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JEWISH DEMOGRAPHY – REALITIES AND OPTIONS

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Demographics, "Sociological Death," and Jewish Survival

Demographers have been classically concerned with birth rates, death rates and migration. For Jews, "sociological death" is another factor crucial to the life and health of every group, particularly to small groups such as the Jews. "Sociological death" means the lapsing of the mental commitment of a person to the Jewish community, even though he or she is physically still alive. The factors affecting "sociological death" for Jews throughout the world are intermarriage, apostasy, conversion and assimilation.

A certain minimal birthrate is a prerequisite for effective survival. At the same time, there are new developments that must be considered in order to understand the demographic situation of contemporary Jewry. To give one example, a half century ago, conversion nearly always referred to conversion by a Jew to Christianity. Today in the United States, it denotes (by some counts) ten thousand "new Jews" per year, who by now number in the hundreds of thousands, who were born into other religions.(1) The ramifications of the definition of the status of these converts, as well as that of their children, may be greater for the size of the Jewish community in the United States, for instance, than an increase in the birthrate of born Jews. In the other diaspora communities, negative attitudes of the dominant Orthodox rabbinate toward such conversions keep the number of converts much smaller,

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if conversion for marriage is permitted at all.

Another example of a traditionally assumed relationship which may not hold for American Jews is that higher education leads to greater secularization and consequent higher rates of intermarriage. While the matter has not been settled among demographers, at least one sociologist has found that because Jews are occupationally concentrated in professions requiring graduate education, intermarriage rates actually drop for those with the highest level of education. In short, they meet their Jewish mates through propinquity (as has always been the case) and this propinquity is found precisely in the upper reaches of academe, particularly in medical and law schools.(2)

Why the Declining Jewish Birthrate?

The modern era brought many changes in the institution of the family. The nuclear family became more important, Western fertility declined, divorce rates went up, and for the Jews, intermarriage rates went up. These trends are long term,(3) but they have accelerated and taken on greater significance over the last two decades. Historically there has been a connection between the fertility patterns of Jews and of their neighbors. In Western Europe, these trends were clearly visible by the late nineteenth century and led to predictable demographic declines.

In contemporary society, Jews exemplify all of the changes occurring in the families around them. There are more Jewish singles, Jews marry later, and their divorce rate is higher than it was several decades ago. Along with these trends, Jewish communal surveys have indicated declining Jewish birthrates and higher rates of intermarriage. Whether the birth rate is slightly above, just at, or slightly below the replacement level (also known as Zero Population Growth -- ZPG) of 2.1 children per woman, there is consensus on this general rate, with the exception of the seriously Orthodox community. (Seriously Orthodox Jews constitute between 5 and 10 percent of the total Jewish population in the diaspora.)

It is also thought that intermarried couples have a lower birthrate than the general Jewish population.(4) This lower rate may be due to fear of conflict arising from the birth of a child, or may be a by-product of the fact that a significant proportion of intermarriages, particularly by Jewish women, are second marriages in which the women have already borne their children.

The institutions developed by the diaspora Jewish communities in the twentieth century have been largely child-oriented. Parents' Jewish identification has often been through their children. Moreover, in earlier decades of this century most adults were parents of pre-college-age children for a significant period during their early and middle married life, from ages 25-43. It had been assumed that adults would become attached to the synagogue or other community agencies for "the sake of the children." Delayed marriage and fewer children mean that this can no longer be counted upon. Adults will be older and more "set in their ways" when they connect with the community (if it retains its current structure), and with just one or two children moving through the communal educational system before Bar or Bat Mitzvah, there will be fewer years in which to reach the parents in a meaningful way through the children that they do have.

In addition, diaspora Jewries are becoming an increasingly smaller part of the overall population of their country of residence. As noted above, this follows a historical trend. Since the late nineteenth century, at least in the West, the Jewish birthrate has been below that of the general population in each country of Jewish residence. The general fertility may now be converging or even below the Jewish fertility, especially in Western Europe where it has been below 2.1 (ZPG) for several decades. In the United States as of 1970, it was 2.1 (ZPG), and by 1980 had fallen to 1.8 children. At the same

time, the Jewish population of the U.S. is down from 3.7 percent of the total in the 1930s to 2.6 percent at present.

