

The Shrinking Jewish Middle—And What to Do About It

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Foreword

The David W. Belin Lecture in American Jewish Affairs was established in 1991 through a generous gift from the late David W. Belin of Des Moines and New York to provide an academic forum for the discussion of contemporary Jewish life in the United States. Mr. Belin, a graduate of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, the Business School, and the Law School of the University of Michigan, had a distinguished career in law and public service. An exemplary public servant, Belin served as counsel to the Warren Commission, which investigated President John F. Kennedy's assassination, and was executive director to the Rockefeller Commission, which investigated CIA activities within the United States. A founding Chairman of Reform Judaism's Outreach Commission and founding member of the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, Belin served the American Jewish communities in numerous leadership roles. That service reflected his concern for the future of American Jewry and stimulated him to endow this annual lectureship to provide a forum for the discussion of contemporary Jewish life in the United States.

In addition to giving a public lecture at the University of Michigan, each year the distinguished Belin speaker provides a written version of their remarks, which the Frankel Center publishes. The existing Belin publications provide a valuable retrospective of the major issues facing the American Jewish community and a sampling of the depth and variety of research and scholarly thinking on American Jewry. Steven M. Cohen's present contribution adds a new dimension to the series.

Steven M. Cohen, is one of the leading sociologists of American Jewry. Professor Cohen is Research Professor of Jewish Social Policy at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, and Director of the Berman Jewish Policy Archive at Stanford University. He has previously taught at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Queens College, Yale, and Jewish Theological Seminary. He was the lead researcher on the Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011, and consultant to the Pew studies of American Jews and Israeli society. He has written numerous scholarly articles and policy-related reports and has authored a dozen books, including *The Jew Within*, *Two Worlds of Judaism: The Israeli and American Experience* and *Sacred Strategies: Transforming Synagogues from Functional to Visionary*. Professor Cohen has also written on American Jewish Affairs for Commentary Magazine, Mosaic Magazine, the New Republic, The Jewish Telegraphic Agency, and the Washington Post.

Cohen's lecture, delivered in Ann Arbor on March 16, 2017, documents an alarming decline of what he terms "Middle Jews," those non-Orthodox Jews who continue to engage in Judaism and/or the Jewish community in a meaningful way. Cohen proposes a set of policy objectives and calls to action that he argues can help stem this decline. It is up to the reader and the community to balance Cohen's directives with other competing societal and individual objectives.

The opinions expressed in this publication are not necessarily shared by the Frankel Center, but I am confident that they will stimulate debate and reflection as David W. Belin intended with the endowment of this lecture series.

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The Vital Jewish Middle

Over the decades, American Jewry has built an extraordinary number and variety of Jewish institutions. Among them are congregations and minyanim; Jewish membership organizations; Jewish communal relations and advocacy agencies; philanthropies; schools and preschools; youth groups; Israel travel programs; Hillels and Chabad houses; Jewish Studies programs; social service agencies serving both Jews and non-Jews; day and overnight camps; Jewish Community Centers; museums and theaters; and on and on.

By any standard, American Jews of the 20th and 21st centuries built a collective enterprise notable for its diversity, complexity, and sheer size. By such measures, it surpasses institutional endeavors in other Diaspora communities, if only because American Jewry numbers at least 10 times the size of its nearest competitor (France, with about 460,000 Jews). Jews are both an ethnic and a religious group. As an ethnic group, the magnitude and richness of American Jews' institutional life enormously exceeds that of all other "Late Generation European" ethnics, as Herbert Gans refers to the once-vibrant, but now mordant, ethnic communities in the US. [1],[#N1] And even though Jews may be the most secular of all major religious groups in America, they maintain a far greater variety of institutions than do most American religious denominations.

This vast institutional infrastructure is sustained by millions of American Jews donating not only their financial support, but their time and expertise as rabbis, educators, lay leaders, philanthropists, communal professionals, support staff, congregants, members, activists, and so forth. Ultimately, the organized American Jewish community depends upon people, specifically Jews, eager to be engaged in numerous ways.

But as vital and distinctive as the organized Jewish community has been in the past, it is now poised for marked contraction and weakening. In fact, like global warming, the recession in most forms of American Jewish organized life outside the Orthodox community is already underway. And, like global warming, it will continue on its downward path for years to come, following the trajectories of European-origin ethnic groups and mainline Protestant denominations. [2],[#N2]

The reason is the decline of the "American Jewish Middle," those who are neither Orthodox, nor only what we may call "Nominally Jewish": those who may identify as Jews, and be proud to be Jewish, but who rarely engage in acts of Jewish commitment and belonging. Numerically, the Jewish Middle is shrinking, while the Nominally Jewish are growing and Orthodox numbers are exploding.

To be sure, concerted action by philanthropists, leaders, professionals, and rank-and-file Jewish family members have indeed begun to alter these disturbing trends. But, their efforts—although still not up to the task—will bear fruit only 20 or 30 years from now. In the meantime, we can anticipate steady and ongoing declines in those parts of the Jewish world dependent upon committed non-Orthodox Jews, a group that is simultaneously vital to Jewish life as we know it, and subject to the intervention of policymakers who can

help revitalize the shrinking Jewish Middle, if only they come to recognize the gravity of the challenge before them.

