

JERUSALEM LETTER

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

JL:118 29 Tevet 5751 / 15 January 1991

AMERICAN JEWRY IN THE 1990s: PART TWO THE 1990 DEMOGRAPHIC STUDY: SOME GOOD NEWS; MUCH BAD NEWS

Daniel J. Elazar

Immigration Brings Population Increase / 590,000 Ex-Jews / 8 Million in Jewish Households / Which Figures Do We Use? / An Aging Population / The Disappearance of the Traditional Jewish Family / Synagogue Affiliation as a Measure of Who is Jewishly Active and How / Intermarriage Now 50 Percent / The Reduction of America's Position in World Jewry

Immigration Brings Population Increase

The first results of the Council of Jewish Federations-sponsored demographic study of the population of the United States Jewish community now have been released. They include good news, strange news, and bad news. First the good news: There are 5,510,000 self-defined Jews in the United States as of 1990 (see Table 1). This is 300,000 more than the 5.2 million self-defined Jews in the 1970 study. We know that there were about 300,000 Jews who migrated to the United States over the past two decades, including some 150,000 Israelis, 100,000 Soviet Jews, 30,000 Iranian Jews, and significant numbers from Latin America and South Africa. So while the existing community did not increase, immigration seems to have led

to a slight increase in the ranks of American Jewry.

On the other hand, federations have also been surprised when surveys have come in, particularly in the southern and western communities, showing much higher numbers of Jews than anybody projected. In addition, part of the increase in the 1990 population may also simply be because it was a better study than the 1970 study, with better sampling and a better scientific approach.

It should be remembered that these surveys do not measure Jewishness by halakhic standards; they use a very subjective measure of self-identification. They use a very sophisticated kind of telephone survey employing random digit dialing. Those answering are asked how they identify themselves and that is as far as it goes.

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor
21 Arlozorov St. Jerusalem, 92181, Israel; Tel. 02-639281. © Copyright. All rights reserved. ISSN:0334-4096

Table 1

U.S. JEWISH POPULATION, 1990

Born Jews-Jewish Religion	4,190,000*	67%
Jews by Choice/Converts	185,000	3%
(Jews by Religion)	(4,375,000)	(70%)
Jews with No Religion (Secular)	1,135,000	20%

Core Jewish Population	5,510,000	(90%)
Converts Out (Born/Raised/Jews)	210,000	3%
Jewish Parentage/Background		
with Other Religion (Adults)	380,000	7%

(Total Jewish Ethnic or Religious Preference)		100%
Children of Jewish Descent under 18		
Being Raised in Other Religion	700,000	
Adult Gentiles Living with		
Total Jewish Population	1,400,000	

Total Population in 3.2M Jewish	8,200,000	
Households		

* Includes 100,000 institutionalized persons

Source: CJF National Jewish Population Survey

590,000 Ex-Jews

Now the bad news: The survey also found that there were 590,000 people who were born or raised as Jews who now are either nothing or have another religion. About 210,000 of these told the interviewers that they had converted to another religion. This is a shocking statistic for American Jewry and for world Jewry as well. We had assumed some Jews were assimilating but not that people would say that literally they do not see themselves as Jews or that they see themselves as something else religiously.

One possibility is that many of these people are women who have intermarried. The survey confirmed what we know from other studies, that in intermarriages Jewish women are more likely to convert to another religion than Jewish men. Apparently in many cases, the husband still sets the religious pattern for the family. If the husband is not Jewish and wants one

religion in the family, then he gets his wife to convert.

The other 380,000 of Jewish parentage or background with another religion may be examples of Milton Himmelfarb's famous dictum which he posed as a question: "What do you call the grandchildren of intermarried Jews?" His answer: "Christians." In American society, as a matter of course, if children are born into an intermarried family in which there is no conversion, and who are raised in neither religion, then in all likelihood they are going to marry somebody of the majority population. That person is probably going to be a member of some church and the grandchild of the Jewish partner will probably join that church. That is what happens when there is a small minority living among a large majority. It is not a deliberate act of abjuring Judaism.

Adding the 590,000 to the 5.5 million self-defined Jews brings a total of 6.1

million Jews and ex-Jews. The parallel figure for 1970 was 5.4 million, including 200,000 ex-Jews. The number of ex-Jews has just about tripled in the last 20 years from 200,000 to 590,000, the result of the second and third generations of intermarriage.

