done over the past 30 or 40 years, they will become an ever larger, more visible, and better represented part of the total community, and will be in a position to insist on a larger share of communal expenditures—as some Orthodox leaders are already doing.

But what accounts for the high fertility rates of Orthodox Jews? It is certainly true that they marry much earlier than other Jews. Almost two-thirds of Orthodox women are wed by the age of twenty-five, and 90 percent by thirty-five. (For Conservative women, the comparable figure at age twenty-five is 9 percent, for Reform women 3 percent, and for women who identify themselves as "just Jewish" 14 percent; by age thirty-five, only slightly over half of Reform women are married.)* These Orthodox women go on to bear children at a younger age, and to have larger families.

But this just begs the question of causation; something is at work to produce those figures. It is hardly enough to say, as some do, that the Orthodox lag behind the rest of the Jewish population in levels of educational attainment. That is emphatically not the case with the modern Orthodox, and it is less and less the case in the Haredi community. Nor has the fact that Orthodox women are pursuing higher education and entering the labor force in large numbers impeded their determination to marry young and bear children.

A recent class exercise at an academically-oriented, modern-Orthodox day school in Manhattan may offer some insight here. The assembled fifteen-year-olds, boys and girls alike, were asked how many children they themselves hoped to have. Only two gave two as their ideal number, and none wanted fewer than that. A large majority named four. Whether all of these young people will actually follow through on their stated aspirations is not the point; the point is the aspirations themselves. It is unlikely that a similar exercise would yield the same results in Jewish schools of other denominations.

In brief, we are in the realm of norms and values. Orthodox communal culture encourages child-bearing, and has more thoroughly insulated itself from the "substantial downward pressures" that, in the reasonable judgment of Frank Mott, are currently depressing the overall size of the Jewish population—and that may themselves be the results of a rather different value system.

* These figures, based on the 2000-01 NJPS, were provided to me by Dr. Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz of the United Jewish Communities.

REMARKABLY, THERE has been little inquiry into any of these matters—that is, into why so many in the Jewish community are remaining single, or are having smaller families, or are intermarrying. In light of the pain expressed by many Jews about what has happened within their own families, this willed ignorance is in itself shocking. Thirty- and forty-year-old singles speak freely of their loneliness, and their inability to meet eligible Jewish mates. Because of late marriages, huge numbers of Jewish couples are struggling with infertility or with the difficulties of finding babies to adopt. Parents of adult children cannot fathom why their offspring are still living alone or moving from one transitory relationship to the next. Tens of thousands of families are trying to cope with the consequences of intermarriage or find themselves at a loss to explain to their children why, even though an uncle or aunt is married to a Gentile, it is not all right to consider "interdating."

No doubt, many feel there is not much to be said about any of this—that the twin trends of low fertility and high intermarriage are forces of nature, not to be questioned but merely endured. Besides, one can always point to the larger social forces at work, from the sexual revolution, to the felt economic need to maintain dual-career marriages, to the obsessive quest for success, to a predisposition among the best-educated to regard family itself as a suspect category and child-rearing as a chore best left to others, to the triumph of the cult of individualism and freedom of personal choice, and so forth.

The litany is well-known, and its constituent elements have surely affected Jews as much as anyone else. In fact, to judge by the figures cited above, they have affected Jews more than others. But, precisely because that is so, it is useful to consider the particular beliefs and social values embraced by the majority of American Jewish families.

Tom Smith's study of distinctiveness is a good place to start. His surveys demonstrate, for example, that American Jews are exceptional in the emphasis they place on raising independent-minded children. Asked to rank the relative importance of five values to be passed on to the next generation, overwhelming numbers identify their highest priority as the ability to "think for himself or herself," far more than those naming "working hard" or "obedience."

That no other ethnic group shows results like these is a finding in which many Jews would undoubtedly express pride. But there is surely a price to be paid for this unmodulated emphasis on independent-mindedness. At least in part, it has been paid in the coin of group allegiance and even of fidelity to one's own parents when it comes to things like marriage and family. The same can be said for the value that Jews place upon education. Although this certainly accounts for their disproportionate presence at top-tier colleges and universities, it, too, is pursued at the cost of other values.