Fewer Middle Jews, Less Middle Judaism

To assess the changing contours of the American Jewish population, I turned to the dataset from the Pew Research Center's *Portrait of Jewish Americans*. Setting aside the self-defined Orthodox, I needed to divide the others (the “non-Orthodox”) into “relatively engaged” and “relatively unengaged” segments, requiring construction of an inevitably arbitrary and fuzzy boundary.

I devised a simple three-point standard. Those qualified as “engaged” shared three characteristics. First, they say that being Jewish is at least somewhat important to them. Second, they attended what they called a Passover Seder in the prior year, which for some meant a meal of family and friends with little explicit ritual content. And third, at least some of their close friends are Jewish. About half the non-Orthodox met all three criteria.

Respectively, these three criteria roughly correspond to the “three Bs” in social scientists’ conception of religiosity: Belief, Behavior, and Belonging. Those who don’t qualify on all three are classified as “Jewishly unengaged.” We can call them “Nominally Jewish.” And those who cross the threshold—the Jewishly engaged—consist both of Orthodox and all the others (primarily Conservative and Reform Jews, but also nondenominational and no-religion Jews as well). The latter group—somewhat engaged but non-Orthodox—constitute what I’m calling the “Jewish Middle.” Of the more than 5 million Jewish adults, fully 45% are unengaged (“Nominal Jews”), 9% are Orthodox, while the remainder—46%—comprise the Jewish Middle, that is, non-Orthodox and meeting all three criteria noted above.

Jews in the Middle trail the Orthodox with respect to having mostly Jewish friends (40% vs. 90%), fasting on Yom Kippur (69% vs. 100%), belonging to a synagogue (43% vs. 72%), giving to a Jewish charity (72% vs. 95%), and feeling very attached to Israel (39% vs. 62%). At the same time, those in the Middle are more active and committed than the “Nominally Jewish.” The Middles are about twice as likely as the Nominals to fast on Yom Kippur, give to Jewish charities, see being Jewish as very important, or feel very attached to Israel. They are three times as likely to have mostly Jewish friends, attend a Seder, light Shabbat candles, or belong to a Jewish organization. And the gap expands to 4:1 with respect to attending services at least monthly, or belonging to a synagogue.

The drop in the number of Jews in the middle of the identity spectrum is quite apparent. Middle Jews decline from 61% among those 70 and over, to 53% among those aged 55–69, 44% among those in the 40–54 age cohort, and 35% among those aged 25–39. In contrast, over the same age spectrum the “Nominal Jews” climb from 35% to 52%, and the Orthodox leap from 4% to 14%. And 27% of Jewish children under 17 are born into Orthodox families, with as many as 35% of those under 5 years old. [3][#N3]

Distribution of Orthodox, “Middle” and Nominally Jewish Adults by Age

Age	Orthodox	Middle	Nominally Jewish
70+	4%	60%	35%
55-69	5%	53%	42%
40-54	11%	45%	44%
25-39	15%	35%	50%

18-24	11%	37%	52%
All adults	9%	46%	45%

The drop in Middle Jews is not only a matter of percentages, but also one of absolute numbers. In comparing those aged 55–69 with those aged 25–39, the raw number of Orthodox more than doubles (75,000 vs. 179,000), as their percentage increases from 5% to 15%. The number of Nominal Jews holds steady at about 650,000, while growing as a fraction of the adult population. But the shrinking Jewish Middle plummets from a hefty 805,000 to a mere 442,000, plummeting from 53% to 35% of adult Jews.

The conclusion is inescapable: Put simply, the number of middle-aged non-Orthodox Jews who are engaged in Jewish life is dropping sharply today, and will drop even further in the next 20 to 40 years. And, absent significant policy changes, their numbers will continue to drop for years thereafter.

The critical concern is that a large Jewish Middle is vital to the sustenance of so many major institutions in Jewish life. Clearly, Conservative and Reform synagogues depend heavily upon these moderately to highly affiliating Jews. So too do Federations, JCCs, and numerous Jewish organizations. Jews of the Middle patronize Jewish cultural events, museums, periodicals, and publications. They are the mainstays of the vast Jewish educational enterprise on behalf of their children.

The effects of a declining number of engaged non-Orthodox Jews are already palpable. The American Jewish Congress is no more. Hadassah, B'nai B'rith, and other venerable organizations have been experiencing plunging membership for years. Even if one regards these entities as endeavors whose time has come, one must take cognizance of declining numbers, over the past decade, of: donors to Jewish federations; Conservative synagogue members; Reform temple members; youth group participants; and enrollments in Schechter, Reform, and community day schools. [4].[#N4]

Now, it could be argued that a vital future for American Jews may not depend upon healthy Conservative, Reform, JCC, and Federation movements—classic Jewish organizations. After all, new ways of being Jewish and expressing Jewish commitment constantly emerge.

