

Nitzotzot Min HaNer

THE JEWISHNESS OF AMERICAN JEWRY

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Introduction

This is the third and last in our series on Jewish Demography. In our October edition, we summarized the overall profile of the American Jewish community. In this edition we look specifically at the Jewishness of American Jewry.

The demographic figures paint a disturbing picture. In 1937, Jews comprised 4% of the U.S. population. Today they are less than 2%. On the other hand, communal life is vibrant and growing. Focusing on the development of Jewish day schools, yeshivas and the like, one could easily present a very rosy picture of USA Jewry today. In fact, both pictures of gloom and vibrancy are true. The Torah world has gotten much stronger, and at the same time, enormous numbers of Jews are getting lost altogether.

Even in the non-Orthodox world, this kind of duality has emerged. In an interview with the NY Times, Alan Dershowitz¹, a Harvard law professor and author of "The

¹ In the late 1990's Harvard law professor, Alan Dershowitz, and former Assistant Secretary of State, Elliott Abrams, (now just appointed Bush's special envoy to the Middle East) both wrote widely read books on the crisis facing American Jews. Mr. Abrams's book was titled "Faith or Fear" and Mr. Dershowitz's "The



Vanishing American Jew”¹, stated, "There's an incredible renaissance of Jewish culture going on for some, and at the other extreme there's increasing assimilation, withdrawal and intermarriage.... What this means is that the Jewish community, which used to be a continuum of involvement, has become a dichotomy. More and more people are more active than ever before in things Jewish and more are also vanishing.”

It is harder and harder to remain a traditional Jew. In America, any level of Jewishness less than full Torah observance is becoming increasingly untenable. There once existed a notion that intermarriage was the “bottom rung.” If a person was keeping aspects of *kashrut*, candle lighting, etc, they surely would not intermarry. But this is no longer the case. Increasingly, people are intermarrying (without the intention of the spouse converting later) thinking that they are not sacrificing their Jewishness or their Judaism thereby. We hear statements like, ‘But he (she) respects my Jewishness,’ ‘Of course we are going to bring the children up Jewish’ and ‘We invited him to the Seder and he seemed so Jewish. He was more interested than our Jewish neighbors in what was going on.’ Both males (remember patrilineal descent!) and females extend this logic to their children as well.

Intermarriage is not the only serious challenge to American Jewish life today. Cohen and Eisen² express even more concern over the decline of Jewish community institutions. They point out that at least since the Babylonian exile, Jews have established communal organizations that “not only preserved Judaism, but helped constitute its very essence.”

In their search for individual meaning, this generation assigns much less importance to the organizational life of the Jewish community. The bonds that were once taken for granted to hold American Jews together—membership in Jewish organizations, shared feelings about the Holocaust, and most of all, identification with Israel—have all weakened. Instead, there is “the sovereign self.” Jewish community organizations seem “remote and irrelevant” to 40% of the respondents. Almost no one had anything good to say about the federations or other Jewish organizations. Only the synagogue elicited a positive response, with 38% saying they felt either “extremely attached” or “very attached” to a synagogue. The synagogue provides the “spiritual” side of things, a place for reflection, and a study center.

Jews are intermarrying – not “making it” as Jews – because they have been “making it” as Americans. But the implications of “making it” should not be viewed in individual

Vanishing American Jew." Mr. Dershowitz, who has an intermarried child and who belongs to the post-denominational synagogue, argued that secular Judaism, bolstered by a strong educational basis in Jewish texts, was the solution to the issue of "the vanishing American Jew." Mr. Abrams suggested that only a return to traditional Judaism would stave off doom. However, both writers agreed that two opposing trends are at work in Jewish life right now.

¹ In his book, *The Vanishing American Jew*, Alan Dershowitz suggested that the solution to Jewish continuity was, “learning, learning, learning.” He expressed the idea that the goal of those who wish to keep Judaism alive should be greater Jewish literacy, or in his words, to “fill the Yiddesher cup” with Jewish knowledge. From the study of the Bible to Maimonides, to the study of Ahad Ha’am to Heschel, studying the vast library of Jewish knowledge completely for its own sake, he felt, would connect Jews to Judaism. Dershowitz, no friend of Orthodoxy, specified that this “learning for the sake of learning,” was not to be “a means toward returning to God.” Dershowitz married this proposal to a series of seemingly unrealistic initiatives including “open Jewish Schools” modeled after those run by the Quakers and an international conference on the Jewish state of mind. Although he admits that secularism has failed us, he nonetheless defends it, and hopes that it will save us now.

