

*Editor*  
RABBI JULES HARLOW

*Olin*

*BM*

*21*

*R11*

*9/1st*

*1991*



# What of the Future?

## The New National Jewish Population Study\*

DR. SIDNEY GOLDSTEIN  
*George Hazard Crooker University Professor  
and Professor of Sociology  
Brown University  
Providence, Rhode Island*

Concern about the health of American Jewish life, and particularly Jewish population trends in the United States, has expanded beyond the professional interests of rabbis and of a few specialists in demography and sociology to become part of a general and spirited debate over the Jewish experience and the Jewish future in America. What is more, the tone of the debate has gone well beyond neutral and objective academic and scientific discussion, to embrace such value distinctions as "pessimists" and "optimists," "assimilationists" and "transformationists." Unfortunately, an increasingly emotional tenor has come to affect the debate on Jewish population and, to say the least, this has contributed little to the quality of the debate.

Let me briefly review these opposing views of the future, particularly from the perspective of demographics. On the one hand, there is a deep-rooted feeling among many Jews and among some scholars that there is no demographic future in the long run for the American Jewish community, and therefore no quantitative basis on which to build a qualitative future. Though there may be some ambiguity and disagreement over how "long" is the long run, this view holds that American Jewry is progressively weakening demographically, that it is shrinking in size as a result of low fertility, high intermarriage and assimilative losses, and that it is assimilating into American culture and society. So it is argued.

\* Only highlights of Dr. Goldstein's presentation and discussion of the NJPS findings covering the characteristics of the Jewish population can be included in this abstract of his lecture. Readers interested in fuller detail and particularly in his discussion of the implications of the findings for the future of American Jewry are referred to an extensive report he has authored that will be published in the 1992 *American Jewish Year Book*.

In contrast, others maintain that the demographic issues are of marginal importance in the lives of American Jews, that the issue is not how many Jews there are or will be, but rather the quality of Jewish life. In this view, concerns about population size, growth, fertility and migration represent misplaced emphases. The critical concerns should focus on Judaism, Jewish culture, Jewish education, the perpetuation of Jewish communal institutions and the linkages between Diaspora communities and Israel. It is argued that the changes in substance and style of Jewish life present no serious threat to the survival of American Jewry, that indeed we may be entering or may already be in the midst of a transformation to a new Golden Age.

I do not regard myself as a pessimist or an optimist, but as a realist. I disagree with the anti-demographic position. I reject the view that population issues are marginal to the social, economic, political and cultural life of the American Jewish community. I view the demographic patterns of American Jews as basic to family, structure, community cohesion and generational continuity. The size, mobility, location and composition of the population of the Jewish community all greatly affect its social, cultural and religious viability, whether this is judged by the ability to support an educational system, to organize religious life, to maintain a Jewish marriage market or to provide sufficient density of population to insure a sense of community. The socio-demographic structure of the Jewish community, like that of the larger American community, is both a product and a cause of change. To have Judaism, we have to have Jews, and the right kind in the right kinds of places. Quality and quantity are inexorably linked in a complex fashion, and we need therefore to be concerned about both and the connections between them.

Several interrelated factors specific to the Jewish experience in the United States can help us to understand the importance that population factors have assumed among American Jews. First is the changing rate of population growth of the Jewish population. The dramatic increase from only slightly over 1,000 in 1790–200 years ago to a quarter million by 1880, was followed by the massive immigration that swelled the American Jewish population to over four million by the end of the 1920s. By then, Jews constituted 3.6 percent of the total population; they had become a substantial, vibrant segment of American society. But after the 1920s, the number of Jews grew at a slower rate, because of curtailed immigration, reduced fertility and possibly the effects of intermarriage and assimilation. In 1991, as we will see in more detail, there are probably about 5.5

million Jews in the United States. Because the rest of the United States population has grown at a faster rate, Jews are now only about 2.2 percent of the total American population.