That said, my concern with the shrinking number of engaged non-Orthodox Jews is not predicated only upon anxiety over the future of these legacy institutions. Rather it is about the engaged Jewish population needed to either perpetuate current institutions or to launch their successors. Successor identities and institutions—be they independent minyanim, Jewish activism in the Third World, Jewish environmentalism, redefining “pro-Israel,” or something(s) else—will rely upon a committed population outside of Orthodoxy.

Most simply, the decline of the Jewish Middle raises a serious question about the Jewish future: Will a vigorous and vital Orthodoxy be complemented by a full range of Jewish cultural and ideological diversity and vitality? Or will the precincts of active American Jewry come to be numerically dominated by Orthodoxy? Right now we may speak of four streams of Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist. In 50 years, will our grandchildren be speaking of four other streams: Hasidic, Yeshivish, Modern Orthodox, and “liberal?” [5].[#N5]

Few Jewish Births, Many Jews Intermarrying

A big reason for the falling population of the non-Orthodox is the low fertility rate—about 1.7 children for non-Orthodox Jews 40–54 years old. [6].[#N6]. Since a stable population requires a birthrate of 2.1, an

estimate of 1.7 immediately suggests an intergenerational decline of as much as 19%.

But not all of the 1.7 born to Jewish parents are being raised as Jews, or—more critically—will grow up to identify as Jews. While all Orthodox children are being raised as Jews, among the non-Orthodox, about one-sixth are not. So while Orthodox women are averaging over 4 Jewish children, the figure drops to just 1.4 among the non-Orthodox, meaning that among the non-Orthodox, the next generation of Jews will be just two-thirds as large as the current generation of Jewish adults.

The prime reason why so many children of non-Orthodox Jewish adults are raised outside of the Jewish group relates to intermarriage. Of adults with two Jewish parents, almost all (90%) of the grown children identify as Jews. However, among those with just one parent who was Jewish (the offspring of the intermarried), just 45% currently identify as Jews. [7][#N7]

The loss of Jewish population owing in large part to intermarriage is demonstrated by additional figures: of the 7.23 million adults who had one or two Jewish parents, 5.15 million identify as Jews, but as many as 2.08 million (about 29%) do not identify as Jews. Notably, of the 2.08 million dropouts, fully 79% report that just one of their parents was Jewish.

Owing to the many who intermarried in recent years (72% among the non-Orthodox), the “effective Jewish fertility” rate (the number of children who are Jewish, as opposed to the simple number of children) is diminished by the tendency of the intermarried to raise their children as non-Jews.

Moreover, not only do intermarried couples produce fewer Jewish children, they also provide the youngsters with far weaker Jewish socialization and education than do in-married Jews. As compared with in-married couples, intermarried couples exhibit far lower rates of holiday celebration, ritual observance, institutional affiliation, and informal ties with other Jews (friends, neighbors, co-workers, etc.). Their children experience less formal and less intensive Jewish schooling, and less frequent informal Jewish education experiences (day camp, overnight camp, youth groups, and Israel travel). [8][#N8]

As a result, the children of the intermarried who grow up to identify as Jews exhibit weaker Jewish interest and diminished capacities to partake of Jewish life. They are less familiar with holiday observance, Jewish communal organization, Israel, music, prayer, and linguistic expressions, to note just a few areas of the everyday Jewish “recipe knowledge.”

The cumulative chain effect of intermarriage can be seen in the grandparents’ generation. Since about 90% of the children of the intermarried also intermarry, the vast majority of intermarried Jews’ grandchildren have just one Jewish grandparent.

Of course, it’s possible that the offspring of intermarried couples may well increasingly identify as Jews. One reason is that over the last 50 years, American Jews’ social prestige has risen enormously, moving from a very low-standing white ethnic group in the 1960s [9][#N9] to the highest-standing major religious group in 2009. [10][#N10] In addition, the rise of intermarriage also means a rise in the levels of Jewish cultural and social capital that Jewish partners bring to the marriage. More Jewishly-educated people are intermarrying than in previous generations, raising the chances that more children of the intermarried will identify as Jews when they grow up. However, even as the number of Jewishly identifying offspring increases, very few of those offspring will be particularly engaged in Jewish life, consistent with a growing number of Nominal Jews and a declining number of Jews in the Middle.

Intermarriage is its own engine. Moderate levels of intermarriage in the 1960s helped fuel high rates of intermarriage in recent years. The reason? The increased presence of children of the intermarried, a group exhibiting a high intermarriage propensity. Somewhat paradoxically, the more the children of the intermarried identify as Jews, the higher the intermarriage rate of identifying Jews in the next generation.

In sum, low Jewish birthrates combined with high rates of intermarriage are producing fewer non-Orthodox Jews with moderate-to-advanced education and cultural skills to allow for knowledgeable participation and leadership in Jewish life. That is, the future size of the non-Orthodox population in total may well remain stable. At the same time, the numerical decline of non-Orthodox Jews with some measure of engagement in Jewish life is virtually assured.