² Steven Cohen (Hebrew University) and Arnold Eisen (Stanford University) in a 2001 study focusing on “moderately affiliated” Jews.



terms alone. As Nathan Diament¹ put it, over the past fifty years, much of the American Jewish establishment has defined Jewish survival in fairly simple terms: fighting the scourge of anti-Semitism and the socio-political conditions perceived to foster it. Thus, the strategy pursued by leading Jewish organizations has been to fight in the courts and the legislatures for a high "wall of separation" between church and the lowering of any barriers to the access and equality of opportunity for Jewish individuals in our society. While pursuing these goals single-mindedly, the establishment overlooked the fact that embracing secularism came at the expense of the most salient feature of the Jewish people -- the Jewish religion. Nonetheless, the perception of success -- through Jews being admitted and welcomed to Ivy League colleges, Wall Street firms and high government posts -- lulled the community into not only a sense of security, but a sense of victory -- Jews had "made it" in America. No longer would anti-Semitism prevent Jews from disappearing into the surrounding culture!

“We may be experiencing something unique in Jewish history—what I call the ‘post-persecution era’ of Jewish life—where we can’t count on *tsuris* (grief), on external persecutions, and on people hating us to death, to keep us together. The world loves us to death. And we don’t have the answers².”

For the first time in history, Jewish civilization is a voluntary one.

Other factors are at work too. Professor Henry Feingold, a Jewish historian, says that in America today, unlike in pre-war Europe, there is no secular “Jewish” net to catch those disaffected by Judaism.

There used to be a way of clearly being a secular Jew. The Yiddishists were a good example of this. In fact, most secular Jews of that period did *not* eat pork, and went to Orthodox shuls on the holidays. There was no Conservative, Reform or Reconstructionist. For them it was Orthodox or nothing. It was a question of their thinking—if they doubted or were skeptics. But they still participated in Jewish communal events because Judaism was perceived as a way of life. Today, the lack of anti-Semitism means that Jews feel completely accepted into American society as Americans, not as Jews. Alan Dershowitz tells of his thanking former President Clinton for appointing two Jews to the Supreme Court, only to discover that it was not part of Clinton’s consciousness that Breyer and Ginsburg were both Jewish. They were just good judges. In the old days there was a Jewish seat. Jewish judges were clearly identified as Jews and appointed as Jews to the Supreme court.

Thus Michael Lerner can publish a Jewish magazine with a large Jewish audience of people who generally would prefer not to be Jews, and want to have an excuse for bashing Jews. His magazine has been more unfair to Israel than any non-Jewish magazine in America, and has legitimized Israel- and Jew-bashing.

The story in 1990

The CJF³ 1990 Jewish National Population Study and the United Jewish Appeal Federation 1991 New York Jewish Population Study showed the following:

¹ Director, Institute for Public Affairs – Union of Orthodox Jewish congregations of America as quoted on Jlaw.com

² Alan Dershowitz

³ Now known as the UJC – United Jewish Communities.



1. Nearly one out of every 5 people of Jewish lineage (1,325,000) is following another religion. Of those remaining, 1 out of 5 (1,120,000) claims no religion.
2. Less than half of all children of Jewish lineage are being raised Jewish. Nearly 2 out of 5 (701,000) are being raised in another religion. The remainder (307,000) are being raised with no religion.
3. More than 1 out of every 4 (28%) (1580,000) married Jews-by-birth are married to Gentiles.
4. Before 1965 the intermarriage rate was 9%. Since then it has soared to 25% in 1965-74, to 44% in 1975-84, and to 52% since 1985. The majority of Jews-by birth marrying today, marry a Gentile. Less than one third of present marriages involving a Jew-by-birth are between two Jews.
5. Only 15% of people of Jewish lineage would oppose their child's decision to intermarry. 43% would accept it and nearly one third would even support it. Amongst the unaffiliated claiming no religion, only 4% would oppose it.
6. In intermarried households, only 28% of children are being raised Jewish and 41% (1,319,000) are being raised in another religion. The remainder (237,000) are raised with no religion. Of all these children 85% receive no formal Jewish education.
7. Of households containing Jewish lineage, nearly half (1,375,000 households) contain Gentiles or Jews following other religions.
8. More than 60% of all Jewish children receive no formal Jewish education. For the unaffiliated claiming no religion, it is over 75%. In intermarried households, 85% of children receive no formal Jewish education.
9. A study done in Los Angeles¹ found that currently 68% of the Jewish population were inmarried (= a Jew married to a Jew), with only 41% intermarrying at present. The latter figure is lower than the 52% measured in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey. The reason for this, however, is not necessarily encouraging. In L.A., more Jews are generationally closer to the immigrant experience than in other areas of the country, and intermarriage is associated with progressing generations being in the United States².

