

# Demographic

---

## Counting Jewish Populations: Methods and Problems

**T**HE COUNTING OF JEWISH populations has been reported since the time of the Exodus from Egypt. From the very outset, the question of method has been almost as significant as the question of substance. Not only how many Jews are there, but how is the number determined? Who should be counted? Should all Jews be counted or only men of war or only taxpayers? What of those who, though not themselves Jewish, are part of Jewish households? What of those who once were Jewish (and remain so by Jewish law) but who have since renounced their Jewishness through conversion or simple drift away from the community? The question of counts presupposes that we know "who is a Jew," but that question is bedeviling elements of the Jewish community at this very time. There is, too, the matter of how to conduct the count. Shall we count individuals or households? And what kinds of information are available—at what cost in dollars and effort and with what degree of accuracy?

For the United States, the only Jewish population number of which we can be certain is that of the 23 Jewish refugees from the Inquisition who landed in New Amsterdam (New York) in 1654. For more than two centuries after that we have only speculation as to the number of Jews in the United States as a whole and in particular cities. The first set of estimates to which scholars have given serious credence is that published by the Board of Delegates of American Israelites and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1880.<sup>1</sup> Fortuitously, since the 1880 estimates came right at the beginning of the mass migration from Eastern Europe, particularly Russia, they provide a fixed point that was found useful for making later estimates.

For much of this century, Jewish population estimates were often speculative. Using one or another ingenious method, sometimes with great sophistication,

---

<sup>1</sup>Board of Delegates of American Israelites and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, *Statistics of the Jews of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1880), cited in Stephen G. Mostov, "Migration Patterns of America's German Jews," in U.O. Schmelz, P. Glikson, and S. DellaPergola, *Papers in Jewish Demography 1981* (Jerusalem, 1983).

sometimes with incredible naiveté, estimates of major centers were arrived at. In many of the smaller communities, the "estimate" was often merely the guess of a communal leader. For years certain entries remained the same simply because no one could be motivated to compute a new, perhaps more accurate, estimate. With a mixture of annoyance and relief, one scholar commented, "... not until 1948, following three decades of grossly exaggerated estimates, did a reasonable calculation of the American Jewish population gain acceptance."<sup>2</sup>

### *The U. S. and Other Censuses*

Jews as Jews have never been enumerated in the national decennial census. The decennial census has never had a religion question, and even the ethnic identity question on the 1980 census did not allow for a Jewish response. As far as the decennial census is concerned, therefore, Jews (and Protestants and Catholics) do not exist. While popular wisdom has it that the absence of a religion question reflects the constitutional ban on the establishment of religion, this notion is not supported either by judicial decision or legislation.<sup>3</sup>

The absence of good official statistics, necessitating resort to various ingenious procedures, is attributable as much to Jewish concerns as it might be to fundamental church-state issues. For example, the recording of Jews as Jews at ports of entry, the official practice from 1899 through 1943, was decried by some of the very people and groups that engaged in Jewish population estimating and was not viewed happily by Jewish communal bodies and leaders.<sup>4</sup> The author of the Jewish population article in the first volume of the *American Jewish Year Book* described the enumeration of Jewish immigrants as "... a discrimination which has been properly condemned, but is held by the officials to be expedient."<sup>5</sup> Just a few years earlier, Jews in Germany correctly viewed the inclusion of a religion question in the census as the government's acquiescence to the demands of organized anti-Semitic groups.<sup>6</sup> During the hearings of the U.S. Immigration Commission (1907-1910), Jews actively opposed the enumeration of Jews as an ethnic group. They wanted to be counted as either of Jewish faith or of Russian or Polish (as appropriate) birth. Their sense of themselves as Jews was that they were members of a confessional

<sup>2</sup>Ira Rosenwaike, "The Utilization of Census Mother Tongue Data in American Jewish Population Analysis," *Jewish Social Studies* 33, nos. 2-3 (Apr.-July 1971): 156.

<sup>3</sup>Dorothy Good, "Questions on Religion in the United States Census," *Population Index* 25, no. 1 (Jan. 1959): 3-16.

<sup>4</sup>For a history and analysis of the issue, see Nathan Goldberg, "Forty-Five Years of Controversy: Should Jewish Immigrants Be Classified as Jews?" in Nathan Goldberg, Jacob Lestchinsky, and Max Weinreich, eds., *The Classification of Jewish Immigrants and Its Implications* (New York, 1945), 90-105.

<sup>5</sup>Abram S. Isaacs, "The Jews of the United States," *AJYB*, vol. 1, 1899-1900, 14-15.

<sup>6</sup>See Solomon Neumann, *Zur Statistik der Juden in Preussen von 1816 bis 1880* (Berlin, 1884), 6, cited in Jack Wertheimer, *Unwelcome Strangers: East European Jews in Imperial Germany* (New York, 1987), 32, 210 n.18.

community, like Protestants and Catholics. They denied that the Jews were a people or nation (particularly in exile), convinced that affirmation of Jewish peoplehood would threaten their status as members of the American nation.<sup>7</sup>

Once, in March of 1957, the Bureau of the Census did ask about religion on its monthly Current Population Survey, a sample survey rather than a full population enumeration. That 1957 estimate of Jewish population is extremely valuable in its own right and valuable too as an aid to other inquiries.<sup>8</sup> From 1850 through 1936, the federal government conducted a Census of Religious Bodies. Based on the reports of ecclesiastical officials rather than direct enumeration of the population, the Census of Religious Bodies reported the number of members or communicants a religious group had in various areas and in the nation as a whole. While this series cannot be used for developing precise estimates of Jewish population, it can be used to assess trends in Jewish population geography.<sup>9</sup>

State and local governments have conducted censuses as well, usually halfway between two decennial censuses. Less inhibited by church-state issues and also less constrained by demands for privacy, these nonfederal censuses have been valuable sources of information. Both the state of Iowa and Hamilton County, Ohio (Cincinnati), conducted censuses with a religion question in 1935. The manuscript censuses of the states of New York and Michigan have been made available to investigators. In these instances, Jewish households are identifiable through a variety of "markers," including name and national origin.<sup>10</sup>

Other nations with substantial Jewish populations do identify and enumerate Jews, in some instances as an ethnic group, in others as a religious group, and in the Canadian case, as both. Among these are the Soviet Union, Australia, New Zealand, and Switzerland.<sup>11</sup> The similarity of Canadian and American Jewish

---

<sup>7</sup>Charles A. Price, "Methods of Estimating the Size of Groups," in Stephan Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, 1980), 1041.