Policy Objectives

Absent any effective intervention, fewer non-Orthodox Jews will be socialized into Jewish life; fewer will have been exposed to home observance, Jewish schooling, and other Jewish socialization experiences—largely because of the rising fraction of them who derive from mixed married homes. Put succinctly, non-Orthodox Jews will be numerically fewer and educationally thinner. As a result, engaged non-Orthodox Jews will contract, with direct adverse consequences for the entire organized Jewish communal infrastructure outside of Orthodoxy.

The Mishnah teaches, “Im ein kemach, ein Torah” – If there’s no flour (sustenance), there’s no Torah learning. By extension we can intone, “Im ein Yehudim, ein Yahadut” – If there are no Jews, there’s no Judaism.

To contend with the current and impending decline of the Jewish Middle, effective policies need to achieve the following very ambitious outcomes:

1. Bring down the average age at marriage, such that Jewish young adults marry sooner.
2. Increase the rate of in-marriage (i.e., decrease the rate of intermarriage).
3. Raise the fertility rate of non-Orthodox Jews.
4. Raise the Jewish-upbringing rate among intermarried couples.
5. Encourage more non-Jewish spouses of Jews to see themselves as Jews, preferably through conversion or, if not, then by informal personal decision, so that more of their children come to identify as Jews. ^[11]_[#N11]

The Impetus for Action — And the Urgency

To be sure, influencing family formation patterns has proven difficult, if not impossible, even for national governments. The Jewish community has limited ability to influence its members or the society at large. Yet at the same time, three considerations argue for the plausibility of making the effort to influence the marriage and fertility patterns of non-Orthodox American Jews. One is the matter of urgency, another is the chance of success, and a third relates to the efficacy of instruments of intervention.

One consideration arguing in favor of action concerns the urgency of the situation. When the stakes are low to moderate, tolerable costs are attached to failure and moderate gains are associated with success. When such is the case, policymakers enjoy the luxury of proceeding carefully and methodically, seeking options that are proven and effective, as well as feasible and sustainable. At other times, the stakes are very high and the window of time for effective action is very short. In such high-risk situations, a rational cost/benefit approach dictates massive and immediate action, even with imperfect knowledge, unknown risks, and uncertain outcomes. ^[12]_[#N12]

With a 72% intermarriage rate among the non-Orthodox, with birthrates well under replacement levels, and with yearly declines in the engaged non-Orthodox population, the Jewish community in the United States is in a state of vulnerability, risk, and uncertainty.

With the Jewish Middle falling so rapidly, and with so many erstwhile Jews being lost to the Jewish population forever, any delay in provoking, planning, or implementing corrective action is highly consequential. The usual standards of evidence as requisite for action may not be applicable in such a period of population decline, as there may not be enough Jews around in the next generation to assure the diversity of Jewish culture, community, and politics, or to populate what has arguably been the most productive and influential diaspora community in Jewish history.

Second, a concerted and well-financed effort to effect identificational and socio-demographic change actually stands a chance of success. Several subcultures within the United States do display significant variations with respect to marriage and fertility patterns. For example, Mormons, Hispanics, and Orthodox Jews marry at a younger age, marry more frequently with their in-group, and have more children. Admittedly, all are culturally variant minority groups with moderate to high levels of religiosity; yet their very existence does suggest that departing from national norms of demographic-related behavior is at least possible.

Third and most relevant, a long line of literature demonstrates that many planned social and educational interventions in American Jewish education, broadly conceived, actually “work.” Birthright Israel, the most thoroughly and systematically researched intervention, demonstrates clear impacts upon in-marriage (higher) rates. [13]. Over the years, research has pointed, as well, to several salutary outcomes in adulthood associated with ritual observance in the home, day schools, overnight Jewish summer camps, youth groups, and long-term trips to Israel. [14]. These experiences lead to greater feelings of attachment to things Jewish (including Israel), more Jewish friends, higher in-marriage, and more communal participation. In addition, specific ideologically driven educational experiences leave their distinct educational imprints. Habonim Zionist youth movement participation elevates Zionist commitment in adulthood, encourages aliyah, and promotes politically progressive orientations with respect to Israel and the society at large. [15]. The Pardes Institute produces commitment to Judaic textual study and greater levels of traditional religious practice. [16]. Camp Ramah both elevates ritual observance and produces a measure of alienation from conventional Conservative synagogues. [17]. In short, Jewish educational experiences generally achieve their objectives and produce enduring effects visible in their “alumni” 30, 40, and 50 years down the road.

So, if the research on Jewish educational impact demonstrates so much success, then why is intermarriage high and rising? The short answer is that Jewish educational experiences are effective (albeit with the general exception of “Sunday school” whose lack of effectiveness may owe to its tendency to serve the least Jewishly committed population, possibly reinforcing social ties among them), but participation is relatively low: among the non-Orthodox, only about one in 10 make use of day schools, about half ever go to a Jewish camp, about a third take an educational trip to Israel, and about a third take Jewish studies courses or are at one time active in Hillel.

As a general rule, then, the prime policy challenge is not so much to perfect the quality or effectiveness of these educational instruments—as worthy an objective as that may be. Rather, a more urgent and immediate goal is to increase young Jews’ participation in the vast variety of reasonably effective Jewish educational and socializing vehicles.