Intermarriage and Mixed Marriages

The Hillel study found that whereas 92.6% of students with two Jewish parents identify themselves as Jewish, this figure drops to 37.8% when only the mother is Jewish. Significantly, only 15.3% of those who have a Jewish father but not a Jewish mother (and

¹ The L.A. Jewish population survey '97, conducted by the L.A. Jewish Federation

² The L.A. Jewish population survey '97, conducted by the L.A. Jewish Federation



who presumably have not, in the main, converted) considered themselves Jewish.

Those students who claim no religious preference but have at least one Jewish parent also exhibit by far the lowest levels of commitment to raising a family; are the most likely to have parents who are divorced or separated; are the most politically liberal; and display the lowest levels of physical and emotional self-confidence.

Current Jewish birth and intermarriage rates imply that the chances of young contemporary Jews having Jewish grandchildren and great-grandchildren, are increasingly remote. If these trends continue, the figures suggest the ultimate demise of the majority of the Jewish population of America.

Part of the problem of intermarriage is that there is no stigma whatsoever for marrying a non-Jew today. You can be intermarried and head the federation; you can be a Jewish male married to a non-Jewess, and have the Reform consider your children Jewish. You do not have to feel that you are giving up your Jewishness in any way!

Predictably, a national survey by the American Jewish Committee reported in late 2000¹ that most American Jews accept marriages between Jews and non-Jews. 40% said they were neutral about such unions, and 16% said they regarded interfaith marriages as "a positive good." 12% said they strongly disapproved of interfaith marriages, while 30% said they would be disappointed by such marriages if the non-Jewish partner did not convert to Judaism. In a study of Los Angeles Jewry, 56% said that they thought it important to marry a Jew².

78% favor rabbinic officiation at Jewish-gentile marriages.

A majority 56% said they disagreed with the statement, "It would pain me if my child married a gentile," and 80% said they agreed that "intermarriage is inevitable in an open society."

50% said it was racist to oppose marriages between Jews and non-Jews, while 47% disagreed.

69% said Jews had "an obligation to urge Jews to marry Jews." And in a separate question, asked to choose which posed "a greater threat to Jewish life," 50% said anti-Semitism, 41% said interfaith marriage.

64% of Orthodox Jews surveyed said they strongly disapproved of interfaith marriages, as opposed to 15% of Conservative Jews, 3% of Reform Jews and 2% of those who identified themselves as "just Jewish".

Fewer than one in four respondents said a rabbi should refuse to officiate at such marriages, and more than 40% said a rabbi should officiate "even if a gentile clergyman is involved in the ceremony." 80% of Orthodox Jews said a rabbi should refuse to officiate under such circumstances.

These attitudes are increasingly being supported by the Jewish non-Orthodox leadership. In 1990, the American Jewish Committee did a mail survey of 2,179 rabbis, synagogue presidents, Jewish agency officials and Jewish lay people, asking what they would do if they were a rabbi who had been asked to marry an interfaith couple. Only 62% said they would not officiate.

¹ The questions were posed in the 2000 Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion, in which 1,010 Jews were interviewed by telephone in September by Market Facts Inc., a research company in Chicago. The survey had a margin of error of plus or minus three percentage points.

² The L.A. Jewish population survey '97, conducted by the L.A. Jewish Federation



As Steven Bayme of the AJC writes: "In the face of an American culture that has declared interfaith marriage to be as American as apple pie, only Jews themselves can articulate the importance of Jewish inmarriage. The question is whether the Jewish leaders have the will to do so¹."