This has political implications, among others. In most Western countries, the Jewish percentage of the total population was never large enough to make a difference, whereas in Central and Eastern Europe where it was significant, the Holocaust dealt the Jews an irreparable blow. Moreover, the Jewish situation outside of the United States and perhaps Canada and Australia kept Jewish political influence minimal and confined to the efforts of a few notable leaders. In the United States, however, Jewish numbers have counted in American politics.

We do not know at what point this decline will begin to make a political difference in the perception of U.S. Jewry. Jewish political strength is largely built on the Jews' concentration in swing states, their high voter turnout rates, the high proportion of campaign contributions from Jews, and more symbolic factors (such as the regnant American ideology of the equality of the three major faiths). It is unclear at what point a lower percentage will create a shift in influence or public opinion.

Similarly, it is not clear when the Jewish institutional infrastructure will reflect the change. What is happening more at present is an institutional response to shifting geographic and age trends within the population. Thus, centers, schools and synagogues close in New York and open in Miami and Phoenix. Institutions serving the elderly proliferate while supplementary Jewish elementary schools undergo consolidation.

There are a number of social movements which have contributed to the lowered birthrate in as yet unmeasured ways. The first and most important is the feminist movement and the concomitant movement of women into the labor force. Goldscheider has argued that Jewish women combine family and careers without sacrificing one for the other and that we should be careful not to equate a fall in the birthrate with family decline or disintegration. He notes that "the data suggest that reports of the imminent death of the Jewish family have been greatly exaggerated....The evidence from the Boston study of 1975 suggests that, contrary to popular reports, the Jewish family continues to be a major source of strength in the community."(5)

Goldscheider's assertion about the apparent success of the dual career/two job family for the Jewish community applies to the 1-3 child family. However, since, except for the Orthodox community, a higher birthrate was not prevalent even during the era of "the feminine mystique" of the 1950s, it is unlikely that a birthrate much above the current one could have been anticipated even without current labor force trends.

A second social movement involves the legitimation of homosexuality as an "alternative" lifestyle. There are no hard data on the incidence of this phenomenon in the Jewish community, but it surely lowers the birthrate.

More crucial than these social movements have been the changing economic conditions in the West, combined with higher expectations and, in the United States, the extraordinary increase in the expense of college and graduate school education. It is virtually impossible for middle class families to maintain their expected lifestyle unless both parents work outside the home for pay. To all this must be added the high cost of living Jewishly. Factors contributing to the cost of living Jewishly may include some or all of the following: synagogue membership, children's day school tuition, Jewish summer camp tuition, membership in Jewish community centers, contributions to the United Jewish Appeal, the local Jewish Federation, and other Jewish philanthropies, memberships in Jewish organizations, buying kosher food, trips to Israel, buying Jewish books, etc. It may well be economic trends more than anything else that have led couples to curtail their number of children.

The Orthodox community, and particularly its right wing, is the grand exception to this trend. While we have little hard data, it seems that three to five children is the norm among the modern Orthodox, while among the ultra-Orthodox, five to eight children is normative. The high fertility of this segment of the population could, in part, offset the lower fertility of the others. Moreover, if they succeed in retaining their children, the percentage of Orthodox within the total Jewish population could rise significantly and radically change the Jewish community in a generation.(6) Already, Jewish communal institutions have become more sensitive to this constituency and have tailored summer camps, Jewish community centers and other institutions to meet their needs in communities where they are concentrated.

Implications for Social Policy

Over the last decade many students of social policy have made recommendations for the creation of communal support systems aimed at alleviating the economic and social pressures experienced by diaspora Jewish families today that are considered to be at the heart of the declining fertility rate. There appears to be a growing consensus that Jewish communal institutions should adopt an explicit posture in favor of larger families and provide supports such as reduced or free tuition in Jewish schools for families with three or more children, and quality Jewish day care facilities aimed at encouraging Jewish couples to have more children.

According to many sociologists however, these sorts of recommendations, while commendable, may not have an impact on the birthrate. For example, "In virtually every industrialized country the birthrate continues to decline in the face of expanding social services. There is a universal inverse relationship between social class and fertility....Increasing the birthrate apparently involves much more than changing institutional arrangements to reduce economic burdens."(7)

Just because these supports may not significantly reverse larger social trends does not invalidate them. Many of these proposals, along with others, may strengthen the Jewish family, an important goal in its own right and perhaps the best possible demographic strategy. Moreover, the 1980s has seen a general increase in familism in the West, which would reinforce measures taken by the Jewish community to strengthen its families.