The second major factor transforming the American Jewish community is a by-product of the reduced role of immigration. Today, more than ninety percent of American Jews are native born, and half or more of these are third- and fourth- generation Americans. In recent decades, the American Jewish community has had to depend substantially on itself to maintain its numbers. Increasingly we have become, in a demographic sense, an American-Jewish community. The annual number of immigrants from the Soviet Union, Israel and other countries has probably not yet been large enough even to cancel the reductions in the foreign-born resulting from the deaths of aged Jews, among whom most of the earlier immigrants are concentrated.

The third factor affecting the demographic experience and characteristics of the American Jewish population, and perhaps the most important, is their impressive success in the struggle for acceptance into the larger society. Jews have reached new heights in educational achievement and occupational choice, as well as far greater freedom in selection of place of residence, memberships, friends and spouses. Together these changes help explain associated demographic features such as later age at marriage, low fertility, more intermarriage and more divorce, all of which may reinforce the tendencies to greater mobility that have resulted from the educational and occupational patterns. The major question is the extent to which they have contributed to the weakening of American Jewry, and especially the ties of individual Jews to the Jewish community.

These concerns with the vitality of the American-Jewish community have led to a growing recognition that up-to-date information and self-assessment are necessary as a basis for measuring needs, for identifying problems that threaten our future and for making decisions about facilities, services, funding and community relations, as well as religious, social, and cultural activities.

A major step in this direction is the National Jewish Population Study (NJPS), undertaken in 1990 under the sponsorship of the Council of Jewish Federations. In this survey the sample design was intended to insure the widest possible coverage of the Jewish population. It encompassed all types of Jews, ranging from those strongly identifying themselves as Jewish at one extreme to those on the margins of the community or even outside it at the other; by design it

sought to include born Jews who no longer considered themselves Jewish and the non-Jewish spouses/partners and children of Jewish household members, as well as other non-Jewish members of the household.

The fluid character of the American Jewish community is at the heart of the findings of the NJPS. How many we are depends on who is counted in or out of the population. The survey estimates that there are 3.2 million households in the United States containing one or more persons who are Jews (including those Jewish by religion, secular Jews, and persons who were born or raised Jewish who no longer consider themselves Jewish). This 3.2 million contrasts with only 1.950 million such households in 1970-71. The 64% increase largely reflects the upsurge in intermarriage, resulting in many more mixed households, but also in households that contain only persons currently non-Jewish who were either formerly Jewish or of Jewish descent. Of the 3.2 million households, 57% were entirely Jewish, 27% of mixed composition, and 16% contained no core Jews, only persons who had been born or raised Jews who belong to another religious group, a number of whom consider themselves concurrently to be ethnically Jewish. In total, the 3.2 million households contain 8.2 million persons (including 80,000 Jews estimated to have been in institutions and 20,000 Russian immigrants not covered because of arrival after the survey was initiated).

Of these 8.2 million persons, 5.515 million constitute the core Jewish population (those who reported themselves as Jewish by religion [4.4 million] or as secular Jews). This compares with 5.420 million estimated as core Jews in 1970, an increase of only 1.8%. The slower rate of growth of the core Jewish population is evidenced by the fact that in this same interval the total U. S. population grew by 23%. As a result of the differential growth rates, core Jews as a percentage of the U. S. population declined from 2.7% to 2.2%.

In addition to the core population, 415,000 were adults born of Jewish parents but raised from birth as non-Jews, 210,000 persons were born or raised Jewish and had switched to another religion, and 700,000 were children under the age of 18 who had a "qualified Jew" as a parent but were being raised in a religion other than Judaism. Including all of these persons of Jewish descent in the Jewish count raises the total to 6.840 million. The balance of the 8.2 million persons represented in the sampled households consist of 1.350 million Gentile adults who were not and had never been identified as Jewish by religion or ethnic origin. They are largely the spouses of

current Jews or of Jews by descent. The heterogeneity of the household composition of the sampled households attests to the cumulative impact over one or more generations that intermarriage and other social forces have had on the demographics of the Jewish population. This is further evidenced in the information on the characteristics of the population.

