

# **Bad Things Happen to Good Numbers**

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ot all Jewish numbers are created equal. Many scientifically generated numbers — those that provoke discomfort or demonstrate shortcomings - encounter immediate resistance. And, sometimes, research findings attain enduring acceptance, even if they're wrong. The 1990 estimate that 52 percent of Jews were marrying non-Jews is illustrative. While still widely accepted, the finding was challenged in its time, and later revised to 43 percent.

## Jewish numbers are certainly subject to contestation — maybe that's why God commanded Moses to count the Israelites twice.

Sometimes, "good" numbers get bad receptions. Some years ago, working on a Jewish population survey for a local federation, my research team reported a huge increase in Jewish households over previous estimates. Our counting of the many marginally identified Jews in the outer reaches of the community helped increase the overall Jewish population (presumably a good thing), but in doing so, we diminished the average gift per household, tarnishing the luster of the federation's wellcelebrated campaign.

Similar examples abound today. Major donors today want to fund programs that "reach the unaffiliated." Consequently, in order to attract funding, directors of such projects are much more eager to find unaffiliated participants than participants who are 'alumni' of day schools, Jewish camps, youth groups, or Israel travel. I'm often asked, when I evaluate such programs, whether day school alumni are too numerous, or the intermarried too absent. No one ever asks if I missed those with stronger Jewish backgrounds.

In the debate over whether American Jews are growing more distant from Israel, Ari Kelman and I — advocates of "the distancing hypothesis" — are working with two advantages. As with the case of inflated intermarriage rates, the public "likes" our bad news, provided Israel isn't blamed. Most Jewish leaders, it seems, are prone to believe that young Jews are increasingly distant from Israel, agreeing with our analysis. The sole exceptions are devotees of Israel advocacy, who want to believe and

project the claim that Jews today support Israel as much as ever.

All of which brings us to the most contentious issue: assessing the impact of intermarriage. For years, I've been trying to advance the idea that intermarried parents produce very few children who identify as Jews, and that intermarriage per se is at the heart of the matter, not the weaker Jewish identities that many intermarried parents bring to their marriages. Population studies demonstrate repeatedly that only about one third of the children of intermarried families grow up to identify as Jews, and they go on to marry non-Jews even more than the children of in-marriages. What's more, these findings are neither isolated phenomena nor distinctive to American Jews. They coincide with patterns among other American ethno-religious groups as well as with evidence on Jews from other countries.

Though well-founded, this disturbing view of intermarriage typically generates disbelief and rejection — for two reasons: First, this view implies that intermarried Jews and the parents who raised them are somehow at fault; and second, we prefer to reason from the people whom we know rather than from the people we hardly encounter. The children of intermarriage who are most visible to engaged Jews are engaged in some form with Jewish life. They are rabbis, cantors, educators, innovators, donors, lay leaders, and Jewish studies professors. With children of the intermarried entering the ranks of committed Jewish leadership, it's hard to remember the tens of thousands of other children of the intermarried who are not visible because they have assimilated. We know about them only through Jewish population studies.

Unfortunately, rejecting what I call the "realistic" view of intermarriage means foregoing several helpful communal responses: more attention to teenagers, students, and post-college singles to help build Jewish social networks before they marry; more introductory Jewish education for all adults - intermarried or otherwise; more investment in easing the path to conversion for non-Jewish spouses and a greater willingness to advocate for conversion as the desired outcome when intermarriage occurs; and, finally, more work on lowering the competence barriers that impede entry into Jewish life by people with limited backgrounds

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— intermarried or not — so that those unfamiliar with the sometimes complex "choreography" of Jewish life will be invited into and helped with the "Jewish dance."

Jewish numbers are certainly subject to contestation — maybe that's why God commanded Moses to count the Israelites twice. That said, good and true Jewish numbers can illuminate and generate good Jewish public policy — but only if we adopt a more dispassionate approach to evaluating them, even, or especially, when their implications are disturbing.



by the numbers

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**Holidays** 

# Who Is Rich and What Is a Big Community?

RUHAMA WEISS

### Who can count the dust of Jacob?

will make your offspring as the dust of the Earth, so that if one can count the dust of the Earth, then your offspring, too, can be counted." (Genesis 13:16) Such is God's promise to Abraham. Was this promise ever fulfilled? Would we want it fulfilled? Numerous biblical censuses of the nation of Israel count the persons and clans of our ancestors. We find dreams on the one hand, reality on the other. In actuality, we are not as numerous as the sands of the seashore; we are a rather small nation that can definitely be counted.

### Does size matter?

Why do we want to be a multitude? Is our size important to God? The fantasy of being "as the sands on the seashore" creates an anxiety that remains part of the counting of the nation. Because we can be counted, we are counted. But taking the census can be catastrophic; God, thus, commands us to count silver instead of people.

What thread connects the divine promise that we would be as the sands on the seashore and the prohibition to count the Israelites? Is this a fear of the greed that accompanies counting or is this a fear of encountering a limited reality? Why is our size as a people important?

### Who is rich?

How do I count my money? How do I know if I have enough? The Talmud tells of several Jewish sages in the second century of the Common Era who tried to understand the common desire of becoming rich. What did they do? They played a type of conceptual game in which each sage offered a definition of the concept of wealth. The interesting definitions that entered the pages of history challenge the fantasy of wealth. They examine it and sometimes

pass criticism; they wink at it and at us and ask what is really important in our lives and whether money can provide that answer. Here are their definitions: Who is rich?

- Whoever is satisfied with his riches, says R. Meir.
- R. Tarfon says: Whoever has 100 vinevards and 100 fields and 100 servants who work in them.
- R. Akiva says: Whoever has a wife whose ways are pleasant.
- R. Yosi says: Whoever has a bathroom (toilet) near his table.

(Talmud Bavli, Tractate Shabbat 25b)

R. Meir claims that a rich person is one who is satisfied with what he has (the more familiar format — "one who is satisfied with his lot"). Poverty is true suffering, but the desire for wealth has no limits. The only limit, according to R. Meir, is a private limit; wealth is the ability to place limits and to be happy with what exists. A rich person is one who knows how to be happy.

R. Tarfon, who was very rich (and, according to talmudic legend, craved money), is uncritical and humorless regarding money. He says: A rich person is rich. A rich person has a lot of money.

R. Akiva married the daughter of one of the richest men in Jerusalem, Kalba Savua. R. Akiva's wife made an intriguing choice (I'm not sure I identify with her choice, but it was a brave choice); she relinquished her father's wealth and chose to devote her life to her husband's success as a talmid hacham (Torah scholar). R. Akiva tells us that there are things that cannot be purchased and that the highest level of happiness is devotion to the marital relationship. Money cannot buy love.

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