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The American Orthodox: Future Demographic Scenarios

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אמר רבי יוחנן: מיום שחרב בית המקדש ניטלה נבואה מין הנביאים וניתנה לשוטים ולתינוקות
(בבא בתרא, 12א)

If the world's strategic balance of power, Wall Street, globalization and the American economy, El Niño, continental drift and San Andrea fault, and other major sociopolitical variables behave more or less as they have done in recent years, the demographic future of American Orthodoxy might be rather stable. Continuation of the demographic trends observed among the Orthodox population over the last decades, and the patterns typical of other Jewish groups in the United States are bound to produce a moderate decline in the total number of Jews, and an increase, ranging from very moderate to quite significant, in the share of Orthodoxy out of that total. However, the absolute number of the self-identifying Orthodox may vary quite substantially according to different circumstances that may unfold.

These cautious scenarios emerge from a new set of demographic projections based on the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) sponsored by the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF). The survey covered a large representative countrywide sample of households including at least one person currently Jewish or of Jewish ancestry, and provided a detailed sociodemographic profile of the American Jewish population and of its denominational composition.

Jewish population projections, besides trying to account for a reasonable level of future birth and death rates and for the predictable volume of international migration, also prominently reflect changing patterns of Jewish identification, affiliation or disaffiliation. While concerns have been expressed in general about the future of Jewish population and community in the US, demographic and sociocultural behaviors clearly differ between Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Other or non-affiliated Jews. Under the good health conditions of contemporary developed societies, the average people's life span currently approaches 75 years for males and 80 for females, and continues to increase. Under contemporary mortality patterns among US Jews, fifty years from now the majority of those who live today will still be alive. Hence, the different effects of demographic trends among those who identify with either or none of the major Jewish denominations tend to show up quite slowly as they are diluted within the slow fading away of the current generations. It would be a mistake to simply and straightforwardly project family size differences between denominations as multipliers of their future

population growth. In the following, we review recent trends concerning shifts in Jewish denominational preferences, marriage and fertility patterns, and examine the possible implications for the demographic future of American Jewry and for American Orthodoxy in particular.

How many and who?

According to the 1990 NJPS, the distribution of American Jews by denominations at birth was 23% Orthodox, 34% Conservative, 26% Reform, and 17% Other and non-denominational. The distribution of current denominational preferences was 6% Orthodox, 35% Conservative, 38% Reform, and 21% Other and non-denominational. After accounting for the child population, the total number of the self-identifying Orthodox was estimated at 378,000, or 7% of a total American Jewry assessed at 5,515,000. These figures on the size of Orthodox Jewry in America have been the object of some controversy. Having noted that the label *Orthodox* subsumes a great variety of different groups, some observers thought that total was unrealistically low, and suggested their own corrected estimates. It is entirely possible that the rate of non-response to NJPS was higher among Orthodox, especially Hassidic or *haredi,* than among other Jews, but it should be noted that later tests did not conclusively support that claim.

Clearly, the Orthodox constitute a relatively small minority of American Jewry, but their visibility is greater as they carry responsibility for a disproportionate share of the services being provided to the Jewish community at large. One case in point is Jewish day schools which are still to a large extent sponsored by Orthodox organizations, and whose pupils are drawn from a much broader and denominationally heterogeneous spectrum of families. In this respect, a comparison of data on Jewish education enrollment drawn from NJPS and from various educational censuses conducted in recent years at the Hebrew University's Institute of Contemporary Jewry, indicated a good correspondence between these two independent sources. Based on these comparisons, the NJPS figure of 443,000 children aged 6-18 having received any formal Jewish education was not off target, confirming the general validity of the survey. If, however, the new NJPS now being planned by the CJF for the year 2000 were to demonstrate that a significant undercount affected the Orthodox population in 1990, appropriate corrections should be introduced into our following evaluation.