<sup>8</sup>Good, "Questions on Religion."

<sup>9</sup>Uriah Zvi Engelman, "Jewish Statistics in the U.S. Census of Religious Bodies (1850-1936)," *Jewish Social Studies* 9, no.2 (Apr. 1947): 127-74.

<sup>10</sup>For use of the New York State manuscript census as an aid in reconstructing Jewish household structure and economic role in comparative perspective, see Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York, 1976), 521-30; for use of the 1925 New York State census in the course of a New York City Jewish population estimate, see Samuel A. Goldsmith, *Jewish Communal Survey of Greater New York; First Section: Studies in the New York Population* (New York, 1928), 13-19. The Jewish responses to the 1935 Iowa State census may be found in Rosenwaik, "Utilization of Census Mother Tongue Data": 141-59; on the Hamilton County Jewish responses, see Ira Rosenwaik, "The Utilization of Census Tract Data in the Study of the American Jewish Population," *Jewish Social Studies* 35, no.1 (Jan. 1963): 42-56.

<sup>11</sup>For a useful discussion of Jewish populations as represented in recent official censuses, see Ivor I. Millman, "Data on Diaspora Jewish Populations from Official Censuses," in U. O. Schmelz, P. Glikson, and S. J. Gould, *Studies in Jewish Demography Survey for 1972-1980* (New York, 1983), 33-120.

populations makes the Canadian census particularly valuable to the student of American Jewry. Among other reasons, it sheds light on discrepancies between ethnic and religious modes of Jewish identification. For example, in the 1971 Canadian census, among those reported as Jews by ethnicity were 7,825 Protestants and 3,340 Roman Catholics.<sup>12</sup> In part this is likely to occur by way of the census practice of ascribing ethnic identity through the paternal line, while Jewish tradition ascribes Jewish identity through the maternal line. In all, the 1971 Canadian census found 7 percent more people identified as being Jewish by ethnicity than were found by religion. Since the American Jewish community experiences many of the same social processes as the Jewish community of Canada, the availability of Canadian census data compensates in part for its absence in the United States.<sup>13</sup>

### *Census Proxy Indicators*

On the American decennial census, through the census of 1980, three questions have been of special interest for the study of ethnic populations generally and Jewish populations particularly. These are race (white, black, other), country of origin, and mother tongue. Each of these questions entered the census schedule in response to a political concern and serves as a full or partial proxy for the identification and enumeration of Jewish populations. (By proxy we mean an accessible and valid substitute indicator. Thus, while Jews as such are not found in the census, any attribute enumerated in the census that is largely or uniquely held by Jews can be used as a substitute.)

#### RACE

The question of race was asked in the first American census in 1790 so that blacks might be enumerated for the population base required for representation in the House of Representatives. This is what led to the "three-fifths of a man" compromise in the U. S. Constitution. Since Jews are overwhelmingly white, the student of Jewish population can take into account broader ethnic succession from white to black as a context for studying Jews. For example, one study was based on the assumption that Jews were a stable proportion of the white non-Hispanic population of New York City. An estimate of the Jewish population of the city for 1970 was computed using the Jewish percentage as of 1957 and the number of white non-Hispanics as of 1970. While estimates on the level of the tract and even the county

<sup>12</sup>J. A. Norland, "Canadian Jewish Population, 1971," *Canadian Jewish Population Studies* 3, no. 4 (1974): 2-3.

<sup>13</sup>Joseph Norland and H. Freedman, "Jewish Demographic Studies in the Context of the Census of Canada," in U. O. Schmelz, P. Glikson, and S. DellaPergola, *Papers in Jewish Demography 1973* (Jerusalem, 1977), 59-78; Louis Rosenberg, "Births, Deaths and Morbidity Among Jews in Montreal in 1950," *Jewish Social Studies* 15, no. 2 (Apr. 1953): 101-12.

were flawed, for the city as a whole the assumption was valid and the resulting estimate was within the correct range.<sup>14</sup>

#### COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

The question on country of origin was introduced in 1850 in response to the large wave of immigration from the German states and Ireland in the 1840s. America wanted to know where its new residents were coming from, where in the United States they were residing, and other facts about the new "foreign" population. Two decades later, when the children of the migrants of the 1840s were old enough to be counted as adults, the census broadened its questioning to include not only the country of origin of the non-American-born but the country of origin of the parents of the American-born whose parents were born abroad. The two generations, parents born abroad and their native-born children, were designated as "foreign stock."<sup>15</sup>

The use of the decennial census for Jewish population counts was introduced for the census of 1900 by Dr. Walter Laidlaw, founder of the New York Federation of Churches and a major figure behind the development of the census-tract system. Laidlaw's motive was practical. He wanted his and other religious bodies to be able to use the census as a planning tool for the delivery of religious-based services. He appealed "to the churches and synagogues not to allow the social and civic agencies to distance them in deriving and bestowing benefit through it [i.e., the census]."<sup>16</sup>