Religious Inspiration is Demographically Ineffective

In the wake of the visible growth in Jewish departure and lack of engagement, observers and thought leaders have offered a variety of approaches to addressing the perceived ills in American Jewish life. Most revolve around perfecting religious Judaism and its delivery system: rabbis, congregations, prayer, schools, education, and so forth.

One Pew finding may have helped provoke the call for improved religious inspiration. The Pew researchers highlighted the rise of what they called, “Jews of No Religion” (JNR). This nomenclature—created by the Pew analysts—refers to Jewish respondents who, when asked for their religion, answered atheist, agnostic, or none. They then proceeded to answer affirmatively when asked, if aside from religion, they consider themselves Jewish or partially Jewish. These JNRs amount to 22% of Jewish adults and are more numerous among younger adults, suggesting a steady movement over the years from Jews with religion to those without religion. Of JNRs with children, two-thirds are raising them as non-Jews. Correlatively, they score incredibly low on all measures of Jewish engagement.

The impression of diminishing religious commitment also derives from the declining number of self-identifying Conservative Jews. In the 1950s, Conservative Jews comprised about two-thirds of American Jews; in 2013, they have fallen to a meager 18% of Jewish adults. The plummet in Conservative adherents sparked several critiques of Conservative leadership, communities, philosophy, and education.

For its part, Reform Judaism seems, at first glance, in healthier shape. Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the leader of the Reform movement, see Reform as “the fastest-growing theologically liberal denomination of any religion in North America. And this growth is reflected in the Pew report, which finds that we are not just the largest stream of American Jewry, but larger than all the other streams combined.” [18][#N18]

But all is not well in the world of Reform. One troubling issue is the clearly declining share of the Jewish population that identify as Reform. Of all Jews aged 55–64, 26% identify as Reform, whereas only 10% among those aged 35–44 do. The rate of decline in Conservative identity is less severe, with a drop from 21% to 9% in the same age groups.

Even more disturbing are Reform Jews’ patently low rates of Jewish engagement, symbolized by the small number (34%) who are temple members. In fact, on *every* measure of Jewish engagement found in the Pew study, Reform Jews trail Conservative Jews (to say nothing of Orthodox Jews).

Quite telling are the denominational variations in the extent to which people regard Jewish as being very important in their lives: Orthodox (87%), Conservative (69%), and Reform (43%). The same denominational rank ordering applies to making donations to a Jewish cause (92%, 80%, 60%), having mostly Jewish friends (84%, 39%, 28%), and raising one’s children as exclusively Jewish by religion (97%, 88%, 60%). Other signs of “religious flabbiness” are found in the large number (50%) of Reform Jews who are intermarried, compared to Conservative Jews (27%).

In light of all these disturbing trends in Jewish religious life, it looks like Jews are abandoning their communities of faith, if not their Jewish religious faith entirely. Perhaps—as some have argued—better messaging, more inspiring synagogues, more relationship-oriented rabbis, or a host of other widely touted adjustments will bring thousands of Jews back to their faith, re-engage wayward Jews, or even attract non-Jews in sufficient number to offset the demographic exodus.

If this analysis were right, one would have to argue that the quality and level of inspiring leaders, experiences, and communities has fallen dramatically during the last half century or more. Logically, if inspiration produces engagement, and engagement is down, then inspiration must be down as well. Right? Well, no.

Truth be told, lack of inspiring communities is no explanation for why today’s engaged non-Orthodox Jews are failing to reproduce themselves, or why so many are disengaged from Jewish life. American Judaism is NOT more poorly constructed or more poorly communicated than in the past. Today’s rabbis and educators and Jewish leaders are NOT dramatically inferior to their predecessors. Today’s congregations (and other communities) are NOT appreciably more unwelcoming, uncaring, and uninspiring than those of the 1950s and 1960s. In their time, mid-20th-century suburban synagogues generated trenchant critiques of their

hierarchical leaders, aloof rabbis, insipid prayer, uncaring community, ostentatious architecture, conservative politics, and patriarchal culture. Somehow the congregations with all these alleged shortcomings coexisted with low rates of intermarriage (7% in the 1950s) and a Jewish Baby Boom.

In fact, people in the “right” family situations—ideally those raising Jewish children or, secondarily, those married to other Jews—display very high rates of Jewish engagement, however measured. In contrast, those who have no other Jews in the household (usually by virtue of intermarriage or singlehood) display low rates of engagement. [19][#N19]

It isn't so much that Judaism or its denominations, congregations, religious leaders, and educators have changed. Rather, it's the Jews who have changed. Jews in America were never particularly active in the religious sphere. Pew's 2007 U.S. Religious Landscape data showed that Jews are as about as religious—in terms of God-belief, service-attendance, and congregational membership—as unaffiliated Christians. [20][#N20]. Over the years, Jews have joined synagogues and identified with religious denominations in large part out of ethnic motivations. The great sociologist Marshall Sklare referred to Conservative Judaism in its heyday as an “ethnic church.” [21][#N21]

The major shift over the decades is not so much a change in Jews' religiosity, but a change in their ethnicity—the full texture of social relationships, culture, and collectivity that distinguishes Jews from others. Jews aren't so much losing their faith (which they never had much); rather, they're losing their family-like ties and sense of collectivity.