Studies have confirmed the obvious: Parental attitude makes a huge difference in both whether the children are likely to intermarry and whether, if they do, they are likely to bring up the children as Jews². Couples that didn't discuss religion before the wedding are more likely to raise Christian families³.

Less than one-third of all mixed-married raise Jewish children⁴. Pesach and Hanukka are celebrated by 98% of all mixed-marrieds, and other Jewish holidays are celebrated in 28% of households that are raising their children as both Jews and Christians. Shabbat candles are lit by 31% of families with a Jewish mother, and 18% of households with a non-Jewish mother but a Jewish father⁵.

Jewish women are much more likely to remain Jewish and give their children a Jewish education after intermarrying than Jewish men. Jews and non-Jews of both sexes termed Jewish activities "religious" or "different," and called Christian activities "just cultural" and even "fun"⁶.

More than two-thirds of mixed-marriage families celebrate Christmas inside the home and 16% celebrate it in church⁷. 66% of mixed-marriage families have X-mas trees. 41% of mixed-marriage families provide their children with formal Jewish education⁸.

Jewish mothers opposed to Christmas at home sometimes begin celebrating non-Jewish holidays as the marriage goes on, the in-laws grow older, and the children enter school⁹. In her study, Blackman quotes one Jewish woman as saying she cooks an Easter ham for her in-laws every year, "except one year Easter fell on Passover, so I had them over for Easter but I didn't make the ham."

Christmas celebrations for children of mixed marriages were described in less than glowing terms by another participant, who was raised by a Jewish mother and non-Jewish father. "My cousins would all be getting toys from Santa, and I'd be getting gifts from the dog because my mom felt bad," he said.

¹ In the forward of a study done by Sylvia Barack Fishman quoted below.

² "Jewish and Something Else: A Study of Mixed-Marriage Families" by Brandeis University's Sylvia Barack Fishman was published in 2001. It looked at 127 American interfaith families.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The AJC's National Jewish Population Survey in 1990.

⁵ "Jewish and Something Else: A Study of Mixed-Marriage Families" by Brandeis University's Sylvia Barack Fishman was published in 2001. It looked at 127 American interfaith families.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ A recent American Jewish Committee study.

⁸ Statistics taken from *A Breath of Life* by Sylvia Barack Fishman Published by the Free Press.

⁹ Fishman, *ibid.*



One Jewish man was quoted as saying he opposes making Bar Mitzvas for his children, because "my Bar Mitzva wasn't a particularly enriching experience, and I'm not sure that any 13-year old boy's has been, other than they get lots of really cool Cross pens"¹. The man also stated his children did have Bar Mitzvas, but only due to the insistence of his Christian wife.

Level of Religious Observance

The 1990 CJF study reported that one out of three people of Jewish lineage do not consider being Jewish important in their lives. Amongst the unaffiliated claiming no religion, one in ten or less fast on Yom Kippur, subscribe to a Jewish periodical, or volunteer for a Jewish organization.

Of third and fourth generation Americans of Jewish lineage in New York, 1 out of 4 do not avoid having a Christmas tree.

Nearly half do not attend synagogue on High Holidays .

In another study, it was found that 30% of Jews don't feel competent praying in synagogue. 30% found most synagogue services not interesting,² though many people may have Reform and Conservative service in mind when stating this.

Only 2 out of 5 households containing only people of Jewish lineage are (dues paying) members of any synagogue - Orthodox, Conservative, Reform or other. Only a small percentage of those who are members actually attend synagogue on any regular basis.

In our previous edition on USA Jewry, we pointed out that Jews are by far the most secular of all American groups. An ARIS/AJIS³ study asked correspondents the following question: "Would you describe your outlook as religious, somewhat religious, somewhat secular, or secular?" 44% of Jews responded that their outlook was secular or somewhat secular compared to 16% of the broader American population. The vast majority of Americans believe in miracles (87% - 99% of various Christian denominations do). Amongst Jews who called themselves moderately affiliated, 56% said they "definitely" believe, and 27% "probably" do. They perceive God in a friendly, personal way.⁴

According to the Hillel study, Jewish freshmen show a high interest in discussing (as opposed to practicing) religion. Use of the term "spirituality" fails to resonate with Jewish survey participants. Jewish learning built on discussion groups, textual analysis and *chevruta* (paired) learning styles are more interesting than straight shiurim.