#### GENERATION STATUS

Generation status has particular significance for the Jewish population because it is closely associated with a host of other identity variables. Two-thirds of Jews by religion reported that all four of their grandparents were born overseas. Only 11% reported all of their grandparents born in the United States. Only one-third of the secular Jews have had all four of their grandparents born overseas. Less than one-fourth of those who were raised Jewish or who were born Jewish but now profess another religion have had all four grandparents born overseas. For about 40% of them, all four grandparents were born in the United States. Clearly, the further persons are removed from their immigrant origins, the greater is the tendency to identify as a secular Jew or to be at the margins of the Jewish community.

#### AGE COMPOSITION

Reflecting the combined effects of lower fertility and the growing concentration of the large numbers of immigrants from the early 1900s among the aged, the core Jewish population continues to be older than the white population of the United States. In 1990, the median age of the Jewish core was 37.3 years, compared to the 33.6 median of the total whites. The differences in age composition suggested by the medians are reflected in the proportions in different age segments. For example, 19% of the Jewish group is under age 15, compared to 21% of all whites. By contrast, 17% of the core Jewish population was age 65 and over, compared to only 13% of the white population.

The age composition within the Jewish population also varies among the different identity sub-categories. The median age of those who were born Jews and are currently Jews by religion was 39.3 years, compared to a median of only 29.9 years for those classified as secular Jews. This difference is clearly reflected in the much

larger proportion of secular Jews under age 25 and in the much higher percentage of aged among the Jews by religion.

#### GENERAL EDUCATION

For the Jewish core population 25 years and old and over, a college education has become increasingly common. Almost three-quarters had at least some college, and as many one-quarter had some graduate education. Overall, the educational achievement of the total adult Jewish population rose substantially between 1970/71 and 1990. Some of this increase reflects the changing age composition of the population aged 25 and over. As the older persons with less schooling die, and as the more educated younger population ages, the average for all ages will rise. The data from NJPS-1990 strongly suggest that levels of education vary by type of Jewish identity. Many more of the younger secular Jews had less than a college education, and a much higher percent of the Jews by religion had completed college than was true of the Jews by choice or of the secular Jews. Similarly, the secular Jews had the lowest percentage reporting graduate studies. These very different educational patterns suggest that the high value placed on education generally associated with Jews occurs most frequently among those professing to be Jews by religion.

#### METROPOLITAN RESIDENCE

In 1990, Jews continued to be concentrated in metropolitan areas (three-fourths of all core Jews); yet one-quarter of all Jews were living in non-metropolitan counties and one-third of these were in counties of less than 150,000 people. More of those who were Jews by religion were concentrated in metropolitan centers, suggesting that greater dispersion is associated with being a secular Jew. A major challenge to the community is how to service the Judaic needs of those living in smaller communities and in greater isolation from mainstream Jewry.

#### REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION

There is strong but declining concentration of core Jewish population in the Northeast (44% of total). The number and proportion of core Jews in the South (22%) and in the West (24%) has been growing substantially. More households in the Northeast are entirely

Jewish households (two-thirds), compared to 45% in the Midwest and 50% in the South and in the West. About 18% of households in the West contain no core Jews, compared to 21% in the South, 23% in the Midwest, and only 8% in the Northeast. Region of residence thus must be considered a key variable in understanding the strength and character of Jewish identification.

#### MIGRATION IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS

Geographic mobility constitutes a major feature of Jewish life in the United States and has serious implications for the strength of ties of individual Jews to the community. About one-quarter of all adults in the core Jewish population lived in a different area in 1990 than in 1985; 11% had moved within their state to a different city or town, another 11% had moved between states, and one percent had made an international change in residence. Over the course of their lifetime four out of every five core Jews had moved away from city or town of birth. Secular Jews tended to be more mobile than Jews by religion. How to integrate mobile Jews into the local communities in which they settle, often temporarily, constitutes one of the major challenges facing the national and local communities.

#### INTERMARRIAGE

Of the 2.6 million adults who were born Jewish and were married at the time of the survey, 31% were married to someone not born Jewish, including the 4% who were married to a person not born Jewish who had chosen to be Jewish either through conversion or through self-identification. Of the Jews by choice, about 70% had converted. Compared to the findings of NJPS-1970/71, these data point to a very substantial rise in the level of intermarriage, from 8% in 1970/71 to 31% of all born Jews.