An outfit called the Curriculum Initiative has estimated the number of Jewish children enrolled in private prep schools at 50,000. Many of these private schools are under Christian auspices. When asked to explain their choice, parents regularly extol the extraordinary education their children are receiving. They may well be right about that; but choosing one course of action entails rejecting another. A report by the National Study of Youth and Religion notes the extent to which young Jews fall behind *every other* American group in religious identification and practice. Young people well understand their parents' priorities—and live them out.

THESE PARTICULAR trends may seem relatively easy to explain; others are more opaque. Take the spiraling intermarriage rates. To the extent that these are understood at all, they are generally ascribed to two factors. The first is that Americans in general think nothing these days of crossing ethnic and religious boundaries in marriage; the second is that, for Jews, intermarriage is the natural result of a great blessing, namely, the radical diminution of anti-Semitism in American society. Both explanations focus on trends beyond the control of Jews and therefore requiring no response.

In fact, however, we know very little about how Jewish men and women actually regard each other and why so many of them opt to date or to marry non-Jews. Is it true, as one hears, that Jewish men do not want to marry someone who reminds them of their mother, or that Jewish women do not want to marry someone who reminds them of their father? And if it is, why have they only recently begun acting on this disinclination in such massive numbers? Might it be the reverse—that, for example, Jewish men want to marry someone *more* like their mother than the typical young Jewish woman of today, and that Gentile women happen to fit the bill?

Similar questions might be asked about the decisions of young Jews when they think about forming a family. What values and beliefs correlate with delayed marriage? How is it that Jewish adults who have themselves grown up in intact homes, and whose parents' enduring togetherness might be

thought to serve as a positive model, nonetheless choose to remain single? Despite the vital relevance of such questions to the future of the Jewish community, they have gone unexplored.

In the meantime, the outlook of the organized Jewish community has been characterized mostly by denial. Faced with irrefutable evidence of demographic decline, communal leaders have worked to "reframe" the discussion. The reframing goes like this: the Jewish population should be seen not as hemorrhaging, but rather as evolving new forms of expression. Yes, today's Jews are choosing to behave differently from Jews in the past, but, if treated with dignity and respect, they will surely return to play a positive role within the community. Yes, Jews are intermarrying at high rates, but if intermarried couples are offered a more welcoming environment, they will participate gladly in Jewish activities and both they and their offspring will come to identify strongly with Jewish life. Yes, Jews are producing fewer children, but what counts is quality, not quantity. Yes, fewer Jews are affiliating with synagogues and other communal institutions, but eliminating exclusionary and inhospitable attitudes will cause the situation to reverse itself.

The challenge of demographic decline, then, is to be met by inclusiveness, pluralism, and a welcoming atmosphere. The worse the decline has grown, the more fervently has this mantra been invoked—and not just invoked, but acted upon. Here, for example, is a "Statement on Human Sexuality" issued in 1998 by the rabbinate of the Reform movement:

> In our age, the traditional notion of family as being two parents and children (and perhaps older generations) living in the same household is in the process of being redefined. Men and women of various ages living together, singles, gay and lesbian couples, single-parent households, etc., may be understood as families in the wider, if not traditional sense. "Family" also has multiple meanings in an age of increasingly complex biotechnology and choice. . . .

Having thus radically expanded the definition of a Jewish family to accommodate what it calls "contemporary secular norms," the statement goes on to encourage "adults of all ages and physical and mental capabilities to develop expressions of their sexuality that are both responsible and joyful." Never once, however, does it encourage Jews to marry, or even mention that marriage is the one element previously thought to be the *sine qua non* of Jewish sexual expression and family life.

A second document, this one issued by the Reconstructionist rabbis, also avoids an endorsement of marriage as a Jewish ideal. "Contemporary liberal Jews," it states, "affirm the equality of both partners and understand that it is the obligation of each partner to treat the other with dignity. It is the qualities of mutual respect, trust, and love that we consider the fundamental attributes of loving partnerships." Marriage, disparaged elsewhere in the document as "historically a relationship of two unequal parties," evidently fails to meet these criteria. While praising the family "as the primary, stable unit of intimacy," the statement quickly adds that "many old and new kinds of families can fulfill these values."

