JEWISH CAMPUS LIFE: SOME REFLECTIONS AFTER A DECADE

Rela Geffen Monson

When, in the early 1980s, Yehuda Rosenman asked me to help the Jewish Communal Affairs Department of the American Jewish Committee and B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundations explore the current attitudes of Jewish college students toward marriage and the family, I eagerly agreed. Various surveys of American youth had pointed up a growing reluctance to commit to the traditional values of marriage and family life. There was a collective sense in the Jewish community that this was true of Jewish youth as well, who, since the civil rights, antiwar, and feminist movements of the '70s, had been perceived to be in the avant garde of liberal social movements. Experimentation with alternative family life-styles was often associated with these movements, and Jewish leaders of the early 1980s were almost obsessively concerned with the low birthrate among Jews. Had the quest for individual fulfillment led to a negation of family life? This was the question that led to the commissioning of the study that was published in 1984 as *Jewish Campus Life: A Survey of Student Attitudes Toward Marriage and Family.*[1]

The Study Plan

With the cooperation of Hillel directors across the United States, more than 3,000 unmarried students on fourteen campuses were surveyed during the academic year 1981-82. Of the more than 1200 who returned the survey, 51 percent were women, 75 percent were undergraduates, and they ranged in age from 18 to 26. Just under half (45 percent) reported that they were members of Hillel or had participated in Jewish activities on the campus. If there was a sampling bias in the respondent population, it was in the direction of connectedness to Jewish identity, since half of the sample was drawn from lists of those affiliated with campus Jewish organizations in one way or another. (These connections varied from the campus UJA campaign to Israeli dance groups to kosher eating plans to Soviet Jewry committees.)[2] Despite this bias, the implications of which will be explored further, the sample was large and varied enough to enrich and enhance the knowledge available until then about Jewish student life on campus. With this in mind, we turn to the findings about attitudes toward family life and intermarriage as a background for reflections on the latest finding of the Council of Jewish Federation's National Jewish Population Study (NJPS).[3]

Some Surprising Results

Analysis of the data from student respondents indicated that several hypotheses were not confirmed. For instance, contrary to expectations, nearly all of the students were planning to marry and to raise families. Doubts about these plans were motivated by the fear that they might not be able to find the "right" person and by a perceived shortage of eligible Jewish mates -- and not by a rejection of the institution of marriage. There were, however, some -- women in particular -- who worried that marriage might conflict with their careers. Three-fourths of the students viewed marriage as "the best opportunity for love and growth." Just 5 percent said that they would delay marriage because they enjoyed the single life. As many as two-thirds agreed that "for a Jew, family is more important than career." Not only were the students positive toward marriage, overwhelmingly they planned to become parents, just 7 percent saying that they did not expect to have any children. These figures were similar for men and women and for undergraduate and graduate students. Even less popular, either as an "ideal" or as an expectation for themselves, was the prospect of having only

one child. Fewer than 1 percent of the sample cited this as their ideal and 2 percent as their real expectation -- a pattern that remained the same for those who were older and thus closer to marriage. A decade earlier, Yankelovich had found that 25 percent of male college students and 17 percent of females were interested in having children.[4] Overall, the Jewish students, rather than appearing less familistic, were more in favor of marriage and child rearing than the national sample of American college students polled by Yankelovich at a time when values were probably more conservative.

When planning the study, we had assumed that religiosity and familism were related and mutually reenforcing values. The data revealed that, while religiously committed Jewish students were invariably familistic, the reverse was not the case. A substantial proportion of the students who saw future marriage and parenting as crucial to their happiness did not connect that future to their Jewish identity, specifically to Jewish peoplehood or the fate of the Jewish people. For them, familism was clearly the broader societal and Jewish value. A substantial minority (40 percent) saw little relationship, if any, between Judaism and their commitment to marriage and child rearing. This sentiment was expressed in many of the comments made by respondents. For instance, one wrote:

> I am very proud of my heritage and culture. I am proud to be a Jew . . . Marriage and children are things I want very much for my life. It would be nice to marry a Jewish person to have a basis or starting foundation for a happy life. It would be one more thing a couple could share together. However, love is first over religion. If I were to fall in love with a non-Jew, I would definitely marry him. This may lead to some dissension with grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc., but I do not care.

As exemplified by this quote, many of these students, who had been raised on the pluralistic principles of American society, expressed the belief that non-Jewish mates would be able to rear their children Jewishly, or that love would ultimately triumph over religious differences. All in all, love and family life were linked together more solidly than Judaism and family life.