In addition, the survey found 2.1 million non-Jews living in households with Jews. We have already encountered this phenomenon in local community surveys. In Kansas City, for example, a survey done in the early 1980s showed that more than 1 out of 5 Jewish households included non-Jews. These may have been intermarried households in which there was no conversion. Some may have been households in which there had been an intermarriage with conversion but where the originally non-Jewish spouse brought in parents to live, or had non-Jewish children from a previous marriage.

Some more bad news; one-third of that 2.1 million, or 700,000, are children under 18 of Jewish descent being raised in another religion.

8 Million in Jewish Households

In one sense it could be said that politically this is good news in the sense that Jewish households contain over 8 million people. The chances are that on Jewish political issues, even the non-Jewish in-laws of Jews tend to support Jews. On the other hand, there is certainly some question as to what kind of Jewish households these are likely to be when they include non-Jews who in all likelihood will influence the quality of Jewish life. One can hazard a guess that Christmas is more likely to be observed than most Jewish holidays, not to speak of Sabbath and kashrut. So while there may be pluses on the political side, there are minuses on the cultural-religious side.

Which Figures Do We Use?

One of the problems with these figures is that they represent extrapolations from a sample and one can take a high estimate, a medium estimate, and a low estimate.

The Jewish community will usually use the high estimate for political purposes and the federations will take the low estimate for fundraising purposes. In one community a few years back, the local population study came up with a range of 240,000 to 310,000, with 280,000 the number that the demographers thought was the best. The federation chose 240,000. Why? Because the community has one of the lower per capita giving ratios in the United States and the per capita figure was raised by saying there were only 240,000 Jews rather than 280,000. A similar situation took place in another community. A bank-conducted survey showed 70,000 Jews, while the federation study claimed only 50,000 Jews.

An Aging Population

The survey revealed an aging population. The figure of 21 percent of American Jews under the age of 18 is much lower than that of the American population as a whole where it is about half, while 18 percent are over 65. Many of today's older people are the children of immigrant parents who had large families, whereas they, in turn, had smaller ones. Gerald Bubis has described the phenomenon in Los Angeles of two generations, mothers and daughters, living in the same senior citizens home.

Whatever the minor adjustments, U.S. Jewry is falling behind the rest of the population. Since 1932, the population of the United States has doubled, from 125 million to 250 million. The Jewish population, on the other hand, has at most risen from 5 million to 6 million.

The Disappearance of the Traditional Jewish Family

In looking at the present state of the American Jewish family, we see the almost total disappearance of the so-called traditional family -- a married couple, both first marriages, with children -- the basis upon which most Jewish institutions, especially congregations, were built. Only 14 percent of American Jews fit into that

model today. There are another 15 percent who do not have children at home. Some of those are probably empty nests where the children have grown and left, and some are couples who do not yet have or are not having children. Even if we put those two figures together, less than a third of the Jewish families in the United States fit the traditional model.

This has tremendous implications. In a Jerusalem Center study done a few years ago for the Conservative movement on the occasion of their centennial, one of the first things that we pointed out was that the Conservative movement was built on the premise of the nuclear Jewish family. Yet there were probably only two generations in the whole history of the Jewish people (or of the world, for that matter) where a nuclear family of that kind was the norm. Those happened to be the generations when the American non-Orthodox religious movements took form and built themselves around that reality. That base does not exist any more, as these figures show. The Reform movement has adjusted to it because it does not mind accepting all kinds of different family configurations, including mixed marriages or even homosexuals and lesbians. The Reform movement has been able to accommodate them within their ideological and structural framework. The Conservative movement is having a harder time, which is why the Reform movement now claims to have moved ahead of the Conservative movement in registered membership.

That claim is not reflected in the survey. On the contrary, 41 percent of those who claim to be synagogue members indicate that they are affiliated with Conservative congregations as against 36 percent claiming Reform. It must be remembered, however, that this, too, is a subjective response, and that not all who claim to be members actually are enrolled as such.

Synagogue Affiliation as a Measure of Who is Jewishly Active and How

860,000 households claimed to be synagogue members (see Table 2). Using aver-

age household size for a multiplier, we find that totals about 2 million or one-third of all American Jews. Since 1,135,000 American Jews claim to be secular, that is to say, have no religion, slightly over 45 percent of those who declare themselves Jewish by religion also claim to be synagogue members.