Laidlaw's workers interviewed thousands of households, determining both their religion and their country of origin. Based upon his interviews he estimated that 90 percent of persons from Russia were Jews, 70 percent from Austria were Jews, and so on. In principle, Laidlaw's method was sound. His error was in generalizing to a population other than that from which his sample of interviews was drawn. He did no interviewing in Brooklyn and Queens but generalized to the entire city, including those two boroughs. However, the relationship between country of origin and religion was not the same in the areas in which he interviewed as in the areas in which he did not interview. The result was that Laidlaw overestimated the Jewish population by over 20 percent for 1900 and 1910. In subsequent years, i.e., 1920 and 1930, Laidlaw's estimates became more credible as his methods improved and Jewish population became more evenly distributed across the city.<sup>17</sup>

The Russian-stock indicator has been a useful proxy for the study of Jewish population *characteristics* and *geography* but has been less useful for the study of

<sup>14</sup>Abraham C. Burstein, "Estimates of Jewish Population, New York City" (1974, mimeo), cited in Jack Diamond, "A Demography of the Jews of New York City: A Preliminary Survey" (American Jewish Committee, Aug. 1976, typescript), 8.

<sup>15</sup>Price, "Methods of Estimating the Size of Groups," 1033-44.

<sup>16</sup>Rosenwaiké, "Utilization of Census Tract Data": 43.

<sup>17</sup>Ira Rosenwaiké, *Population History of New York City* (Syracuse, 1972), 122-25.

Jewish population *size*, primarily because it neglects Jews of Poland, Hungary, Rumania, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. However, since the socioeconomic characteristics of Russian Jews at the time of the great migration were largely the same as those of other East European Jews, studies of educational and occupational attainment and of population segregation and centralization based upon census data have usually understood Russian to mean Jewish.<sup>18</sup> More recently the country-of-origin question has become useful in the study of the new Soviet Jewish immigration to the United States as well as for the study of Israeli immigrants.<sup>19</sup>

#### MOTHER TONGUE

By the beginning of the twentieth century, need was felt to supplement the country-of-origin question with one that would identify more precisely the ethnicity of immigrants from southern and Eastern Europe, particularly those from multiethnic areas like the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. The mother-tongue question, then, was introduced into the census in 1910 to develop a more refined picture of the population.<sup>20</sup>

The mother-tongue question has proved to be more useful than country of origin in computing Jewish population numbers. While the wording of the language question has changed from one decade to the next, it can be assumed safely that all those who report Yiddish facility, childhood memory, or use in their parental households are themselves Jews.<sup>21</sup> In 1910, the first year of its use, 1,676,762 persons (both native and foreign-born), an estimated 82 percent of American Jewry, reported Yiddish as their mother tongue.<sup>22</sup> In 1970, two generations later, 1,600,000 persons reported at least some familiarity with Yiddish. While the more recent number constitutes a much smaller segment (approximately 27 percent) of the American Jewish population, it is still substantial.<sup>23</sup> The Yiddish-language census sample has

<sup>18</sup>Erich Rosenthal, "The Equivalence of United States Census Data for Persons of Russian Stock or Descent with American Jews: An Evaluation," *Demography* 12, no. 3 (May 1975): 275-90; Nathan Kantrowitz, *Ethnic and Racial Segregation in New York City* (New York, 1973), see particularly 31. For a historical perspective, see Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians* (Cambridge, 1973), 111-75.

<sup>19</sup>Paul Ritterband, "Israelis in New York," *Contemporary Jewry* 7 (1986): 113-26.

<sup>20</sup>Price, "Methods of Estimating the Size of Groups," 1033-44.

<sup>21</sup>The language question was included in every census from 1910 through 1980, with the exception of 1950. Unfortunately, the wording of the question and the definition of the responding population were not consistent over the 70-year period.

<sup>22</sup>Joseph Jacobs, "Jewish Population of the United States," *AJYB*, vol. 16, 1914-1915, 339.

<sup>23</sup>The comparability of the U.S. Census Yiddish mother-tongue population and the 1971 National Jewish Population Study Yiddish-competent population has been established in Frances E. Kobrin, "National Data on American Jewry, 1970-71; A Comparative Evaluation of the Census Yiddish Mother Tongue Subpopulation and the National Jewish Population Study," in U.O. Schmelz, P. Glikson, and S. DellaPergola, eds., *Papers in Jewish Demography 1981* (Jerusalem, 1983), 129-43.

been used to estimate local Jewish population size, Jewish economic activity, and Jewish fertility.<sup>24</sup> In one of its earliest uses, by virtue of establishing a well-grounded minimum number, the Yiddish-language statistic was able to show that a 1910 estimate of Jewish population was too low.<sup>25</sup> More recently, for a 1970 estimate, a ratio was computed based on Jewish population as estimated in the 1957 Current Population Survey and the number of Yiddish mother-tongue respondents in 1970. Using this ratio, the number of Jews and their geographic distribution was successfully calculated for several metropolitan areas.<sup>26</sup>

### *Noncensus Proxy Indicators*

The basic logic has been established. Where the number of Jews is not known from the census, either one develops an estimate through a proxy indicator (e.g., mother tongue), or, as we will describe in the next section, one conducts a community survey, or both. In this section we discuss another method, the use of noncensus proxies. The three that are commonly used are death rates, Yom Kippur absences, and distinctive Jewish names.

#### DEATH RATE

The death-rate method is premised on two assumptions: first, that Jewish deaths can be identified unequivocally, and second, that a Jewish death rate can be established. The first of these turns out to be simple. In study after study, from the beginning of this century to this decade, investigators have reported that death certificates supply as a matter of course the name of the decedent along with country of birth, the funeral home, and the cemetery of internment. Each of these entries is an indicator of Jewishness. One finds very few misclassifications in the direction of over- or underestimating the number of Jewish deaths.