As compared to non-Jews, Jewish students report less frequent attendance at religious services, fewer hours per week devoted to praying/meditating, and lower levels of "spirituality" (although it is unclear whether Jews and non-Jews interpret spirituality in the

¹ Ibid.

² Cohen's research for Jewish Community Center Association reported in the LA '97 survey.

³ A study done by Barry Kosmin with Egon Mayer and Ariela Keysar of the Graduate Center of the City University of NY, based on the American Religious Identification Survey 2001 (ARIS) and its associated American Jewish Identifications Survey (AJIS), which we will call the ARIS/AJIS study.

⁴ Steven Cohen (Hebrew University) and Arnold Eisen (Stanford University) in a 2001 study focusing on "moderately affiliated" Jews.



same way). Both groups appear to be discussing religion with greater frequency now than they have in the past. Both groups also have become increasingly committed to financial well-being but less strongly committed to developing a meaningful philosophy of life, reflecting one of the most dramatic shifts in the history of the survey.

Only 13.3% of Jewish freshmen report “frequent” attendance at religious services during the year prior to entering college, compared to nearly half (46.6%) among non-Jews. 70.0% of Jewish students report “occasional” attendance at religious services. While the survey does not specify what constitutes “occasional”, we can assume that students who attended services only during the high holidays (Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur) would be considered as “occasional” attendance.

27.6% of Jewish students discussed religion frequently, 59.0% occasionally, and 13.4% not at all.

The survey also asks students how many hours they typically spent in “prayer/mediation” during their last year in high school. More than half of Jewish students (57.5%) report spending zero hours per week in prayer or meditation, with an additional 26.6% having engaged in prayer less than one hour per week. Only 15.9% of Jewish students report spending one or more hours per week in prayer or meditation, compared to 33.8% among non-Jewish students.

Jewish students are less likely than non-Jewish students to rate themselves highly on spirituality and are far less committed than non-Jews to integrating spirituality into their lives.

In the study of moderately affiliated Jews, those who believe in G-d do not believe in a particularly Jewish G-d, “—or at least not a particularist Jewish G-d. [They] have embraced universalist and personalist elements of the tradition and of modern culture. They have rejected those parts of Judaism that claim a special relation between G-d and the Jewish people.”¹

They do not feel superior to Christians, and they do not assume, as did previous generations, that all Christians hate Jews. They are therefore free, in multicultural America, to reclaim the Jewishness that their parents’ generation tried to hide—but in ways that adhere to social norms, private ways that do not offend society at large. The Passover seder is their favorite ritual, and it’s easy to see why: It is celebrated in private, with family, and at night, so it does not interfere with any other activity. For this reason, they are unhappy with the Orthodox, once admired as the “most authentic” Jews, but now seen as too different from mainstream American society.

“Today’s Jews, like their peers in other religious traditions, have turned inward in their search for meaning,” Cohen and Eisen write. “The ‘first language’ our subjects speak is by and large one of profound individualism. Their language is universalist, liberal and personalist. Community is a second language subordinate to the first.”

In this Jews are very much like other Americans. .

Moving away from communal bonds, Jews in search of spiritual significance in their lives are creating their own religious traditions, based mainly on family memories, customs and their own personal preferences.

74% of those surveyed reserved the right to “reject those Jewish observances that I don’t find meaningful”.

Each of these Jews therefore jealously guards his or her individual right to be observant in his or her own way, picking and choosing from a sort of menu of Jewish customs and rituals.

¹ Ibid.



The Judaism practiced by these “post-modern” Jews is conceived as a journey, one that they see as ongoing throughout life. These Jewish journeys are linked to memories of family occasions or rites of passage, fond memories of Sabbath meals and grandma’s cooking.

“The more committed and active told us repeatedly that they decide week by week, year by year, which rituals they will observe and how they will observe them. They also repeatedly reconsider which organizations and charities they will join or support, which beliefs they will hold, which loyalties they will acknowledge”. The self is and must remain autonomous and sovereign.

On the other side, there are more Jews engaging in Jewish learning, including in non-Orthodox circles. Barry Shrage, the president of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston stated of his non-Orthodox brethren: "All of a sudden, there's a huge hunger for Jewish learning." But he added: "It's also clear that the Jewish community is hungry for a vision that will make sense in their lives. What we lack are the leaders who can articulate that vision and create a real community of learners¹."