Denominational retention and passages

Because people may switch their ideological preferences, and their lifestyles and demographic behaviors accordingly, the size and composition of Jewish denominations change all the time. As noted, comparing the denominational distributions of American Jewish adults currently and when they were born or raised, it appears that the Orthodox group suffered the strongest losses. The share raised as Orthodox in 1990 was 44% among Jews aged 60 and over, 19% among those aged 40-59, and 12% among those aged 20-39, which pointed to a narrowing preferential basis for Orthodoxy over time. A plurality of the older age group was raised in an Orthodox environment, whose family roots often were abroad. In America, the Conservative movement grew the most among the second immigrant generation, it attracted many people with an

Orthodox background, and it became the movement in which the largest share of Jews aged below 60 were raised, and the current preference of a plurality of those aged 60 and above. The plurality of current preferences among Jews below 60 pertained to the Reform movement. At the same time, that part of American Jewry not identifying with any of the major denominations was quickly growing among the younger generations.

To sharpen the analysis, let us address the two partially overlapping, yet different notions of *retention* and *resilience*. *Retention* is the proportion of those born or raised within a given Jewish denomination who prefer the same denomination at a later stage in their life; *resilience* is the ratio between the number of those who currently identify with a denomination and those born/raised within that denomination. Here losses due to non-retention of old followers may be partially compensated by gains of new followers, which among the Orthodox may be defined as *hazarah bit'shuvah*. In 1990 both retention and resilience indexes were weaker among the Orthodox than among other denominations or among the aggregate of Other and non-denominational. Interestingly, both indicators were much higher among younger adults (20-39 in 1990, born 1950-1970) than among older people. Indeed, Orthodoxy retained 42% of those born in its fold aged less than 40, against only 18-19% of those aged 40 and above. Similarly, the ratio between the number of those currently identifying and those raised as Orthodox was 51% for those below 40, versus 21-22% for those over 40. While this points to some recovery in the ability of Orthodoxy to keep its own children, losses were still significant among young adults born or raised in Orthodox homes during the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s. Part of the transfers from Orthodoxy to another denomination may have occurred at a later age, possibly in connection with marriage or residential mobility. A significant proportion of the Jewish population below 40 were still unmarried, and the majority will move.

The Conservative movement, too, witnessed increasd ability to keep its own children among younger adults although it still featured an overall negative net balance. Highest resilience appeared among the Reform movement and the Other and non-denominational group whose losses were more than compensated through accessions from other movements.

Marriage and fertility

The NJPS findings on the frequency of intermarriage have received much attention. The fact that much lower rates prevail among the Orthodox than among the rest of American Jewry was all too expected, although somewhat intriguingly over 10% of the Orthodox who married during the 1980s did so with non-Jewish spouses who did not convert. Less noted was the fact that the propensity to marry has significantly declined across the board among Jews as among total whites in the US. In the past the proportion of Jews who never married was low, and indeed in 1990, only 5% of Jewish males and 2% of Jewish females aged 50 and over were never married, with only minor differences between denominations. Higher rates of permanent celibacy appeared among Jews aged 40-49 (12% of males and 10% of females, again with only minor denominational differences), and among those aged 30-39 (26% of males and 18% of females still never-married, the rates for the Orthodox being, respectively, 30% and 14%). The Orthodox actually did marry younger, as

indicated by lower shares of never married at age 20-29: 64% of males and 31% of females, versus 77% and 58%, respectively, for the other denominations.

Thus, besides a clearly younger female age at marriage, marriage patterns of the Orthodox were not distinctive. Rising ages at marriage and the declining propensity to marry at all probably reflect the extended span of professional training related to the high educational achievements of US Jews, and the penalizing if not prohibitive cost of housing even for a population with income levels above the national average. This holds true for the Orthodox as well.

Marriage patterns bear significant consequences for the timing and frequency of child-bearing—at least in a Jewish population that, unlike other large sections of contemporary society, has not adopted births to unmarried mothers as a widespread practice. Since the 1970s the whole childbearing schedule has been delayed and in spite of postponed births, the span of years effective for reproduction has shortened as compared to the standard of the 1950s and 1960s. While most births continue to occur to women 25 to 35, births below 25 have declined dramatically—though somewhat less so among the Orthodox. The final consequence is a steady decline in total fertility.