<sup>24</sup>Barry Chiswick, "The Labor Market Status of American Jews: Patterns and Determinants," *AJYB*, vol. 85, 1985, 131–53; Ronald K. Watts, "Jewish Fertility Trends and Differentials: An Examination of the Evidence from the Census of 1970," *Jewish Social Studies* 40, nos. 3, 4 (1980): 293–312.

<sup>25</sup>Joseph Jacobs, "The Jewish Population of New York," *American Hebrew* 90, no. 13 (Jan. 26, 1912); Henry Chalmers, "The Number of Jews in New York City," *Publications of the American Statistical Association*, 14, 1914–15 (1916): 74. In this instance the Jacobs estimate was significantly off. It is the case, however, that in retrospect he was a major pioneer in the development of Jewish population statistics in the United States, publishing his results in this yearbook and various journals. An accomplished medieval historian, Jacobs first attempted these methods in London, where he was employed by the Board of Deputies of British Jews as secretary of the Russo-Jewish Committee and edited the *British Jewish Year Book*. His estimates, even when wrong, are not rank speculation but are based on thoughtful method. Jacobs tried to extend the death-rate method (described in the next section) by securing mortality statistics from various part of the country. Unfortunately, the effort was not successful.

<sup>26</sup>Ira Rosenwaike, "Estimating Jewish Population Distribution in U.S. Metropolitan Areas in 1970," *Jewish Social Studies* 36, no. 2 (1974): 106–17.

The first death-rate study of which we are aware is one of Parisian Jewry for 1780, published in 1878. The first contemporary death-rate study we know of was conducted in turn-of-the-century Baltimore and was immediately followed by studies in New York, London, Chicago, Detroit, and elsewhere in the United States and abroad, ultimately developing into one of the basic methods of Jewish population estimation.<sup>27</sup> The Baltimore study laid out the issues clearly.<sup>28</sup> To calculate the number of Jews, the number of Jewish deaths (326 in this instance) was divided by the death rate. As a first approximation, the Baltimore white death rate was used (18 per thousand), yielding an estimated Jewish population of 18,000, i.e.,  $326/.018 = 18,111$ , rounded to 18,000. The problem is that while we have confidence in the number of Jewish deaths, the same is not true of the death rate. The Baltimore study and all studies that followed it recognize that the Jewish death rate cannot be assumed to be the same as the local white death rate. On the contrary, because of differences in age structure, the sex ratio, immigration status, socioeconomic conditions, and life-style associated with being Jewish, Jewish death rates are very much unlike those of the populations among whom Jews live. This was as true in late czarist Russia as in contemporary Providence, Rhode Island.<sup>29</sup>

As is clear from the algorithm, the lower the death rate, the larger the population that is computed. Similarly, if the death rate employed is an overestimate, the result will be an underestimate of the Jewish population. In the instance at hand, the death rate was too high, thus producing an underestimate of the number of Jews in Baltimore. The investigator, George Barnett, proceeded to divide the Baltimore Jewish population into two major elements, the well-established German Jews and the recent Polish and Russian immigrants. Through a sophisticated use of late nineteenth-century census-collected Jewish vital statistics, along with vital statistics of Jews in Germany (analyzed and published by Arthur Ruppin), Barnett computed a death rate and then a size estimate for the German Jewish population. For the East European Jews, Barnett computed a death rate for census-identified Russians,

---

<sup>27</sup>Isidore Loeb, *Biographie d'Albert Cohen* (Paris, 1878), 27, cited in Zosa Szajkowski, "The Growth of the Jewish Population of France," *Jewish Social Studies* 8, no. 3 (July 1946): 179-96; George E. Barnett, "The Jewish Population of Maryland," *AJYB*, vol. 4, 1902-1903, 46-62; Joseph Jacobs, "The Jewish Population of New York," *The Jewish World*, Aug. 17, 1902: 8; S. Rosenbaum, "A Contribution to the Study of Vital and Other Statistics of the Jews in the United Kingdom," *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 68 (1905): 526-56, cited in Steven Haberman, Barry A. Kosmin, and Caren Levy, "Mortality Patterns of British Jews 1975-79: Insights and Applications for the Size and Structure of British Jewry," *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 146, no. 3 (1983): 294-310. For references to other American studies, see below.

<sup>28</sup>Interestingly enough, the impetus for carrying out a death-rate study in Maryland came not from a social scientist or statistician but from a rabbi in a small town in the state. The actual work of combing through the death records and establishing the basic facts was done by Henrietta Szold, secretary of the Jewish Publication Society and an editor of the *AJYB*, who later became the founder of Hadassah and Youth Aliyah.

<sup>29</sup>Alice Goldstein, "Patterns of Mortality and Causes of Death Among Rhode Island Jews, 1979-1981," *Social Biology* 33, nos. 1-2 (1987): 87-101.



whom he assumed to be Jews (see above), borrowing his data from New York. He then had the number of deaths, the death rates, and the population size of the major elements in the Jewish community and was able to compute a total Jewish community size of 25,000 persons, well above the estimate computed using the white death rate.<sup>30</sup>

In the 1902 New York study conducted by Joseph Jacobs, the number of Jewish deaths was collected as it was in Baltimore.<sup>31</sup> The Jewish death rate was taken areally; that is, the death rate was computed for specific wards known to be populated overwhelmingly by immigrant Jews. It was then reasoned that since the living conditions in these wards were such as to lower life expectancy, the overall death rate had to be adjusted downward to compensate. To check his results, Jacobs examined data on Jewish immigration to New York, natural increase (the surplus of births over deaths), and marriage rates and found that the estimates from death rates were consistent with those from marriages and natural increase.