At this point it will be useful to return to the "bias" in the sample. Remember, if there was a bias in this sample it was toward traditionalism and connectedness to Jewish identity. Therefore, if 40 percent of these students saw little or no connection between family formation and their Jewish identity, then, in a completely random sample of Jewish college students, the proportion probably would have been even higher. The starkness of this finding shaped the final report and the policy implications derived from the study.

Which Students Connected Family and Jewish Identity?

There was a positive correlation between the degree of exposure to a variety of Jewish experiences before coming to college and the intensity of participation in Jewish life on campus. These included: socialization in homes where Jewish rituals were observed and where parents were involved in Jewish communal life; participation in formal and informal Jewish education, particularly through intensive adolescent experiences such as membership in youth groups and attendance at summer camps with a Jewish orientation; involvement in a network of close Jewish friends; and affiliation with Conservative or Orthodox Judaism rather than self-designation as secular Jews.

Of particular interest was the linkage between ideology, attitudes toward interdating and intermarriage, and actual experience of interfaith dating in college and graduate school. Those who had dated non-Jews in high school and those who subscribed to the universalistic belief that "a person is a person regardless of his or her religion" were more prone than others to date non-Jews in college. On the other hand, students who reported that their parents were opposed to interdating, and who agreed that interdating led to intermarriage, were less likely to interdate.

Those who thought of themselves as secular Jews were the most likely to espouse universalistic ideology, while those who considered themselves Orthodox or Conservative were the most inclined to believe that interdating led to intermarriage and to act on this belief in managing their social life.

Ideology played a pivotal role in accepting the link between one's personal dating patterns and Jewish identity, and between Jewish identity and group survival. Students with a strong commitment to Judaism as a religion were more likely to recognize that marriage and child rearing were essential, not only to their personal happiness, but to Jewish group survival. They were also significantly more likely than those who did not make this link to limit their choice of prospective marriage partners to Jews.

Then and Now -- Connections Between *Jewish Campus Life* and the 1990 NJPS

In 1989, the North American Jewish Data Bank, together with the CUNY Graduate Center, published a secondary analysis of data on intermarriage, divorce, and remarriage derived from a data base which aggregated the marital histories of 6,457 ever-married, never-widowed, Jewish adults from nine cities around the United States.[5] Some of their key findings replicated those of *Jewish Campus Life*. For instance, the authors wrote that "the factors most associated with preventing a first intermarriage are having Jewish friends, higher income, higher education, and some Jewish education (in order of importance). In second marriages, the chance of intermarriage was inhibited solely by the presence of Jewish friends."[6] They also found that being young and male at the time of first marriage was highly related to intermarriage, while "having more Jewish friends, and being older appear to be the strongest predictors of an endogamous Jewish marriage.[7]

The importance of Jewish friendship networks, of being imbedded in Jewish social circles, was a central finding of the 1984 campus study. At that time, I wrote in the policy-implications portion of the study that when adolescents go on to college, they should have access to open and supportive Jewish social frameworks in addition to the intellectual opportunities they find on campus, and that Jewish campus professionals should see as one of their primary tasks the creation of a variety of Jewish social circles with which students could associate. This was because in the study even those who lacked meaningful exposure to Jewish experiences before coming to college were more likely to date and to plan to marry Jews if they had a high proportion of Jewish friends.

The 1990 NJPS is rich with data reflecting the demographic and social characteristics of American Jews. In particular, the findings on intermarriage and conversion into and out of Judaism have already begun to send shock waves through the Jewish community. The rate of intermarriage since 1985 has been 52 percent, though it varies widely by geographic region. The rate of conversion to Judaism by non-Jewish spouses has slowed, and a hitherto unreported rate of conversion to Christianity and other religions has been demonstrated. It appears that the children of mixed marriages are very likely to be raised out of the Jewish religion and that their rate of intermarriage is such that the ability of mixed-married couples to transmit Jewish identity to the next generation has been seriously called into question. Now, none of these data are totally new. Yet, in the aggregate, they compelled social scientists, religious and organizational leaders, and caring lay people to look at the community differently. It is as though all of the data we already were aware of have been refracted through a new prism, leading to fresh perspectives on future policy.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Some pundits now argue that a continually increasing rate of mixed marriage without conversion is a fact of life. Therefore, the response of the organized Jewish community should be to increase the funding of outreach efforts to the minimally, marginally, and unaffiliated, whether or not they

consider themselves Jews. However, given the results of outreach efforts -- primarily but not exclusively by the Reform movement -- over the last decade and a half, it is clear that only a small percentage of Jews and non-Jews in mixed marriages will be influenced by these programs. Not all outreach efforts are worthwhile or cost-effective. Moreover, the decision by the Reform and Reconstructionist movements to legitimate patrilineal descent, while humanitarian and logical in the short term, is also one of the factors which led to a decline in adult conversion rates. The 1990 NJPS data clearly demonstrate that it is very difficult to transmit Jewish identity in a mixed household, particularly the ideological connectedness to Jewish peoplehood and a personal stake in Jewish corporate survival.