Not much detective work is needed to discover the impulse behind these rejections of traditional Jewish teachings. In order to welcome Jews who live in unconventional family arrangements, and in particular to eliminate any negative judgment of gays and lesbians, the rabbis have rushed to scuttle what Judaism has always held about the centrality of marriage. They have done so, moreover, largely in order to address the discomfort, real or imagined, of the 1 or 2 percent of the Jewish population that is gay or lesbian, slighting their duty to instruct the other 98 percent on the Jewish understanding of sexuality and family. The same drive to offer hospitality at any cost—together with a rote allegiance to the supposed legacy of the civil-rights movement and the demands of "equality"—motivates the several hundred rabbis who now officiate at so-called interweddings.

THE OBVIOUS damage here is to the integrity of Judaism and to two millennia of Jewish preachment. In the case of intermarriage, there is also a subtler consequence. The fact is that Jewish men have consistently outpaced Jewish women as intermarriers. This means that Jewish women wishing to marry confront a shrinking pool of potential Jewish mates. The result in female behavior can be seen quite vividly in the figures gathered by the 2000-01 NJPS.

In the 1960's, when rates of intermarriage first began to take off, many more Jewish men than Jewish women married non-Jewish spouses; in the 1970's, Jewish women caught up with and overtook them. In the 1980's, the men spurted ahead again, and in the early 1990's they were again matched by women. We are now in the next spin of an upward spiral: intermarriage rates for Jewish men in the late 1990's once more exceeded the rates for Jewish women; before the end of this first decade of

the 21st century, as the pool of marriageable Jewish men shrinks still further, we can expect to see still another spike in the rate of intermarrying Jewish women.

Many of the rabbis who perform intermarriages claim to be ardent champions of women. To what are they contributing, however, and what are they abetting? In this area, too, there is no lack of testimony to the damaged lives of actual people. Jewish newspapers around the country have carried personal articles by women lamenting the paucity of Jewish men to marry. At public gatherings, women speak bitterly of being driven to look for non-Jewish mates, and of deciding to do so as long as they have some assurance that their children can be raised as Jews. A small but growing number have taken the extraordinary step of bearing children through artificial insemination, and reportedly some, in the name of Jewish continuity, have contemplated asking the organized community to support their choice financially.

The working assumption of Jewish officialdom seems to be that the acceptance and encouragement of every kind of "family arrangement" will insure that Jewish life will thrive. This is not only a gross distortion of Judaism, it is palpably false. Under the banner of unconditioned equality, the needs of the affiliated are ignored, and the overall Jewish population continues to contract.

But—one can imagine the scoffing reply—can anyone seriously believe that contrary declarations by rabbis or communal leaders would have any salutary impact on behavior? By refusing to officiate at intermarriages, would rabbis reduce the incidence of such marriages in the slightest? If Jewish organizations undertook actively to encourage young Jews to marry and raise children, would anyone pay attention?

This line of thinking is the necessary counterpart to the mantra of inclusiveness, and now passes for realism in much of the Jewish organizational world. If nothing else, however, the exceptionalism of Orthodox Jews suggests what is wrong with it. Beliefs, communal norms, and expectations do in fact play a powerful role in shaping behavior—not overnight, but over time. The pro-natalism of the Orthodox community was a policy deliberately nurtured over the decades through an educational system, through countless sermons and homilies by Orthodox rabbis, and through inculcating in generations of young Jews the positive value of standing apart from those "contemporary secular norms" to which the authors of the "Statement on Human Sexuality" appeal for validation.

In the face of today's secular norms, the Orthodox call on an additional source of strength: the power of *Jewish* norms and obligations. Until other sectors of the community are prepared to speak boldly and forthrightly about Judaism's truly countercultural ideas, they will continue to lose larger and larger numbers of the next generation, and to face a smaller and smaller future.