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NJPS 2000-01, By the Numbers

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The finding of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey that 52% of Jews who married from 1985 to 1990 had married non-Jews was nothing less than a clarion call to action for organized Jewry ("The 52% Fraud," September 12).

Jewish continuity commissions were formed in many Jewish communities. Birthright Israel was established. A foundation for Jewish camping was announced. Jewish day schools were established and expanded. Jewish family education programs commenced. Jewish federations shifted priorities toward Jewish education and emphasis was placed on Jewish singles programs. College Hillel programs were revamped.

The flurry of organized Jewish activity all aimed at enhancing Jewish identity so that more Jews would choose to marry other Jews.

But soon after the release of this number, other researchers began to ask if the 52% intermarriage rate was correct. Some argued that 43% was the right number. The press enjoyed the controversy. Jewish professionals, reporters and the American Jewish public — not being trained in demography, survey research or statistics — became confused.

So, which number was correct? To understand the difference, imagine the following two marriages:

Marriage I: Sarah had two Jewish parents and was raised in a synagogue. After her bat mitzvah she was active in a Jewish youth group and attended a Jewish sleep-away camp. At age 24 she married Abe and had two children who were sent to Jewish day school. Then, when Sarah was age

44, Abe suddenly died. Two years later, Sarah married a co-worker named Christopher, who, while not Jewish, shared many interests with Sarah. Sarah continued to go to synagogue on a regular basis. Christopher came with her on occasion, although he also attended church with his parents.

Marriage II: David had two Jewish parents and although his religious upbringing was not strong, he did celebrate his bar mitzvah and, by age 18, had visited Israel twice. While a teenager, he talked about making aliyah and serving in the Israeli army. While in college, he met and married Shoshana, an Israeli student. After a decade in Israel, David and Shoshana divorced and David returned to the United States to be closer to his family. Within a year, at age 35, David had fallen in love with Christine, a 22-year-old woman in a class David was teaching on the history of Israel at the local community college. Christine came from a strong Greek Orthodox background and her parents absolutely insisted that David had to convert to Greek Orthodoxy to marry their daughter. He did so, although reluctantly. David began to attend church on occasion, but celebrated all the Jewish holidays with his parents and siblings.

Now, both the 52% and the 43% intermarriage rates would classify Marriage I as an intermarriage. Marriage II would be classified as an intermarriage for the 52% rate, but not for the 43% rate. The 52% is the intermarriage rate for all persons who were born Jewish. The 43% is the intermarriage rate for all persons who are currently Jewish.

Since David has converted to Greek Orthodoxy, he would not be considered as intermarried by those who subscribe to the 43% rate: David is simply no longer Jewish and is, consequently, not intermarried. If you ascribe to the 52% rate, then David is intermarried. In either case, Sarah would be counted as part of the core Jewish population of 5.5 million identified in the 1990 study, but David would not. That is why the 52% includes “marriages in which neither party was Jewish by anyone’s definition.” (Although some would argue that David is, at least, ethnically still Jewish.)

I have set up these scenarios in part to explain the logic behind the two

different intermarriage rates and to show that neither rate is incorrect. More importantly, though — given recent editorials in the Forward — the scenarios help explain why, in publishing the 52% rate, the Council of Jewish Federations was not attempting to forward a “fabrication.”

Nor does the current study, the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01 — sponsored by the council’s successor organization, United Jewish Communities — “retract” the 52% figure. It has simply chosen to calculate the intermarriage rate based upon those who are currently Jewish, rather than those who were born Jewish.

No, the fraudulent statement is the one made by Forward editor J.J. Goldberg in his September 17 opinion article in The New York Times, the charge that the 52% figure was published “to shock straying Jews into greater observance.” Not only is 52% a legitimate rate, but there was no motive to choose to report a “fraudulent” 52% rate, for the 43% rate would have resulted in the same clarion call to action.

The Forward also questions in a September 12 editorial whether UJC engendered another crisis by publishing the fact that NJPS 1990 estimated 5.5 million Jews, while NJPS 2000-2001 found 5.2 million Jews. As a member of the survey’s National Technical Advisory Committee since 1988, as a person who played a major role in the design of NJPS 2000-01, and as someone who has developed Jewish population estimates as part of the more than 30 Jewish demographic studies that I have completed for Jewish communities across the country, I answer this question with a resounding *no*.

First, making Jewish population estimates is as much “art” as “science” and we will probably never have an accurate count of Jews in the United States, in part because of the varying definitions of “who is a Jew.” Second, from the “Analytical Limitations” section at the front of the report, which is available to the public at www.ujc.org, to the methodological appendix, the authors of NJPS 2000-01 report freely and state openly the limitations of the methodology.

The UJC funded a follow-up study to NJPS 2000-01 to examine whether an undercount had occurred. In my opinion, although the tests themselves were not perfect, they showed that in fact an undercount had occurred — and UJC readily admitted as much in the text and appendix of the report.

Personally, I believe that both the 5.5 million population estimate from NJPS 1990 and the 5.2 million population estimate from NJPS 2000-01 are too low. The current “American Jewish Year Book,” which develops a national Jewish population estimate by summing estimates provided by hundreds of Jewish communities across the country, is 955,000 Jews higher than the NJPS 2000-01 number. For a variety of reasons, the year book number is probably too high, but I also believe that the NJPS number is too low. The proper figure, most likely, is somewhere in between.

Does the decrease in the estimate from 5.5 million in 1990 to 5.2 million in 2000 indicate a decreasing Jewish population? Not really. First, given the margin of error around both numbers, which is inherent in the survey research process, the 5.5 million and 5.2 million are not statistically significantly different. Second, the estimate only decreased by about 5% in a decade, certainly not enough of a decrease to “shock straying Jews into observance.”

I searched the downloadable version of the NJPS 2000-01 report for the word “decrease” and found that the authors do not indicate once that the Jewish population has decreased. To be sure, had I written the report I would have been careful to indicate that the two estimates are just that — estimates — and that we should probably conclude that the American Jewish population is holding its own. (Then again, other findings about low fertility, high intermarriage and low percentages of children being raised as Jews within intermarriages probably indicate that a decrease has occurred, and should clearly give us pause about the American Jewish future.)

But was the UJC’s report on NJPS 2000-01 an attempt to “publish flawed figures once again?” Absolutely not. It is in fact the press who subtracted the two figures and made it the headline. Perhaps UJC was somewhat remiss in not providing the proper cautions about the population numbers,

but the press, always looking for controversy and sensationalism, must share most of the blame if the American Jewish public is being misled.

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