The trend in intermarriage is evidenced in the statistics by year of marriage. The percentage marrying a person not born Jewish increased from 11% of those married prior to 1965 to 51% of the group marrying between 1975 and 1984, and to 57% of those marrying between 1985 and 1990. Of the intermarriages, some involved conversions to Judaism or a choice on the part of the non-Jewish spouses to regard themselves as Jewish even if not formally converted. If all such Jews by choice are counted as Jewish, the percent of Jews married to a non-Jew rose from only 9% among those marrying before 1965 to 52% of those marrying in the most recent period,



1985-1990. The high rate of mixed marriages in 1985-1990 means that for every new couple consisting of two Jewish partners there were approximately two new couples in which only one of the partners was Jewish.

#### FERTILITY

Comparison of the Jewish fertility reported in 1990 with that of all white women in childbearing years in 1988 shows Jewish fertility to be substantially below that of the American white population. For example, Jewish women aged 25-29 averaged only 0.5 children, whereas all white women this age had already had one child. By ages 40-44, Jewish women averaged 1.6 children, far below the 2.1 average of all white women of that age.

The 1970/71 survey showed an average completed fertility of 2.4 children for all Jewish women aged 45-49. In 1990, the comparable age group had averaged only 1.9 children. This was not only 20% below the Jewish average for those age 45-49 twenty years earlier, but also 10% below the 2.1 level needed for replacement. Clearly, Jewish fertility has declined, resulting in below-replacement fertility for those at the end of childbearing. Even among women below age 35, except for those aged 20-24 who were just beginning childbearing, the fertility levels reported in 1990 were about half those in 1970/71 for comparable age groups. Nonetheless, as in 1970/71, in 1990 women under age 35 indicated that they expected to have more than two children. If realized, this would represent a significant reversal in fertility behavior. However, none of the younger age groups in the 1970/71 study realized their expectations by the time of the 1990 survey. The data on actual fertility, therefore, point to continued low levels of childbearing among Jews (both Jews by religion and secular Jews).

#### HOUSEHOLD SIZE

Reflecting low fertility and the greater tendency of the young and the aged to live alone, Jewish household size declined between 1970 and 1990, from 2.8 to 1.9 for all Jews; and from 2.7 to 1.7 for core Jews. Entirely Jewish households are smaller (2.2) than mixed households (3.2) and households without any core Jews (2.7).

## JEWISH DENOMINATIONS

Judging by current denomination of adults in the core Jewish population, Reform Judaism constitutes the largest denomination among Jews by religion (38%). Conservative affiliation accounts for 35% and Orthodox for only 6%. The shift away from Orthodox and toward Reform is evidenced by comparing current denominational affiliation with that in which the respondents were raised. One-third of all Conservative respondents reported being raised as Orthodox, and only 4% as Reform; 12% of currently Reform respondents were raised Orthodox, and 26% were raised Conservative; 89% of all Orthodox respondents reported being raised Orthodox.

Only 27% of the 3.2 million households (13% of mixed households and 41% of all-Jewish households) reported synagogue membership. Of these, 16% belonged to Orthodox, 43% to Conservative, and 35% to Reform congregations. These affiliated households encompassed 2.2 million core Jews, equal to 40% of the core population.

## JEWISH PRACTICES

Jewish and civic attachments and practices vary considerably by Jewish identity, and reinforce the image of a complex set of relations among behavioral and identity features of the population, although most follow the expected pattern of differentials. For example, 61% of Jews by religion fast on Yom Kippur, compared to only 10% of the secular Jews. A similar pattern characterizes high holy days attendance; 59% of the Jews by religion and only 12% of the secular Jews attend. One-third of the Jews by religion have visited Israel, compared to only 11% of secular Jews. Having mostly Jewish friends and subscribing to Jewish periodicals characterizes a minority (45%) of Jews by religion and far fewer of the other categories of Jews. Interestingly, more Jews by religion volunteer for secular organizations than for Jewish ones (39% compared to 21%) and the difference is even greater for secular Jews (43% volunteer for secular organizations and only 5% for Jewish ones).