In a NY Times headline, J.J. Goldberg quotes Sidney Schwarz's "Finding a Spiritual Home." The author argues that if Jewish leaders can tap into the great spiritual energy fermenting among disaffected Jews, they can remake the synagogue and form the kind of "community of learners" that Mr. Shrage speaks of.

There has been talk in non-Orthodox circles of how to ride the wave of this new interest. In his book, Mr. Schwarz profiles four synagogues that he sees as models for the future. Each of these "synagogue-communities," as he calls them, is led by a "visionary" rabbi; has an egalitarian spirit; is based on a carefully articulated viewpoint; has imbued its congregants with a sense of empowerment; and is deeply committed to scholarship and worship.

Jewish Education

Research has confirmed what we already know -- Torah education really works! There is a definite correlation between Torah Chinuch and Jewish identity in adult life. Persons who have six or more years of Day School education are 17.5% less likely to intermarry². Further, based upon the National Jewish Population Study, Rimor and Katz (1993) state that the Day School is the most effective form of Jewish education. They maintain that Jewish Day Schools are the best vehicle for increasing Jewish involvement and are the only type of Jewish education that strongly counteracts the growing rate of intermarriage. The intermarriage rate drops even further when students attend Jewish high school. That is, that at least nine years of Jewish education in a Day School environment have the greatest positive impact on Jewish involvement and yield the lowest rate of

¹ NY Times Headline, by J. J. Goldberg.

² Fishman, Sylvia Barack and Goldstein, Alice (1993). When They Are Grown, They Will Not Depart: Jewish Education and the Behavior of American Adults. Brandeis University, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies.



intermarriage¹. Schiff and Schneider (1994) state that the Day School graduate intermarriage rate is 4.5%².

If we look at growth in isolation, the Jewish day school movement is looking up. A survey of Jewish day schools study conducted in 2000 counted 184,333 students in total, up a brisk 15% in the last decade. Most of that growth is directly tied to growth of the Orthodox community, and better services the Orthodox are providing for themselves. 75% of all day school students come from Orthodox families. In fact, virtually all school age Orthodox Jewish children in America attend day schools, but barely 5% of non-Orthodox Jewish children do.

The 1990 CJF Study showed that 44% of children of Jewish lineage in New York receive no formal Jewish education. Amongst the Reform and Reconstructionist, the percentage is even higher.

Overall, Jewish schools are becoming more *frum*. Barely two fifths of all day schools even try enrolling less committed Jews.

Vibrancy of Orthodoxy

Many of us see the vibrancy of Orthodoxy and cannot believe the population surveys which show Orthodoxy remaining at a fixed percentage of the total Jewish population. Studies over the last thirty years have placed the Orthodox at a consistent 7 – 8% of the population.

Certainly, Orthodox institutions have grown in size, number, and vibrancy. It is therefore puzzling that thirty years of institutional growth is not reflected in the demographic distribution of American Jewry. One explanation is that a large number of self-defined Jews who are being counted by national Jewish surveys are not in fact *halachically* Jewish. In addition, a large number of the broader Jewish population is not visible, giving no active expression to their Jewishness.³

A more detailed look at various studies do seem to bear out the smaller percentage of the Orthodox population. For example, in the 1997 L.A. Jewish population survey performed by the Jewish Federation form the following denominational breakdown:

Reform	39.9% - grew from 37.2% in 1979
Reconstructionists	2% - grew from less than 1%
Conservative	28.2% - declined from 33.9%
Orthodox	4.3% - declined from 5.2%

64,034 households reported that their parents' denomination differed from their own. A whopping 42% switched from Orthodoxy - 26,894 households. Of all Orthodox

¹ Rimor, Mordechai and Katz, Elihu (1993) Jewish Involvement of the Baby Boom Generation: Interrogating the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, Jerusalem Israel: The Louis Guttman Israel Institute of Applied Social Research.

² Schiff, Alvin and Schneider, Marilyn (1994), The Jewishness Quotient of Jewish Day School Graduates, New York, NY: Yeshiva University, Azrieli Graduate Institute.

³ For a more detailed analysis of this, see the article in the November 2002 Jewish Observer by Mordechai Plaut titled "How Many American Jews are There? 5,300,000? 2,300,000?"



respondents, 71% reported their parents were Orthodox. The Orthodox community has experienced the highest proportional losses.