The 1990 NJPS indicated an average of 1.6 children ever-born alive to Jewish women aged 40-44 (regardless of marital status), most of whom had completed their childbearing span. There was minor variation around that average across denominations, with the clear exception of the Orthodox whose average we estimated at 3.7 children. The grand total points to a severe deficit in the reproduction of American Jews as against the minimum of 2.1 children needed for inter-generational replacement. The higher fertility of the Orthodox in 1990, while pointing to faster population growth, remained far below the known stereotypes of exceptionally high fertility.

Besides assuming the continuation or moderate reduction in actually observed fertility levels, population projections must allow for the consequences of intermarriage on the effectively Jewish birth rate. NJPS documented the non-identification with Judaism of the majority of such children, implying a serious reduction of the Jewish reproduction potential. Moreover, the already noted patterns of inter-denominational mobility imply a redistribution of reproduction from the denominations who display a net loss of followers, to those with a net gain. If, as estimated in 1990, the Orthodox have an average of 3.7 children but over time one half of them pass to other denominations, and the Reform have 1.5 Jewish children, but gain another 20% from other denominations, in the long run this works as if the fertility rates were roughly 1.9 for the Orthodox and 1.8 for the Reform. In our projection we shall refer both to the original Jewish fertility rates and to modified rates that allow for shifts in denominational preferences.

International migration

International migration is a further factor affecting the size of American Jewry and the distribution of Jewish denominations. The expected volume of Jewish immigration to the US can be evaluated by looking at recent trends and considering the potential reservoirs that still remain. After the large wave of the early 1990s, immigration from the

Former Soviet Union has significantly declined, possibly due to changes in US legal provisions concerning refugees. The FSU reservoirs themselves are approaching the point of saturation, as Jews remaining there are in large part very elderly, very assimilated, or socially very successful. While a large periphery remains of non-Jews with some Jewish ancestry or some Jewish family ties, it is reasonable to assume that future immigration is bound to decline. Regarding Jewish emigration from the US, its main component is *aliyah* to Israel, whose yearly volume has only rarely passed the 2,000 mark.

As to the ideological preferences of Jewish immigrants since 1970, the1990 NJPS provided the following rough estimates: 9% Orthodox, 10% Conservative, 40% Reform, and 41% Other and non-denominational. Prospective emigrants, according to NJPS, were 13% Orthodox, 37% Conservative, 31% Reform, and 19% Other and non-denominational. While all denominations gain on balance from international migration, the benefits mostly go to the Reform preference and to the non-denominationally identified.

Two projected scenarios

Based on these data and assumptions, we turn to two demographic scenarios with one main difference. The first assumes no passages between denominations, i.e., unlike the well-established trend in the past, each section of US Jewry succeeds to keep its progeny within the denominational fold in the long run; the second projection assumes interdenominational passages—what we have called resilience—as observed among Jews aged 20-39 in 1990.

In general, the initial Jewish population estimate of 5,515,000 in 1990 is bound to a modest increase until the year 2000 or shortly after, followed by progressive reduction during the subsequent decades. Among the reasons for these expected changes, the so called *echo effect* of the baby boom, which produced a temporary increase of births to parents born during the 1950s and early 1960s, and the initially significant impact of immigration. Later on, the decline in fertility and the consequent aging of the Jewish population would produce a number of deaths significantly higher than the number of births. The size of American Jewry would peak at about 5.7 million around the year 2000, declining thereafter to 5.6 around 2020, and slightly less than 5 million around 2050.

Within this general outline, what the future size and share of the Orthodox movement will be out of the total may largely depend on the ability to keep their children within the fold. In the hypothesis of no losses at all, and taking into account that the initial age composition in 1990 was not at all young, the projected number of US Jews identifying as Orthodox would rise from less than 400,000 in 1990 (7% of the total Jewish population), to over 550,000 in 2020 (10%), and over 900,000 in 2050 (19%). The higher than average fertility of Orthodox families would generate a rejuvenating age composition, and a substantial increase of their share out of the Jewish child population below age 15: from 10% in 1990 to 22% in 2020, and as much as 44% in 2050.