Consistent with earlier evidence, attending Seder and lighting Hanukkah candles were the most common household ritual observances for entirely Jewish households (86% and 77%, respectively), for mixed households at a lower level of observance (62% and 59%, respectively), and even for non-core households at a still lower level (25% and 17%, respectively). Contributions to Jewish charities decreased from 62% of the entirely Jewish households to only 28%

of the mixed and 13% of the non-core units. A majority of all types of units, by contrast, contributed to secular charities, and one-third of all types contributed to political campaigns, suggesting that involvement in the secular life of the community was given greater priority than parallel responsibilities to the Jewish community.

### CONCLUSION

Whether American Jewry faces greater assimilation or is transforming itself into a different, possibly more dynamic, community remains a focus of strong debate. Detailed analysis of NJPS-1990, we hope, will yield more definitive answers to these questions. In this future, demographics are a key concern.

In combination, the patterns I have outlined, based on the first evidence available from NJPS-1990, point to low fertility and high levels of intermarriage, an aging population, high mobility and greater residential dispersion, varying levels of personal involvement with an attenuation in memberships and ritual practices. Together, the data portray a community of great complexity and diversity undergoing important changes, altering in significant ways what was, and shaping what will be in the future. There are indications of strengths and weaknesses, of growth and decline, of reasons for pride and for deep concern.

We obviously face very strong challenges and yet, to the extent that a hard and substantial core of Jews retain a comparatively close-knit ethnic-religious identification within the larger American society, the potential for continued vitality remains. Stability of numbers or even declining numbers in itself need not constitute a fundamental threat to the maintenance of a strong Jewish community and to high levels of individual Jewish identity. A stable or larger population base would certainly make it easier to insure Jewish identity and vitality. Concern with numbers—and I want to stress this—is especially relevant at the local level where institutional vitality requires minimum population size. It is unlikely, however, that the Jewish American community as a whole can do very much to control the changing fertility levels or the patterns of redistribution, since these processes very largely reflect reactions to a wide and complex range of social, economic and normative changes in the larger American society.

The challenge to the community, then, is:

a) how to create a balance between the competing forces of integration with the larger American scene and continued strong identity as Jews;

b) how to build on the comparatively strong roots that many Jews, particularly those in the core, have in the community;

c) how to best use our resources to reach out to and integrate those who are more marginal to the community—the newcomers, the aged and disabled, the singles, the intermarried, working women, youth and especially those on the religious and ethnic margins;

d) how to provide support for those Jewish communities that have developed in many scattered locations, at the same time creating a strong sense of national and continental community, and insuring that the national community, in turn, helps meet the needs of the small, isolated communities;

e) how to insure the future Jewish identity of as many as possible of the large number of children growing up in mixed marriage families, in households professing to be only ethnically Jewish, and in households where descent is Jewish but where parents report themselves as non-Jewish.

It is clear that we have a large population reservoir. To the extent that a high percentage of it is marginal to the community, this is a frustrating situation. To the extent that this large reservoir provides a potential source of growth, it constitutes an important challenge and hope for the future.

What is perhaps most important is that, on the basis of continuing research and evaluation, the community be willing and prepared to develop new institutional forms designed both to mitigate the negative effects of potential or actual population decline, dilution and dispersal, and to entice into the core population those now on the margins. More effective means must be developed to enhance opportunities for self-identification as Jews, to promote affiliation, increase our financial resources, expand our leadership base, integrate the mobile and marginal segments of the population and cope with the problems of a dispersed population. Coping with the real world has always been a hallmark of Judaism. By facing the challenges confronting us, and by using our rich experiences, our Judaic tradition and our human and financial resources, the community must help insure that the changes will still allow for a meaningful balance between being Jewish and being American. In the end, I am both a realist and an optimist, believing that the strength and efforts which the American Jewish community has displayed over the past few decades on its own behalf and on behalf of world Jewry augur well for our prospects for the future and will enable us to successfully confront the new demographic situation that has evolved.