More specifically, what changed over the decades was the rising rate of intermarriage. Not only did intermarriage fuel the decline in the number of non-Orthodox Jews, but it also undermined the ethnic commitment (and the derivative religious commitment) of intermarried spouses and their children.

Non-marriage and late marriage may be even more critical than intermarriage. Like other Americans, fewer Jews are marrying, and many are marrying so late in life that they raise one child or none. Since both spouses and children (especially children) stimulate community and religious engagement, the smaller number of married Jewish parents means a smaller base that is predisposed to Jewish congregational belonging and other forms of Jewish engagement. [22][#N22]

In short, apparent defects in American religious Judaism (congregations, prayer, rabbis, education, etc.) did not bring about the demographic decline of the engaged Jewish Middle. As a corollary, fixing American religious life, as laudable as that may be, will do little to address demographic decline, even if it might improve rates of participation in Jewish religious life. Bad synagogues and religious leaders didn't cause the demographic shrinkage; good synagogues and rabbis won't halt it.

Better Conservative and Reform congregations, rabbis, cantors, leaders, prayer, and education are all valuable objectives. But improvements in these areas will do little to induce young adult Jews to marry each other, or to persuade young married couples to raise more Jewish children—the two prerequisites to securing the demographic future of engaged non-Orthodox American Jews.

Building Jewish Social Networks: What is to be done?

When thinking about why some Jews are more engaged in Jewish life than others, the usual discourse among Jewish leaders, observers, and rank-and-file engaged Jews inevitably focuses on motivation. Jews who are motivated to “act Jewishly” do so; those who decline to act Jewishly are presumed to lack the requisite interest or commitment. Accordingly, much discussion about how to get Jews more engaged in Jewish life revolves around motivations and values.

But, as any criminal lawyer knows, two components are essential to the performance of a crime—and, by analogy, to performing a mitzvah: motivation and opportunity. Indeed, for a wide variety of social behaviors, motivation alone is insufficient to provoke behavior; what social scientists call the “opportunity structure,” is equally, if not more, critical.

For in-marriage, the opportunity structure boils down to friends and friends of friends—the primary sources of romantic partners and referrals. The power of social networks has gained increasing recognition in recent years. Social scientists have long emphasized the power of intimate association with like-minded people to sustain minority religious subcultures. Esteemed sociologist Peter Berger once wrote that religious believers need to “huddle together with like-minded fellow deviants — and huddle very closely indeed. Only in a counter-community of considerable strength does cognitive deviance have a chance to maintain itself.” [23].[#N23]

More recently, researchers have demonstrated that family and friends strongly influence a wide range of behaviors and attitudes. Among them are smoking, voting, promiscuity, obesity, and happiness. Social scientists have largely concluded that while what we do affects who we know (smokers come to associate with other smokers), it is also the case that who we know affects what we do and who we are. [24].[#N24]. It should come as no surprise, then, that the most intimate social relationships — household members and close friends — strongly relate to Jewish engagement.

Judaism places a high valuation on Jewish social connectedness and a normative emphasis on conducting Jewish life in concert with other Jews. The liturgy includes praise for those who are involved with the affairs of the community. The prayer quorum (minyan) requires at least 10 adults. “Don’t separate yourself from the community” intones *Pirkei Avot (The Ethics of Our Fathers)* 2:5. The very title of a celebrated anthropological work on Eastern European shtetl society as seen through the eyes of Jewish immigrants to the U.S. also makes the point: *Life is With People*. [25].[#N25]

The long line of research on intermarriage confirms the notion that a combination of motivation (Jewish values, Jewish commitment, etc.) and social networks (residential propinquity, density of Jewish social networks, etc.) strongly influence the prospects of in-marriage. As I wrote in 2006:

The role of Jewish education in promoting in-marriage is fairly well-recognized in Jewish communal circles. In contrast, the equally powerful (if not more powerful) influence upon intermarriage of proximity to other Jews, Jewish residential density, and association (informal ties among Jews—friends, neighbors, co-workers, and the like) has received far less recognition than this domain deserves. Who one happens to meet or know has as much to do with the chances of marrying a Jew as does one’s Jewish commitment and education. Jews living in areas of high density (with lots of Jews relative to the surrounding population) are more likely to marry Jews.

....Linked to more in-marriage is having had more Jewish friends in high school and college, which is a corollary of living in areas with high Jewish residential density. Zip code may in fact be more predictive of in-marriage than Jewish education in that people still date and marry those they live near. [26].[#N26]

While the organized Jewish community has (properly) responded to rising intermarriage by investing in Jewish education (day schools, camps, Israel travel, campus activities, and more —all of which are linked to higher rates of in-marriage), it has never explicitly adopted a policy of strengthening Jewish social networks among Jewish adolescents and young adults. Given the declines in Jewish social networks (fewer Jewish

friends, neighbors, romantic partners, and spouses), the act of bestowing Jewish friends upon young adult Jews becomes paramount. Building Jewish friendships ought to be regarded as a constituent part of Jewish education, and not just a fortuitous by-product.