Over time, the death-rate method became increasingly sophisticated. The Detroit study computed and published several population estimates (for 1940) using different death rates. The results based on death rates of Detroit Jewish tracts and upper-income tracts (in which Jews and non-Jews lived) and constructed Canadian Jewish death rates were extraordinarily close. By contrast, the use of general white Detroit or Canadian death rates resulted in much lower population estimates (on the order of one-third lower).<sup>32</sup>

The Chicago study for 1930 also computed population estimates using more than one set of death rates—in this instance one based on known Jewish tracts and the other on white middle-class tracts. The results of the two sets of calculations differed by approximately 7 percent, a small number but large enough to make the investigator check the outcome. Abram Jaffe examined the internal demographic characteristics of each group and concluded that despite socioeconomic similarities, the Jewish death rate was in fact different and produced more plausible results.<sup>33</sup>

#### YOM KIPPUR-ABSENCE METHOD

The logic of the proxy procedure as laid out in the discussion of the death-rate and other proxy methods is the same. One counts the proxy indicator, computes the proportion of the larger population which members of the proxy population represent (the appropriate rate), and then computes a ratio of the two. In the case at hand, that means counting the number of pupils absent on Yom Kippur and then dividing

<sup>30</sup>Barnett, "Jewish Population of Maryland."

<sup>31</sup>Jacobs, "Jewish Population of New York."

<sup>32</sup>S. Joseph Fauman and Albert J. Mayer, "Estimation of Jewish Population by the Death Rate Method," *Jewish Social Studies* 18, no. 4 (Oct. 1955): 315–22. "Constructed" rates are calculated from life tables rather than from direct observation of mortality.

<sup>33</sup>Abram Jaffe, "A Study of Chicago Jewry (1930) Based on Death Certificates," in Sophia M. Robison, *Jewish Population Studies* (New York, 1943), 131–51. See particularly 146.

that number by the proportion of the Jewish population eligible for inclusion among the absentees, i.e., the Jewish school population. The major advantage of the Yom Kippur method over the death-rate method is that school records are kept centrally. The investigator does not have to go through the arduous task of reading, classifying, and coding thousands of records. Perhaps it was its simplicity that encouraged early investigators to employ the method in London in 1892 and in Philadelphia in 1904.<sup>34</sup>

As with the death-rate method, the Yom Kippur method stands on the investigator's ability to secure accurate counts, in this case, of Yom Kippur absences, and to know what percentage of the Jewish population is in school. The latter is usually represented by the proportion of the Jewish population that is of primary-school attending age.<sup>35</sup> The ratio of the two gives the estimate of the number of Jews in the community. Various objections have been expressed about this method. For one, in schools that are largely Jewish, non-Jewish pupils also absent themselves on the holy day. Investigators using the method respond that where Jews are a small minority, parents may well send their children to school on Yom Kippur, so that the resulting underestimate balances out the overestimate. To determine if his Yom Kippur-absence count was accurate, one early researcher supplemented that number with an actual count of Jewish pupils, identified by name, in the central school records, concluding that the results ". . . are in close agreement."<sup>36</sup>

A second major source of error is the misestimation of the Jewish age distribution. Studies conducted in Pittsburgh and Minneapolis comparing the Yom Kippur method with other procedures conclude that the Yom Kippur method undercounts Jews. Closer examination reveals that the undercounts result from not adequately taking into account lower Jewish fertility, which leads to both a smaller proportion of Jews in the school-age cohort and smaller household size.<sup>37</sup> What this error demonstrates is that the various parameters used in calculating population by means of proxies cannot be taken mechanically from either prior studies or general census populations. Jews have had distinctive birthrates and death rates, and therefore age structures, through most of this century. With the wrong initiating figures, the outcomes will inevitably be wrong.

---

<sup>34</sup>C. Morris Horowitz and Lawrence J. Kaplan, "The Jewish Population of the New York Area" (New York, 1959, mimeo), 85. See, too, Charles Seligman Bernheimer, *The Russian Jew in the United States* (Philadelphia, 1905).

<sup>35</sup>In at least one instance the local school system is reported to have recorded pupils' religion, making it unnecessary to gather Yom Kippur absence statistics. See Maurice Taylor, "A Sample Study of the Jewish Population of Pittsburgh, 1938," in Robison, *Jewish Population Studies*, 81-108. See particularly 88.

<sup>36</sup>Alexander M. Dushkin, "A Statistical Study of the Jewish Population of New York," in *The Jewish Communal Register of New York City, 1917-1918* (1918), 75-88. See particularly 78-80.

<sup>37</sup>Taylor, "Sample Study of Jewish Population of Pittsburgh"; Sophia M. Robison, "The Jewish Population of Minneapolis, 1936," in Robison, *Jewish Population Studies*, 152-59. See particularly 155-56.

## THE DISTINCTIVE JEWISH NAME METHOD

While what has been called the Distinctive Jewish Name (DJN) method is usually associated with the work of Samuel C. Kohs during the 1940s, we can trace its use in the United States at least as far back as 1912 to the work of Joseph Jacobs in New York.<sup>38</sup> Jacobs, calling the procedure the " 'Cohen' method," realized that Jews had a name distribution unlike that of non-Jews. Thus, names could serve as proxies for Jews in the same way as deaths, Russian origin, Yiddish language, Yom Kippur absence, and the like. The procedure, reduced to its simplest terms, is the same: determine the proportion of Jews who bear distinctive Jewish names (from a source such as a synagogue membership list or list of Federation donors). In a general population source that includes Jews and non-Jews (such as a city directory or telephone book) count the number of DJN entries. Knowing what proportion of Jews have DJNs, using simple division, compute an estimate of the total number of Jews in that source. Problems with this method arise from biases in the lists and sources that are not known or accounted for, such as unlisted telephones. Jacobs, for example, underestimated the Jewish population using the " 'Cohen' method." In computing the proportion of Jews who bore distinctive Jewish names, he inadvertently constructed a list of distinctive German Jewish names. His source was the contributors' roster of the predominantly German Jewish United Hebrew Charities, a list that underrepresented the large and increasing population of Russian Jews. When corrected for this bias, the " 'Cohen' method" did give a reasonable estimate of the Jewish population, approximating that produced by the death-rate method.