According to the 1990 NJPS, the total number of self-identifying Orthodox was estimated at 378,000, or 7% of the total of American Jews assessed at 5,515,000. Shockingly, the Orthodox showed the lowest rates of retention of all. The share raised as Orthodox in 1990 was 44% among Jews aged 60 and over, 19% among those aged 40-50, and 12% among those aged 20-30. A plurality of the older age group was raised in an Orthodox environment, whose family roots were often abroad. In America, as the Conservative movement grew the most among the second generation, it attracted many people with an Orthodox background. It became the movement in which the largest share of Jews aged below 60 were raised, and the current preference of a plurality of those aged 60 and above. The Reform movement garnered the plurality of current preferences of Jews aged below 60. At the same time, that part of American Jewry not identifying with any of the major denominations is quickly growing among the younger generations¹.

Writing for Jewish Action, Sergio Della Pergola and Uzi Rebhun flesh out the implications of what is happening using a concept they call resilience. Resilience is the ratio between the number of those who currently identify with a denomination and those born/raised within that denomination. Resilience indexes were the lowest among the Orthodox, moderate among the Conservative, and higher among the Reform and among the aggregate of "other" and nondenominational. Orthodoxy retained 42% of those born in its fold under the age of 40, against only 18-19% of those aged 40 and above. Similarly, the ratio between the number of those currently identifying and those raised as Orthodox was 51% for below 40, versus 21-22% for those over 40. A significant proportion of the adults below 40 were still unmarried, and majority will move from locales with a stronger Jewish infrastructure to places with a weaker one.

More shocking, 10% of those who grew up Orthodox who married during the 1980's did so with non-Jewish spouses who did not convert. The Orthodox also began to show some signs of other problems afflicting the broader public: rising ages at marriage and the declining propensity to marry at all. This analysis gave fuel to non-Orthodox leaders of all sorts that Orthodoxy was incompatible with modern life. Typical was Alan Dershowitz who, in his book, added to his list of "unworkable" solutions the suggestion that all Jews "return to religious adherence." Even Modern Orthodoxy was rejected by Dershowitz as not a viable solution for the continuity crisis since most young Jews are "simply not religious by nature."

Nevertheless, the prognosis for Orthodoxy is overall positive. De Pergello and Rebhun project that the number of U.S. Jews identifying as Orthodox would rise from less than 400,000 in 1990 (7% of the total Jewish population), to over 550,000 in 2020 (10%), and over 900,000 in 2050 (19%). The higher than average fertility rate of Orthodox families would generate a rejuvenating age composition, and a substantial increase in their share of the total U.S. Jewish child population below age 15, from 10% in 1990 to 22% in 2020, and as much as 44% in 2050.

If, on the other hand, the retention of Orthodoxy among youth were not to improve substantially as against the performance observed in 1990, the size of the group would only grow minimally, to about 415,000 in 2020, and 430,000 in 2050. Their share of American Jewry would only grow from 7% to 9% by the mid- 21st Century, and their share of Jewish

¹ Jewish Action, Fall 5759/1998, American Orthodox Jews, by Sergio Della Pergola and Uzi Rebhun, p. 30



children under 15 would reach 11% in 2020, and 13% in 2050. However, the same 7-10% in 1990-2000 looks very different in its vibrancy and future than it did 30 years previously.

William B. Helmreich writes in a new edition of his book "The World of the Yeshiva" (Ktav Publishing House, 2000), that the number of Yeshiva students studying in the States has doubled since 1980, to about 18,000 nationwide.

Elliott Abrams was the first to come out and say it. The American Jewish establishment must learn from the successes of the "Orthodox nuisance" (that is, the nuisance of its success) and return to a Judaism that has its religious identity as its centerpiece. He simply asks: "If the central issue" is "continuity," shouldn't we look to the one element of the Jewish community that has been the most successful at it? "Do not the Orthodox and other traditionally observant Jews have the right to claim success -- and to insist that their approach must be right?" For Abrams, the reason why the various substitute faiths -- fighting anti-Semitism, Israel, liberalism -- have failed to keep Jews Jewish is precisely because they are substitutes.

He also makes a cogent case for the Jewish establishment to fall more in line with the Orthodox on issues of religion and state¹.