Table 2

DISTRIBUTION BY DENOMINATION OF 860,000 HOUSEHOLDS PRESENTLY AFFILIATED WITH A SYNAGOGUE

Orthodox	13%
Conservative	41%
Reform	36%
Reconstructionist	2%
Other	2%
Don't Know/Refused	6%

Looking at the breakdown by household, it seems that the membership distribution among the several branches of Judaism is very similar to the claims of the total Jewish population, with a mere 13 percent claiming to be Orthodox. However, since the household size among non-Orthodox Jews is approximately 2 or even less, only 1,400,000 non-Orthodox Jews are synagogue members. Household size among the Orthodox, however, is between 4 and 5, which means Orthodox households claiming synagogue membership contain over 500,000 Jews, making the percentage of Orthodox Jews among those sufficiently active to claim synagogue membership somewhere between 25 and 30 percent. This figure is remarkably close to that which this writer projected in a Jerusalem Letter several years ago regarding the respective strength of the several branches of Judaism, demographically and operationally (VP:53 "Who is a Jew and How? -- The Demographics of Jewish Religious Identification," September 24, 1986).

Intermarriage Now 50 Percent

Over 50 percent of the Jews in the United States who have married within the

last decade have intermarried. In some cases the non-Jewish partner has converted, but, as we see, in many cases they have not. Of course, since the adoption of patrilineal descent by the Reform movement there is less incentive for a non-Jewish partner in a mixed marriage to convert. Prior to that decision many would go through a Reform conversion for the sake of the Jewish side. Now many people say, why convert? They will raise their children in the Reform Temple, claim patrilineal descent, and there is no reason for conversion. Again, since males tend to determine the direction of a family's religious affiliation, this has had a substantial impact.

The number of Reform converts has dropped steadily since the adoption of patrilineal descent by the Reform movement. In essence, the Reform movement shot itself in the foot. This has led to some very strange situations such as the carefully worded constitution adopted by at least one Reform congregation in the Northeast which specifies that certain offices can be held by non-Jews, certain offices are reserved to Jews, and that the rabbi of the congregation must keep a register as to who is Jewish and who is not, the way the Ministry of Interior does in Israel, only using a different definition.

The Reduction of America's Position in World Jewry

One final point to consider is the larger world picture. In 1948 when Israel was established, the United States, clearly the largest Jewish community in the world, had nearly 10 times as many Jews as lived in Eretz Israel. The second largest Jewish population concentration was in the Soviet Union with 1.5 to 2 million, but it was in its darkest hour at that point and was undergoing the worst of the Stalinist persecutions, so there was no organized Jewish life there except for the Habad underground. No other diaspora community had even as many Jews as Israel.

In 1960 there were about 5.6 million Jews in the United States and 1.8 million in Israel; the ratio had dropped from 10 to 1 to 3 to 1. The Soviet concentration was still not a factor on the world Jewish

scene and French Jewry was just beginning to receive its great influx. In 1990 the ratio of U.S. Jews to Israeli Jews is about 3 to 2 and approaching parity. If 1 million Jews come to Israel from the Soviet Union, in a few years there will be about 5.5 million Jews in the United States and 4.5 million or more Jews in Israel.

Not only that, but if the Soviet Union does not undergo a complete turnabout and repression, there probably will still be somewhere between 1 and 1.5 million people in the USSR who identify themselves as Jewish. It will be the third largest Jewish community in the world and it will be an organized and functioning community. Additionally, as Europe continues to move toward greater integration, sooner or later the Jews of Europe are going to do so as well. European Jewry has been held back, not because they do not have the formal structures but because the largest Jewish communities in Western Europe are in France and the United Kingdom, the two countries where the dominant ethos is isolationist. But the chances are that there will be 1.2 to 1.5 million Jews in the European Community countries who will also constitute some kind of a bloc.

This means that the standing of American Jewry within world Jewry is likely to shift, especially since the communities in the USSR and in Central and Western Europe are much more likely to follow the lead of Israel than of the United States on issues of Jewish interest. The American Jewish community, which has been quite insulated and which has generally helped people "over there," whether in Israel, Europe, the Soviet Union or Latin America, without feeling a close intermeshing with those other Jewish communities, will have to undergo a sea change in the direction of reducing that feeling of separation and becoming more thoroughly a part of the more complex and interconnected Jewish world of the next century.

* * *

Daniel J. Elazar is President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. This is the second of a two-part report on the state of American Jewry in the 1990s.