There is a special irony in the use of distinctive names to identify and enumerate Jews. When the 1924 National Origins Act was being put into force, the law mandated that the manuscript censuses from 1790 through 1890 be searched, the names collected and classified by ethnicity, and calculations made of mortality and fertility, to determine the ethnic composition of the American population as of 1890. The purpose of this law, of course, was to exclude or minimize the number of "undesirables" from southern and Eastern Europe, including Jews, who had been entering the country. Be that all as it may, the name method has proven useful.<sup>39</sup>

More recently, debate has arisen over the accuracy of the method. One scholar noted that the DJN method grossly overestimated the number of Jews in the area he was studying. He used what he believed to be "standard" parameters, but the proportion of Jews bearing one of the names on his DJN list proved to be too small. Since this fraction is the denominator of the ratio, too small a fraction leads to too

<sup>38</sup>Jacobs, "Jewish Population of New York"; Fred Massaryk, "A Changing Era in U.S. Jewish Population Research: Multiple Research Strategies—Indexes and Heuristics," in Schmelz, Glikson, and DellaPergola, eds., *Papers in Jewish Demography 1981*, 105–27; Stanley Waterman and Barry Kosmin, "Mapping an Unenumerated Ethnic Population: Jews in London," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 19, no. 4 (1986): 484–501.

<sup>39</sup>William S. Bernard, "Immigration: History of U.S. Policy," in Thernstrom, *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, 486–95. See particularly 493.

large a population estimate. In actuality, the proportion of Jews bearing DJNs varies significantly by area of the country. Some of this may be due to the simple random variation one finds in any population or sample. The variation also reflects regional differences in treatment of immigrants at ports of entry, degrees of assimilation, and differences in national origins.<sup>40</sup> The general point to be made is that with all of the proxy measures, the investigator cannot assume an invariant relationship between his proxy indicator and the number of Jewish households or persons. The number of deaths per 1,000 Jewish population in a retirement area is different from that in a suburb populated by young families. The DJN method requires knowledge of the Jewish age structure and the Jewish name distribution. Each of these methods has proven to be extremely useful, but unless used conservatively can be misleading.

### *Sample Surveys*

#### JEWISH COMMUNAL AND GENERAL DATA COLLECTIONS

The various proxy methods are intriguing, at least in part because of their ingenuity, but it is this very ingenuity that makes some uncomfortable. Would it not be more accurate to go out and count Jews directly, the way the Bureau of the Census enumerates the population of the United States? The answer is yes, but! Since the Jews are a subpopulation, and one whose members are not identified as such by the U.S. Census, it has fallen to Jewish communal agencies to conduct their own counts. Again, the direct approach would be to visit every residence in town or call every phone in town to locate Jews. The number of Jews in the town would then equal the number of persons who say they are Jews along with the number of (Jewish?) people in their households. Unfortunately, this kind of total enumeration of individuals is too expensive to carry out.

Where the town and the Jewish community to be studied are both small, it is possible to make a master list of all known Jewish households and then, through personal contacts, to identify others who do not appear on the master list. In larger communities, however, those which contain the vast majority of America's Jews,

---

<sup>40</sup>Mark Abrahamson, "The Unreliability of DJN Techniques," *Contemporary Jewry* 7 (1986): 93-98; Bernard Lazerwitz, "Some Comments on the Use of Distinctive Jewish Names in Surveys," *ibid.*, 83-91. One must take great care in using the DJN technique to note the degree of acculturation of the local Jewish community and its "ethnic" mix. Recent Russian Jewish immigrants to the United States retain more Russified spellings of their names than do those who came to the United States at the turn of the century. Other Jewish ethnic groups have distinctive Jewish-name patterns that do not appear Jewish to the outsider but make sense to the insider. For Italian Jews, see Rosalba Davico, "Les isolats" Israélites en Piémont (XVIIIe-début XIXe s.): structure des familles et mémoire généalogique," in Schmelz, Glikson, and DellaPergola, *Papers in Jewish Demography 1981*, 61-70. For German Jews, see Rudolf Glanz, "German Jewish Names in America," *Jewish Social Studies* 23, no. 2 (Apr.1961): 143-69.

some form of population sampling must be employed. The main prerequisite of a sample is that it appropriately reflect the population it claims to represent. Thus, a sample drawn from lists of Jewish charitable contributors or synagogue members will not accurately represent the larger Jewish community in terms of demographic characteristics or social and religious attitudes and behaviors. (The oft-cited classic example of bad sampling is that of the *Literary Digest* in 1936. The magazine predicted that Franklin Roosevelt would lose the election, based on a sample drawn from phone books. This apparently biased the investigation in favor of those who could afford telephones—in the midst of the Depression—who were, presumably, more likely to be Republicans.)

Since drawing a Jewish sample is no simple matter, some investigators have found ways to avoid it. One method is to piggyback on a larger study of the total population. For example, the Gallup Organization, one of the major polling firms, introduced a routine question about religion on its interview schedules in 1939 and one on national origin in 1941. Using Gallup surveys aggregated over several years, one investigator developed a credible estimate of national Jewish population during the mid-1970s.<sup>41</sup> Aggregated sequences of the General Social Survey of the National Opinion Research Center offer another opportunity to study national Jewish population characteristics. Large-scale general surveys in New York City in 1935 and 1950 produced both stable and valid population estimates and data for describing and analyzing Jewish characteristics.<sup>42</sup> Local political polls can be used to estimate Jewish population and to serve as a check on other estimates.<sup>43</sup>

Where a sample is drawn, the investigator is subject to two opposing constraints. These are cost and representativeness. For a random sample—one in which every household has the same probability of being contacted—if Jews are 10 percent of the population, the investigator has to contact 100 households to reach 10 Jewish households. In areas where Jews are a smaller proportion of the population, the number of “screening contacts” would, of course, increase. Assuming Jews to be 2.5 percent of the American population, obtaining a random sample of 1,000 Jewish

---

<sup>41</sup>Alan M. Fisher, “The National Gallup Polls and American Jewish Demography,” *AJYB*, vol. 83, 1983, 111–26.