From Analysis to Action Ideas

If the shrinking Jewish Middle—the falling number of engaged non-Orthodox Jews—is today’s central challenge to Jewish life, and if strengthening social networks is the appropriate overall policy objective, then several complementary interventions can enhance the extent to which Jews are connected to one another. Jewish social networks that are stronger and richer will surely raise the in-marriage rate. They may even help Jews to marry sooner. And the evidence points to higher birthrates among those who marry earlier and marry endogamously.

Illustrative of the actions that can be taken by policymakers, philanthropists and others are the following, beginning with most critical ideas:

1. Provide low-cost opportunities for overnight Jewish summer camps. The One Happy Camper program of the Foundation for Jewish Camp is an excellent vehicle for raising enrollment in overnight Jewish summer camps. Jewish camps build long-lasting Jewish social networks linked with higher rates of in-marriage some of which takes places with camp alumni of the same camping movement.
2. Broaden participation in high school-age trips to Israel. Birthright now begins at age 18. One way to raise teen travel to Israel is creating a companion program (separately branded) for 16- and 17-year-olds. Israel travel is associated with higher rates of in-marriage and greater attachment to Israel. [27] [#N27]
3. Field conversion-dedicated rabbis to address the untapped market in conversion. These education-oriented rabbis may be attached to JCCs or congregations. Current programs manage to produce converts at a cost of about \$4,000 per capita and the market is far from saturated. More converts mean more Jews, and, with converts who are married to Jews, the act of individual conversion also converts intermarriage to in-marriage. [28],[#N28]
4. Subsidize Jewish-sponsored day care and preschools, along the lines of “Right Start” programs. These programs strengthen Jewish social networks among young parents, promoting further affiliation and the likelihood that intermarried couples will raise their children as Jews. The success of PJ Library suggests that parents of preschool children are accessible to Jewish educational intervention.
5. Lobby for pro-parent public policy. Among the most critical are paid and parental leave for both mothers and fathers and universal and expanded child tax credits. Any ideas that help raise the ideal and expected number of children among middle-class Americans will also boost birthrates among middle-class Jews.

Other noteworthy ideas include:

6. Increase participation in a wide variety of Jewish youth groups. NCSY and BBYO [29],[#N29] are the two groups with significant external financial support and both seem unusually healthy. Extend financial support to other youth movements.

7. Sponsor non-Orthodox campus rabbis with spouses to serve as educators and informal role models of Jewish family life. [30].[#N30]. The model has been shown to work with Chabad on campus and Base Hillel. [31].[#N31]
8. Increase the number of Jewish film festivals, concerts, and other cultural events in urban Jewish development areas with large numbers of non-married Jewish young adults. [32].[#N32]
9. Stimulate participation in Shabbat tables undertaken by and for young adults. JCCs and synagogues should provide space and other support for such endeavors. (See, for example, One Table).
10. Fund Moishe Houses as well as experimental Jewish outreach teams, such as Base Hillels, headed by young rabbis (married if possible) and supported by educators and outreach workers. [33].[#N33]
11. Capitalize on and support recent efforts to secure tax credits for day school tuition. For day school parents, lower costs may translate into additional spending on informal Jewish educational experiences such as camp and Israel travel. [34].[#N34]
12. Provide an alternative pathway to joining the Jewish people, such as Jewish Cultural Affirmation. The acquisition of Jewish identity by non-Jewish spouses, even if not by way of religious conversion, may well raise the rate at which their children come to identify as Jews in adulthood. [35].[#N35]
13. Finally, engage in massive “Jewish public health” education. That is, instruct Jewish parents and grandparents as to the many small actions that can improve the chances that their children and grandchildren will marry Jews and marry them sooner. Just as public health education has helped change diet, exercise, and smoking in the well-educated population, parallel efforts may influence more Jewish parents to approach Jewish child-rearing with greater information and intentionality.

A Moral Claim to Action

Any one of these initiatives may produce only marginal increments in Jewish friendships, in-group marriages, and Jewish child-rearing. But taken together, these efforts may well prove synergistic: one initiative will interact with the others, producing more participants in each area of activity and beyond. Youth group participation may promote camp enrollments and both will produce more Israel travelers; a well-educated core of Jewish adolescents—“alumni” of youth groups, summer camps, and Israel travel—will enrich Jewish campus life, in turn producing organizers and Jewish consumers in the young adult years.

The capacity to act upon these ideas lies neither in the heavens nor across the sea but within the capacity of Jewish leaders right here in America. All of this can be had at reasonable costs. Indeed, the financial resources are well within reach of the major Jewish philanthropists.

That said, we certainly have no guarantee that they will prove equal to the task of stabilizing the Jewish Middle, the engaged non-Orthodox Jewish population. Yet we do have one guarantee: without significant policy changes, the Jewish Middle surely will decline both in number and in its ability to sustain a rich American Jewish civilization.