Encouraging Jewish Marriage and Childbearing

The evidence suggests that there are only three ways to increase the Jewish birthrate: (1) by increasing the number of Jewish marriages; (2) by enabling those who want children but cannot have them unaided to do so through modern medical means and thereby to increase fertility; and (3) by motivating couples of normal capacity to bear children to bear more through ideological commitment or a new perception of their interests.

Therefore, the following steps should be taken:

1. The community should actively encourage Jewish marriage as an ideal and facilitate the coming together of Jewish singles for marriage through social events, computerized Jewish dating services and other matchmaking techniques.
2. The community should provide any necessary assistance to infertile Jewish couples who wish to have children, whether through fertility enhancement techniques or adoption, including provision for infant conversion of adopted babies born to non-Jewish mothers.
3. While education and "talking up" the need for bearing more children to secure the future of the Jewish people is a slow process that produces uncertain results, it is still a vitally important and perhaps the only means to promote a vision of the Jewish future that will have positive demographic consequences. This method has worked among Orthodox Jews and probably, to some extent, even among non-Orthodox

Israelis. It should not be neglected. In societies where theories of zero population growth to prevent further use of the earth's resources are influential, special attention must be directed to refuting their validity for Jews, especially after the Holocaust.

4. Abortion by married women should be discouraged.

Sustaining the Jewish Family

There are quantitative and qualitative aspects to the problems currently facing the Jewish family. A major Jewish public policy objective should be to create a climate in which raising a family will not be an overly difficult option. A second objective is to encourage a richer Jewish family life that will strengthen the Jewishness of all family members. Third, mothering and fathering have to be recognized again as honorable, responsible and indispensable roles within the Jewish community and the larger society. Fourth, dual career/two job families must be given support. Finally, in addition to reaching out to conventional nuclear families in the community who are marginally affiliated, serious consideration should be given to finding ways to deal positively with the new, increasingly prevalent, lifestyles and to help these people to strengthen their identification with the Jewish community.

To accomplish this, the following steps could be taken:

1. Strengthening the family should be highlighted as a priority of the community.
2. Social agencies, synagogues and other Jewish institutions should place much more emphasis on outreach services. Such services should be directed to singles, parents, and couples that are as yet childless. Jewish institutions should be urged to provide better programming for singles and one-parent families. There should be special dues schedules and they should be involved in the decision-making of the institution. Encouragement should be given to self help and mutual aid programs.
3. Inter-agency consortia should be formed to evaluate the effectiveness of programs, help communication and coordination, and provide information and referral services to Jewish families in need of help.
4. Jewish communal agencies and organizations should assess their own employment policies and consider flexible working hours, parental leave, and facilitation of Jewish holiday observance and dietary laws for their own employees.
5. Explicit emphasis on Jewish values regarding family life should be built into curricula of Jewish schools and the informal education programs of summer camps, community centers and youth movements.
6. Courses on family life should be a requirement in rabbinical schools and training programs for Jewish communal service workers. In-service programs should be provided for lay and professional leaders.
7. The aged should have opportunities to participate in strengthening family life -- as paraprofessionals and surrogate grandparents.
8. There should be high quality child care programs supported by the Jewish community for Jewish children, including day-care centers, day schools and after school programs.
9. Jewish agencies should provide grants for school tuition, fee supplements for Jewish summer camps, and perhaps even grants to families for housing, to help sustain Jewish neighborhoods.(8)

What to Do About the Intermarried

A particularly crucial area of concern involves outreach to the intermarried and their children. Whether one likes it or not, interdating, intermarriage and conversion are major demographic facts of life shaping Jewish communities throughout the diaspora. In the United States, within the Reform movement, there is an effort to reach out to "unchurched" non-Jews in general and encourage their conversion to Judaism. Still, the vast majority of

converts do so because of marriage to Jewish spouses.