<sup>42</sup>Nettie Pauline McGill, “Some Characteristics of Jewish Youth in New York City,” *Jewish Social Service Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1937): 251–72; Neva R. Deardorf, “The Religio-Cultural Background of New York City’s Population,” *Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (Apr. 1955): 152–60; Ben B. Seligman, “The Jewish Population of New York City: 1952,” in Marshall Sklare, ed., *The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group* (Glencoe, Ill., 1960); Morey J. Wantman, Morton Israel, and Leonard S. Kogan, *Estimates of Population Characteristics New York City, 1964–65–66–68–70* (New York, 1972); Henry Cohen, “Jewish Population Trends in New York City, 1940–1970” (Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, Jan. 1956, typescript); Nathan Glazer, Herbert Hyman, and S.M. Lipset, “Characteristics of New York City Jews” (American Jewish Committee, Nov. 1952, typescript).

<sup>43</sup>Paul Ritterband and Steven M. Cohen, *The Jewish Population of Greater New York: A Population Profile* (New York, 1984), 77–78.

households across the United States would require contacting 40,000 American households—a costly procedure. To keep costs down, investigators find various ways of “enriching” the pool of households to be contacted so that Jews will be a larger proportion of the pool than in fact they are in the city or town at large. One way of doing this is to increase phone calls in telephone exchanges that have higher-than-average proportions of distinctive Jewish names, producing a “stratified” sample. Within these areas or phone exchanges, households are contacted randomly, giving a “stratified random” sample.

Some studies use a list sample along with a random sample. The list sample, consisting of members of synagogues, contributors to the local federation, and other Jewish communal lists, gives access to households at minimal cost. The list sample is supplemented by a random sample and the two are merged, with the list sample weighted down. That is, each case on the list sample is worth less statistically than one in the random sample. When properly weighted, the combined sample should *approximate* the results of a pure random sample, and at less cost. To estimate the Jewish population from a random sample, the investigator computes a ratio of all completed household calls in the denominator and completed calls to Jewish households in the numerator. This gives the proportion of all households in the area that are Jewish. The household figures are multiplied by average Jewish household size; Jewish population size is then estimated as a percentage of total population size.

Both the stratified sample and the list sample introduce bias in that not all Jews will have an equal probability of being interviewed. With appropriate statistical procedures, much of the bias can be handled. The investigator must decide how much bias or distortion the study can tolerate, a question for which there is no simple *a priori* answer. Precision is sought but is balanced against costs.

The sample survey is by far the most common mode of Jewish population estimation currently used. Though expensive, the survey collects information on a wide variety of issues in addition to population size. What are the characteristics of Jews who belong to synagogues? Who gives to the federation campaign and why? Who is intermarried and what is happening to the children? The number of questions asked is limited only by the imagination of the investigator, the patience of the respondent, and the budget of the sponsor. Interviews of 30 to 45 minutes are not uncommon.

In reviewing recent population studies using Jewish communal survey methods, the authors identified several problems that require additional discussion.

#### WHO IS A JEW?

The basic issue for this and other methods is determining who is a Jew. Studies done during the immigrant period had relatively little to worry about in this regard. There were few “patrilineal” Jews, few Jews who would not be buried as Jews, few intermarriages, few Jews who would not keep their children out of school on Yom

Kippur, few Jews for whom Jewish identity was not of primary salience. As acculturation took its course, the question of Jewish identity arose, not just as a religious or communal concern but as a practical research matter. The Pittsburgh study (data collected in 1938) explicitly stated:

A Jew was defined as one born of Jewish parents or of a mixed marriage. In addition, a gentile married to a Jew or related by marriage to a Jewish person in the same household and identifying with the Jewish group was included in the count. No one, born a Jew or not, who was unwilling to be so identified was included in the count. Children of mixed marriage not being brought up as Jews and not so considered by the parent or parents were likewise not counted.<sup>44</sup>

A recent study in Denver attempted to deal with some absurdities of self-definition by excluding persons who were

Jews for Jesus, individuals who have no Jewish parents or grandparents but who identify with the Jewish community, and children or grandchildren of intermarriage who do not currently identify as Jewish (these actually disqualified themselves). But including "Jewish Buddhists". . . who continue to identify as Jews.<sup>45</sup>

In these and other surveys a Jew is someone who thinks of him/herself as a Jew or is thought of as a Jew by the interviewed respondent, who is usually a head of household. Thus, persons who by traditional Jewish law are not regarded as Jews might well be counted as Jews, if they are married to Jews and identify with the Jewish people or are children of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother. Most investigators have accepted this definition or something like it for their own surveys. Some have gone one step further and have included in the Jewish population counts spouses and children who are not Jewish and show no "identification," however defined, with Jews or Judaism. The logic of this procedure leads to a paradox and an irony. Since one Jew is enough to make an entire household Jewish, the more intermarriage there is, the larger the Jewish population! In Great Britain, with its centralized religious structure (in emulation of the Church of England), the authorities have been able to legislate a single definition of a Jew. For purposes of enumeration, the Research Unit of the Jewish Board of Deputies defines Jews as ". . . those who are born of a Jewish mother or have been formally converted by an Orthodox or progressive (Reform or Liberal) Beth Din."<sup>46</sup>

Defining who is a Jew, which necessarily entails including or excluding individuals, is by no means a new problem. In his plan for Jewish territorial autonomy in Eastern Europe, Simon Dubnow, the great Russian Jewish historian, proposed that Jews who had been baptized could still be members of the Jewish people and be

<sup>44</sup>Taylor, "Sample Study of Jewish Population of Pittsburgh," 83.