If on the other hand the retention power of Orthodoxy over its younger generation does not improve substantially as against the performance observed in 1990, the size of the group would only grow minimally, to about 415,000 in 2020, and 430,000 in 2050. Their share of

American Jewry would only grow from 7% to 9% by the mid of the 21st century, and their share of Jewish children under 15 would reach 11% in 2020, and 13% in 2050. Interestingly, the reduced size of the Orthodox denomination would not be entirely compensated by an increase of the other denominations. Since fertility of the latter is lower, interdenominational transfers would turn into a general erosion in the overall size of US Jewry, which would account for about 60,000 fewer people in 2020, as against the previous scenario, and about 300,000 less in 2050. In other words, fewer Orthodox would also mean fewer Jews in America.

Concluding remarks

The role and significance of a religiocultural movement do not need to be related to the size of that movement. The future of Orthodoxy as a distinguished minority of the total Jewish community and as a small and unique component of American society, is secured beyond doubt. However, a group's viability is in many respects determined by its underlying demographic trends. The larger or smaller size of a group, coupled with a much younger or older age composition, ultimately will have a definite impact on the scope and quality of interaction within the group, and of its outside-oriented activities. The decisive factor for the future of Orthodoxy—and of the other Jewish denominations in the US—will be their retention grip over the respective younger generations. Overall, the size of Orthodoxy does not seem to be bound to dramatic growth (unlike some other and widely publicized accountancy exercise would have it), which in turn raises interesting questions related to the future needs of Jewish community service markets.

The unique internal openness of the American Jewish community, as demonstrated by the substantial circulation of people through the different options available, also provides one of the keys to figuring out what the future of American Jewry will be. Rather than viewing the different denominations as discrete and competing entities, it seems appropriate to project them as complementary and, to some extent, collaborating ones. An American Orthodoxy of a few hundred thousands or even a million souls, isolated within its own fold will eventually lack the autonomous resources needed to accomplish all of its communal endeavors. Operating in the context of a larger community of customers, the services provided by Orthodoxy would take on more vigorous moral, and possibly economic viability. Projected trends on population size and composition, and the needs they portend for the future of Jewish community service, clearly imply a significant interdependence of the various ideological branches of American Jewry, and remind us of the shared needs and destiny of *Klal Israel*.

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Jewish Demography – A Rejoinder

Rabbi Wein and Dr. Kranzler raise in their letters several serious issues that can only be briefly addressed here because of space limitations. Let us agree, in the first place, that in no way should the social sciences be put to compete with faith, vision, and hope. We are dealing here with two entirely different planes of discourse. By the former, the bare facts should be addressed in as neutral and objective a mode as possible, regardless of our ideal posture. According to the latter, empirical data are not necessary to accepting, conceiving, and nurturing a superior design. If we do not pay attention to the distinction, we risk to dismiss the social sciences as totally irrelevant, which clearly neither of our two learned readers intended to suggest.

Serious social scientific research obviously requires that all the facts be set straight and unbiased in front of the reader. Since our article was not intended to list the many accomplishments and encouraging trends among American Orthodox Jews, after briefly acknowledging those as a solid given, we moved forward to impartially analyze certain less visible implications of the recent past and present. Again, a significant point of method should be stressed here. The social patterns of a complex community, such as Jews in the United States, can be assessed from the inside - by closely scrutinizing the working of relevant institutions and of the people associated with them, or from the outside - by throwing a broader net inclusive of those more clearly identified situations and of the much broader context in which they belong. If we take the example of Jewish geography, the rapid growth of Jewish Monsey is extraordinary; but it is better interpreted taking also into account some decline in Jewish Brooklyn. Or, looking at Jewish education, observation of a given school-class environment will usually provide an image of a plenty of bright and learning Jewish kids; study of the whole pertinent age-group will also give us a sense of how many Jewish kids were not attending that same class at that point in time. Both approaches provide important, indeed complementary information, but we view the latter as definitely better if a broader assessment of trends has to be reached. This is what the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, our major source of data, attempted to do.