The rate of intermarriage in the United States today is variously estimated at 20-25 percent of the individual Jews marrying. It varies in other diaspora communities; in France and the U.S.S.R., it is considerably higher. In the United States, up to one-fourth involve a marriage with a conversion -- just about always to Judaism. Another group involves Jewish women, whose children are automatically Jewish according to halakhah (Jewish law). Moreover, in a reversal of the situation in previous generations, most Jewish spouses wish to remain attached to the Jewish community even when their spouses do not convert.(9) Some of the implications of this phenomenon are:

1. Almost every Jewish extended family will contain Jews by choice and non-Jews. This may lead to a breakdown of stereotypes Jews have about Christians and encourage new types of relationships generally between Christians and Jews that are likely to encourage further intermarriage.
2. The children of intermarriage, even where there is a conversion, will have non-Jewish grandparents and will be exposed to Christian holidays and other observances.
3. Converted spouses and children of intermarriage will not automatically have a sense of Jewish peoplehood and collective responsibility, even if they are serious about being Jewish in a religious sense. Jewish educational institutions will have to take this into account in creating curricula for formal and informal education. If this sense of peoplehood is not transmitted, it will have serious consequences for world Jewry and for the meaning of Judaism for future generations.
4. Differential criteria for conversion and the general issue of "Who is a Jew?" will prove more and more divisive for diaspora Jewry internally, and between certain segments of diaspora Jewry and Israel. Dealing with the problems which flow from intermarriage and conversion is already a major concern of world Jewry. Moreover, the most recent evidence suggests that the Reform movement's acceptance of patrilineal descent already has reduced the number of conversions to Judaism by non-Jewish spouses.

To successfully resolve the problems arising from intermarriage, the organized Jewish community should take the following actions:

1. Develop and implement a common framework for a conversion acceptable to all religious streams (or at least all but the extremes) in Jewish life. The non-rabbinic communal leadership, in cooperation with the leadership of Israel, must work to bring about acceptance of that framework on the part of all streams.
2. Foster educational programming among converts to Judaism and their children that will bring them to understand that being Jewish is to be part of the Jewish people.
3. Encourage the development of guidelines for relationships among Jewish and non-Jewish members of the same extended family so as to safeguard the continued commitment to Judaism of their offspring.

Demography, seen by many as an impersonal and sometimes dull social science, is in reality a key to the future of the Jewish people. The implications of current demographic factors affecting diaspora Jewry must be given careful consideration by academics, professionals in the Jewish community and Jewish leaders from around the world who must, in turn, formulate and institutionalize policies to reverse current negative demographic trends, or at least to make the best of the current situation through the application of knowledge and effective long-range planning.

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NOTES

1. Egon Mayer, Love and Tradition: Marriage Between Jews and Christians (New York: Plenum, 1985).
2. Calvin Goldscheider, The American Jewish Community (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986).
3. Steven M. Cohen, American Modernity and Jewish Identity (New York: Tavistock Publications, 1983).
4. Sidney Goldstein, "Jews in the United States: Perspectives From Demography" in American Jewish Year Book, 1981, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), pp. 3-59.
5. Goldscheider, op. cit., p. 60.
6. Daniel J. Elazar, "Who is a Jew and How? -- The Demographics of Jewish Religious Identification" Jerusalem Letter/ Viewpoints (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, No. 53, 24 September 1986).
7. Chaim I. Waxman, America's Jews in Transition (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), pp. 171-173.
8. Task Force on Jewish Family Policy, Jewish Communal Affairs Department, American Jewish Committee, Sustaining The Jewish Family (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1980).
9. For a good description of this phenomenon, see Mayer, op. cit.

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Earlier studies in our Jewish demography series may be ordered from the Jerusalem Center. They include:

1. "Jews on the Move: The New Wave of Jewish Migration and its Implications for Organized Jewry" by Daniel J. Elazar, Jerusalem Letter, No. 44, 10 January 1982.

2. "The New Agenda of European Jewry" by Daniel J. Elazar, Jerusalem Letter/ Viewpoints, No. 35, 17 October 1984.

3. "Who is a Jew and How? -- The Demographics of Jewish Religious Identification" by Daniel J. Elazar, Jerusalem Letter/ Viewpoints, No. 53, 24 September 1986.

4. "American Jewish Demography: Inconsistencies That Challenge" by Sidney Goldstein, Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints, No. 54, 16 October 1986.