<sup>45</sup>Bruce Phillips and Eleanor P. Judd, *The Denver Jewish Population Study 1981* (Allied Jewish Federation of Denver, 1982), vii.

<sup>46</sup>B. A. Kosmin, "Demography and Sampling Problems," in D. Bensimon, ed., *Communautés Juives (1880-1978), sources et méthodes de recherche* (Paris, 1978), 263.

counted as Jews if they so wished.<sup>47</sup> For some purposes, e.g., asserting its electoral strength, the community wants to cast the widest net possible. Thus, people are included who are Jews by some definitions and not others as well as individuals who are Jewish by no one's definition at all.

#### UNCOUNTED JEWS

The survey method is based on calling households and asking if there is anyone in the household who is Jewish. Usually, the caller identifies him/herself as someone who is associated with a university and calling on behalf of the local Jewish federation. A number of persons who are Jews do not respond affirmatively to the questioner. Some simply do not believe that the call is not for fund-raising purposes. Others do not want to be bothered, though they may well be committed Jews. Still others are uncommitted Jews who no longer wish to identify with the Jewish community, even to the point of responding to questions on the phone. Studies have determined that 4 to 5 percent of Jews who are affiliated with the Jewish community refuse to acknowledge being Jewish when called in a Jewish community survey.<sup>48</sup>

One researcher reports that, in his experience, Jews are more active outside the home than non-Jews and are therefore more difficult to reach by phone. While this is probably not a major source of undercount, it is a source nevertheless.<sup>49</sup>

Since Jewish communal surveys are surveys of households, they almost always miss institutional populations of particular interest to the Jewish community, namely, students in dormitories and residents of nursing homes and geriatric facilities. (We estimate from various national sources that about 1.5 percent of the American population is in geriatric/nursing facilities.) Since only some residents of institutions have individual telephone lines and are accessible to Jewish community surveys, various characteristics of these people as well as their numbers are missing from many surveys. Some studies, but not all, use the Bureau of Census definition of households, excluding from enumeration dependent members of the household who are living elsewhere in student housing.

#### *Improving Methodology*

It is amply clear that we do not know with exactitude the number of Jews in the United States as a whole, not even in any given state, city, town, or village—not for lack of trying on the part of either the researchers or the communal lay leadership

---

<sup>47</sup>Reported in Robert M. Seltzer, "Jewish Liberalism in Late Tzarist Russia," *Contemporary Jewry* 9, no.1 (1988): 57.

<sup>48</sup>Michael Rapoport and Gary A. Tobin, *A Population Study of the Jewish Community of Metro West* (East Orange, N.J., 1987), 12; Gary A. Tobin, *Jewish Population of Greater Baltimore* (Baltimore, 1986), 29.

<sup>49</sup>Ira Sheskin, *The Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County Demographic Study* (1987), 15.



but simply because the issues are complex and uncertainty is built into the research process. One procedure that might lead to greater precision in estimates is triangulation, i.e., the use of multiple methods. Many of the studies we cited, particularly those up to the 1940s, used multiple methods. They compared results achieved by methods that were independent of one another. At times these methods gave significantly discrepant results. One scholar noted that discrepancies arose, not because of the methods but because of the ways in which Jews thought of themselves.

Many who would admit being Jewish when so questioned would keep their children out of school on the holidays and would bury their dead according to Jewish ritual. Some, however, might send their children to school on the holidays and retain only the Jewish burial ceremony. On the other hand, some persons, although buried as Jews, might not have admitted being Jewish if questioned during their lifetime. Thus it is that three somewhat different populations would be arrived at according to three somewhat different definitions.<sup>50</sup>

A multimethod procedure built into a study design from the beginning does not add significantly to the cost but does add significantly to the quality of the estimates. Some of these "second opinions" are free for the asking, such as the use of general surveys that have large enough sample sizes to warrant their use in Jewish population estimation. The early Chicago study that we cited above examined discrepant results by comparing age and sex distributions generated by two different assumptions. This procedure could easily be adopted by other investigators irrespective of method. Social facts uncovered by the survey can be compared with external sources that are well documented. While these will vary by community, they may include the number of recent Soviet immigrants, the number of Israeli-born, the number of pupils enrolled in Jewish day schools, and other relevant data. It is up to the local community to choose its "validators," but they do exist.

The "time series" is one of the most interesting and useful sources of validation. Where there is a good estimate at one point in time and an independent estimate made at a second point in time, a test estimate can be constructed for the second point by using the estimate for time one, the volume of in- and outmigration between the two points, and the number of births and deaths. The federal government's record of Jewish immigrants into the United States between 1899 and 1943 and other sources are available for domestic Jewish migration, as are sources for birth and death rates.<sup>51</sup>

There is not even the hint of a possibility that the U.S. government will include a religion question in the 1990 census. The Yiddish-language and Russian-origin items will clearly be of less use in the 1990 census than they were in the past. Some

---

<sup>50</sup>A.J. Jaffe, "The Use of Death Records to Determine Jewish Population Characteristics," *Jewish Social Studies* 1, no. 2 (Apr. 1939): 144.

<sup>51</sup>For a superb use of the immigration data for describing and analyzing American Jewish population, see Simon Kuznets, "Immigration to the United States: Background and Structure," *Perspectives in American History* 9 (1975): 35-124.

of our other proxies are also becoming a bit worn about the edges. In light of these facts, the community's obligation to create and maintain good population records is all the greater.

PAUL RITTERBAND  
BARRY A. KOSMIN  
JEFFREY SCHECKNER