A second group of community leaders argue that Jewish community resources should be utilized to intensify the Jewish identity and way of life of those who already consider themselves Jewish and who wish to give greater meaning to that identity. They consider nearly all of the expenditures on outreach a waste of resources, given the scarcity of uncommitted community dollars and the high cost of Jewish living for those trying to live a variety of models of maximalist Jewish life within a pluralistic community. Moreover, they argue that it is the quality of Jewish religious and communal life and not the absolute quantity of Jewish individuals that will determine the future vibrancy of the American Jewish community.

A third group contends that we possess the resources to engage in outreach and inreach intensively, but just haven't yet reached deeply enough into our collective pockets. They cite the recent monumental campaigns for operations Exodus, Moses, and Solomon and the rise of many new private Jewish foundations as proof of the existence of these untapped dollars.

Finally, a fourth group has focused on the issue of ideology, the role that fostering a particular climate of opinion within the Jewish community can play in inhibiting intermarriage before the fact and promoting conversion to Judaism by non-Jewish spouses when, or even after, a mixed marriage takes place. This group emphasizes the possibility of changing the atmosphere within which the American Jew functions. Such changes have taken place in the decades since the '60s. For instance, support of a Jewish day-school movement, which was considered un-American by large segments of the Jewish community, has become an accepted tenet across American Jewish religious movements. Public demonstration of Jewish identity by individuals and groups, such as wearing religious symbols and marching in parades and demonstrations for religious and nationalistic reasons, have become acceptable and even desirable behaviors. A community standard of Sabbath and dietary-law observance at public events has taken hold across the country, and Jewish studies have flourished on the secular university campuses. In the same vein, why should it not become Jewishly "politically correct" to encourage Jews to marry other Jews, and to break down remaining prejudices against converts and conversion? Such an approach requires that the Jewish identity of born Jews have meaningful content, and that connectedness with Jewish peoplehood be engendered in all members of the community. This in turn requires the development of structures, rhetorical and institutional, which insure that adult Jewish men and women have the same opportunities for the development of Jewish social circles provided for them as were earlier advocated for college students. For example, "Passport to Israel" programs should be subsidized by the community for adults as well as youth. Weekend and vacation study and socializing institutes should be available in every large Jewish community and open to those from smaller ones. Divorced Jews should be welcomed into these networks, since the only predictor of endogamy in second marriages is Jewish friendship circles.

These are only a few policy implications suggested by the research which we already have available as augmented by the emerging data from the 1990 NJPS. Let us hope that the new prism through which leaders of the community now see the possible futures of the American Jewish community will enlighten and encourage planning to enable positive action.

Notes

1. Rela Geffen Monson, *Jewish Campus Life: A Survey of Attitudes Toward Marriage and Family* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1984).

2. Moreover, since all of the campuses on which the survey was conducted contained institutional Hillel frameworks, whether full foundations or counselorships, it is possible that they were chosen by many of the students because of the presence of these structures which guaranteed the availability of formal Jewish programming, whether the student chose to avail him or herself of it or not. Since half of the sample was randomly selected from lists of Jewish students at each school or from the general college students directory and the other half from lists of students known to Hillel, this was confirmation that the sampling plan had born fruit.

3. Barry A. Kosmin et al., *Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey* (New York: Council of Jewish Federations, 1991).

4. Daniel Yankelovich, *The Changing Values on Campus: Political and Personal Attitudes of Today's College Students* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1972).

5. Barry A. Kosmin et al., *Intermarriage, Divorce, and Remarriage Among American Jews, 1982-87* (New York: Council of Jewish Federations, 1989).

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 22. The reported gender effect may have been a result of sampling bias in the local community studies, some of which used distinctively Jewish names, thus excluding intermarried Jewish women who routinely take their husband's names and therefore are underenumerated. This effect was corrected in the NJPS of 1990 and the gender differential for marriages since the mid-1980s was significantly narrowed.