Conservative and Reform

Moment magazine (December, 2000) reported that between 1975 and 2000, the number of Reform rabbis rose from 1,150 to 1,800. The number of Reform women rabbis rose from 3 to 350, Conservative women rabbis from 0 to 120. In 1975 there were 16 Reconstructionist rabbis of whom 1 was a woman. In 2000, there were 232 Reconstructionist rabbis of whom 97 were women. Reconstructionist affiliates (synagogues and chavurot) had grown from 16 to 100.

Reform, and increasingly Conservative synagogue leaders have become ever more welcoming of the intermarried, not only in their houses of worship, but to active participation in Jewish life. Indicative of the change is that instruction for interfaith spouses used to be called conversion classes; now it's called "Introduction to Judaism." It's a minor alteration of language that bespeaks a deep shift in perception.

Cultural, Holocaust, Social Activist, Federation, and other forms of Judaism

Many optimists about Jewish revival are looking at things which have very little to do with Judaism as a *Ben Torah* would perceive it.

¹ Abrams persuasively contends that the interests of Jews as a religious community will be best served in an American society that is religiously pluralistic rather than secularist. A religious America will not be one in which Jews and other minority religions are the objects of persecution, but one in which morality, the kind of meaningful morality that can only be derived from traditions of faith, will play a central role in shaping our society. On this question, Abrams quotes a compelling thought from the black activist Robert Woodson: "You are walking back to your car through a deserted downtown parking lot and a group of young black men start coming toward you. Do you feel any better, any safer, if you notice that each one is carrying a Bible and they seem to be coming from church?" Thus, Abrams asserts the American Jewish establishment would do well not only to adopt the Orthodox community's principles with regard to Judaism, but with regard to the role of religion in society that has divided the establishment and Orthodox camps as well on issues ranging from education vouchers that may be used to subsidize parochial schools to the public display of Menorahs.



Jack Wertheimer of the Jewish Theological Seminary estimated "that \$9 billion a year is flowing through the treasuries of the Jewish institutions in America."

That's more than the gross national product of many countries, J.J. Goldberg, editor of *Forward* pointed out. He said, "The vitality in the community, by virtue of the level of the money available, is staggering. Then there are the art forms that have been created — the klezmer revival, which is becoming a legitimate form of pop music in America, and the novels and stories. Twenty years ago, people were mourning the death of American Jewish writing, that after Roth and Malamud and Ozick, that would be it. Now you have all these writers — Allegra Goodman and Nathan Englander, and whole new ones younger than they are. It's a very Jewish literature and very American."

Moment magazine (December, 2000) reported that between 1975 and 2000, the number of Jews in the U.S. Senate grew from 4 to 11. Jews in U.S. House of Representatives went up from 21 to 23. In 1975 there were not any Holocaust museums in America, by 2000, there were 6.

Dershowitz and Abrams both recognize that the many "substitute faiths" (Abrams' term) American Jews have identified with Judaism over the past fifty years have failed to engage more recent generations and keep Jews affiliated. Fighting anti-Semitism, support for the State of Israel and the pursuit of social justice through progressive politics have all been offered as definitions of Judaism for the American Jewish community but they have failed to avert the demographic crisis that has resulted.

Over the years, the Jewish federation has supported such a broad range of causes that even marginally affiliated Jews were having difficulty seeing what was specifically Jewish about their giving.

In 1999, top leaders with UJA-Federation of Greater New York urged the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, which coordinates the policies of Jewish Organizations on social issues, to narrow its focus to issues of direct concern to the Jewish community, such as elder care and Jewish rescue.

Yet most Jews would rather have kept things the way they were. In a study by Amos, 56% of Jews say social justice is more important to their Jewish identity than Torah or text study, while 36% said both are equally important. 74% say they don't care whether their own social activism falls under Jewish or secular auspices. American Jews' favorite causes include abortion rights, fighting anti-Semitism, access to affordable health care, and strengthened gun control laws.

85% disagree with the idea that "Jews have enough problems of their own without worrying about broader society." More than half are not familiar with the Hebrew phrase "tikkun olam." Making the world a better place ranked highest as the activity most personally meaningful for being Jewish, followed by belief in God and celebrating Jewish holidays. Ranking lowest were keeping up with Jewish art, music or literature, and studying Torah and other Jewish texts.