Here, three important points raised by our readers call for clarification. First, surveys are not censuses, as they only include a carefully and randomly selected, representative sample of the given population. This implies a certain amount of built-in error whose extent is easily computed, provided there are no serious biases in data collection. If there are doubts (in our view minor) about the NJPS coverage of the Orthodox public, one would hope that refusals to answer were not caused by indifference or even scorn on the part of some of the more Jewishly committed toward their less committed fellows, and toward the Jewish collective as a whole. As we noted in our article, the better strategy is to be included in Jewish population surveys and to be fairly represented in any ensuing data analyses.

Second, the definition of “who is an Orthodox” in NJPS was in no way pre-established but simply reflected the answers provided by respondents. Such reporting reflects the heterogeneous nature of an Orthodox population ranging from quite segregated Chassidic and

"Charedi" communities to a more scattered "modern Orthodox" presence. The significant fact about people who reported they were born in an Orthodox home but currently identify otherwise, is that they believe the intensity of their Jewishness somewhat declined over time. To dismiss face-value reporting about denominational preferences, and to assume all eventual "deviants" were not "true Orthodox" in the first place, entails reducing even more the quantified size of the group. In 1990, 28% of the self-proclaimed Orthodox adults were not affiliated with a synagogue. Should these people be dismissed from our denominational accountancy? To establish for sure that a person was a lifelong coherent Orthodox, one should have to wait until that person passes out. Is this a reasonable mode of operation? That Orthodox life has intensified in the recent generations is out of the question. But there also are contradictions. NJPS, after all, seems to have exposed a well-known and unique trait of U.S. society: while the role of religion is highly important and diffused, the amount of mobility of people across religions, denominations, communities, and lifestyles is overwhelming in international comparison.

Third, the two scenarios suggested in our population projections provide in our view a reasonable range for future developments - given no major upheavals intervene to make our whole exercise irrelevant. In terms of *resilience rates* (the net balance between the number of people raised in a religious denomination and those currently identifying with it), our lower projected level of 51% resilience for the Orthodox reflected the self-declared identities and behaviors of young adults who were born or grew-up not in pre-historic America but during the years of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Carter and Reagan - highly relevant times to present-day American Jewry. On the other hand, our higher projected level of 100% resilience did conform with the more sanguine expectations, and will probably appear quite optimistic to some observers. Our projected range of 415,000 to 550,000 in the year 2020, and 430,000 to 900,000 in 2050, as against 380,000 self-declared Orthodox Jews in 1990, points to growth in the absolute figure and, more significantly, in the share of Orthodox Jewry out of total Jews in the United States - though perhaps not to the extent hoped for by the movement insiders.

As to the comments by Gordon and Horowitz, they do not add much to our own analysis. Their evaluation of a 92% resilience rate for the Orthodox younger adults does indeed fall neatly within the minimum-maximum range we suggested (51% to 100%). Their evaluation of an average family size of 4.5 is indeed higher than the 3.7 adopted in our scenarios, but it overlooks the fact that those younger adults who are still unmarried and will marry at a later age (if at all), will end up with smaller families. We purposely refrained from extending our projections to as distant a target as the year 2100, as we felt that the tremendous imponderables over such a span of time would devoid our exercise of much of its credible factual foundations.

In sum, the gist of our article was that in spite of its dynamics and recent accomplishments, the Orthodox movement should not rest on its laurels, and should give a harsh and realistic look at the complexities of its interaction with the broader Jewish community and with American society at large. All in all, we regret *Jewish Action* choose to omit the quotation we had placed at the opening of our article. The quotation said: *"Rabbi Yochanan said: From the day that the Holy Temple was destroyed,*

prophecy was taken from the prophets and given to fools and children. - Bava Basra 12A".

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