Thus, both rationality and morality demand extraordinary responses, and not only by policymakers and philanthropists, but by the thought leaders who influence them. Rabbis, social scientists, reflective practitioners, and other opinion molders can choose to educate and alert the Jewish public to the demographic losses to the Jews of America that have already occurred. They can vividly present the additional losses that are in the offing if no effective action is taken. They can join in the call for action to

save millions of Jewish souls and the Jewish body at the heart of the greatest Jewish diaspora community the world has ever known.

Or they can choose, as many have, to minimize the likely outcome of current tendencies. Well-intentioned but misguided (and misguiding) leaders can pretend that intermarriage is of minor consequence. They can choose to project an ill-founded aura of success. They can argue—as some do—that since we can't know the future, we shouldn't be concerned enough to try to influence it. They can reassure their donors with soothing tales of how Jews and Judaism survived mortal threats in the past.

Rather than mobilizing their people and marshaling their forces to battle for the vibrant survival of a creatively significant Jewry, their crowd-pleasing words of reassurance undermine the sense of urgency that current trends demand. Given the massive and obvious evidence, such approaches go beyond the merely counterintuitive, counterfactual, or counterproductive. They abjure the responsibilities of leadership.

We who serve the Jewish people need to fully internalize the depth of the threat to the Jewish future, and to communicate both the challenges and the ways to respond to them. Today's challenges demand both clarity of perception and honesty of communication.

Truth be told, we may not reverse the demographic decline and educational thinning of the Jewish Middle, but we're still obligated to undertake what's possible, hoping to bring about the improbable. As John F. Kennedy said, "One person can make a difference—and everyone should try."

NOTES

My thanks to Prof. Herbert Gans and to Prof. Roberta Kwall for their many insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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2. Michael Lipka (2016). "Nones' on the rise." *A closer look at America's rapidly growing religious 'nones'*. Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center. [\[#N2-pt1\]](#)
3. Steven M. Cohen. "Lessons Learned From Orthodoxy's Dramatic Growth," *New York Jewish Week*, December 8, 2015. [\[#N3-pt1\]](#)
4. Marvin Schick (2014). *A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States - 2013-14*. New York: Avi Chai. [\[#N4-pt1\]](#)
5. "Liberal" here refers to all non-Orthodox Jews. This widely recognized nomenclature is a bit problematic in that it subtly disparages Conservative Jews whose very name is the antonym of "liberal." [\[#N5-pt1\]](#)
6. Conservative Jews report having had 1.8 children, Reform 1.7, and others even fewer. Also, the engaged non-Orthodox average just over 1.8 children as contrasted with just under 1.6 for the non-engaged. [\[#N6-pt1\]](#)
7. As Ted Sasson reports, "New Analysis of Pew Data: Children of Intermarriage Increasingly Identify as Jews, for the offspring of the intermarried, the rate of identifying as Jewish among those 18–29 (59%) exceeds the 40% registered among those 30–49. The uptick may simply reflect the fact that hardly any of these 18-to-29-year-olds have married. For those who marry Jews, marriage solidifies Jewish commitment; but intermarriage works in the opposite direction. Among the Jewish children of the intermarried, as many as 85% intermarry. Since intermarriage leads many Jewish spouses to abandon

- their Jewish identity, the levels of Jewish identification among today's 18-to-29-year-olds may well decline as the vast majority marry non-Jews. Of note is that a slight majority of the 59% identifying as Jews, identify as Jews of No Religion, about twice as many as among age peers whose parents were in-married. Among the 59% who identify as Jews, half do not see Judaism as their religion. ♣ [#N7-ptr1]
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 9. Tom W. Smith (1991). *What Do Americans Think About Jews?* American Jewish Committee (AJC). ♣ [#N9-ptr1]
 10. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell (2010). *American Grace: How Religion Divides And Unites Us*. New York: Simon & Schuster. ♣ [#N10-ptr1]
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 12. Thanks to Jack Ukeles for this point. ♣ [#N12-ptr1]
 13. Shaul Kelner (2011). *Tours That Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage, and Israel Birthright Tourism*. New York: New York University Press; Leonard Saxe, Theodore Sasson, Shahar Hecht, Benjamin Phillips, Michelle Shain, Graham Wright, and Charles Kadushin. (2011). *Jewish Futures Project—The Impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel: 2010 Update*. New York: Brandeis University Press; Leonard Saxe, Benjamin Phillips, Theodore Sasson, Shahar Hecht, Michelle Shain, Graham Wright, and Charles Kadushin (2009). *Generation Birthright Israel: The Impact of an Israel Experience on Jewish Identity and Choices*. New York: Brandeis University Press. ♣ [#N13-ptr1]
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- the 2004 “Eight Up” Report on the Attitudes and Practices of Conservative Jewish College Students.* New York: National Ramah Commission. ♣. [#N17-ptr1]
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 27. David Bryfman and Steven M. Cohen. “A Case For More Teen Israel Trips.” *New York Jewish Week*. June 30, 2015. ♣. [#N27-ptr1]
 28. See, for example, Miller, Introduction to Judaism Program or Introduction to Judaism. ♣. [#N28-ptr1]
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 30. Thanks to Daniel Smokler for this idea. ♣. [#N30-ptr1]
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