

Towards 2000: The American Experience

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The gaps in our knowledge of Anglo-Jewry contrast with the extensive information we have about the current state of Jewish life in America. Last year saw several important new studies. What light do they shed on the British experience? If the American example is anything to go by, is Diaspora Jewry heading for extinction?

Surprisingly, the latest research has led some sociologists to optimistic conclusions. Jewish group identity in a free and open society, they argue, is more tenacious than we had thought. The following is a review of the findings.

Where America leads, the rest of the world follows. If the old cliché is no longer true in the economic sphere, it still needs to be taken seriously in relation to Jewry. Quite simply, the USA has the world's largest Jewish population – currently estimated at some five and a half million – larger than Israel and approaching twenty times the size of Anglo-Jewry. More importantly, it has been able to amass a great deal of knowledge about itself. Endless statistics have been gathered, and a group of outstanding Jewish sociologists has been on hand to interpret them.

During the seventies, the story they told was a depressing one. Inter-marriage, which had been estimated in the 1920s at no more than one per cent, had rocketed. No-one knew how high – estimates ranged from fifteen to forty per cent, and the figures varied from town to town. But it was dangerously high: that, everyone agreed. The great foundation-stone of Jewish stability, the family, was crumbling as divorce-rates soared and one parent families became a familiar part of the scene. Most alarmingly, the birth-rate was down to an average of 1.2 children per family, well below the figure needed for even zero population growth.

It was then that a notorious demographic projection spoke of a collapse of American Jewry to ten or a hundred thousand Jews in the year 2075. Like every other obituary written about the Jewish people, it was eminently plausible and utterly wrong. A new picture is emerging among the sociologists of the eighties, one that diagnoses serious problems, to be sure, but nevertheless one that gives intriguing – if sometimes highly controversial – grounds for hope.

How inevitable is assimilation?

America is the test-case for the crucial question of the modern diaspora. Can a distinctive Jewish population survive in an open society? Conventional wisdom said No. Ethnic minorities gradually lose their identities as immigrant memories fade across the generations and assimilation becomes inevitable. The American Jewish pattern seemed to bear this out. The first generation was typically Orthodox, the second generation Conservative, the third Reform, and the fourth already on its way out. Religious identification helped rather than hindered the acculturation process as immigrants moved from being Jewish Americans to American Jews to just Americans.

There were different responses to the facts. Some argued that assimilation was inevitable and desirable; others that it was inevitable and undesirable, so the only place to live as a Jew was Israel; others held that it was inevitable in an open society, even in Israel, so the only option was to recreate the closed society in the form of a modern, voluntary ghetto. But all agreed that majority assimilation and loss of Jewish identity was inevitable.

This assumption is now challenged by Calvin Goldscheider in his *Jewish Continuity and Change: Emerging Patterns in America* (Indiana University Press, 1986). Taking as his basis the extensive community survey of Boston in 1975, he argues that despite inter-marriage and secularisation, American Jews are remaining surprisingly Jewish.

The crux of his analysis is his perspective on Jewish cohesion. Do Jews hold together as an identifiable group? Measured by some indices, most notably religious ones, Jewish identity in America is waning. But there are other criteria. In general, group strength is to be measured by "the number and intensity of in-group interactions". And if Judaism no longer holds Jews together, other things might. What does the evidence show?

Attitudes to intermarriage

The answer is a series of phenomena which will strike those with conventional attitudes as highly paradoxical. Consider, for example, intermarriage. The Boston survey reveals that almost no Jews of any age-group take a positive attitude toward it: they are not deliberately assimilationist. But this apart, the younger generation has markedly different attitudes from their parents. Forty-three per cent of the older age group had strong negative feelings about intermarriage, but only five per cent of the 18-29 year-olds did so. Only forty-eight per cent of the over-sixties would accept the situation if their children proposed marrying out, but eighty-four per cent of the under-thirties would. It is not certain that this means a permanent change of attitude: it may be that today's young Jews will share the views of their parents when they reach the same age. But the indicators are otherwise: the new generation is more accepting of and less alarmist about intermarriage.

Surprisingly it emerges that going to university

does not create liberal, accepting attitudes towards marrying out. Among the younger generation, the most accepting are the least well-educated, while university graduates have the most negative feelings about outmarriage. A very recent discovery of information amassed by a market research team – too recent to figure in Goldscheider's book – confirms this. Steven M. Cohen ("Education and Inter-marriage", *Moment*, November 1986) reports on their findings, which represent a far larger sample than has previously been available to studies of Jewish behaviour. The intermarriage rate for men under forty without a university degree is thirty-three per cent; for those with a degree, it drops to twenty-six per cent; and for those who attended graduate school, the rate drops to eighteen per cent. A similar if less dramatic decline (twenty-four to sixteen per cent) applies to Jewish women in the same age group.

The old assumption that a secular university training weakens Jewish allegiance is in need of revision. In Cohen's words: "To put the matter boldly, the best-educated are the least mixed married". Both Cohen and Goldscheider hazard a guess as to why this should be so. Attendance at university has become the prevailing norm among American Jews, instead of the exception. A generation or two ago, the young Jew at college was likely to be isolated from his or her Jewish peers; now it is the Jew who does not attend college who is more likely to be isolated. "The reason that going to a graduate school improves one's chances of marrying a Jewish spouse", says Cohen, "may well be that, quite simply, that's where the Jews are."

The Intermarriage Paradox

But the most perplexing facts relate to life after intermarriage. Certainly those who have married out (and where the non-Jewish spouse has not undergone a nominal 'conversion') are less Jewishly identified than those who have married in. But on some indicators the differences are surprisingly small. Among younger outmarried couples, a majority still say that most of their friends are Jewish; most identify with some Jewish religious denomination; most perform some family religious ritual. Forty per cent have mostly Jewish neighbours; just under forty per cent register strong Jewish values. In short, not only are the young more accepting of intermarriage, but the intermarried themselves are strongly identified – at least attitudinally and socially – with Jewish life.

Some penetrating comments on this confusing situation are offered by Samuel Heilman ("The Jewish Family Today: An Overview", in *Tradition and Transition*, ed. Jonathan Sacks, Jews' College Publications, 1986). It is, he says, a classic confrontation between two realities: the lay world and halakhic principle. The lay American-Jewish population has come to terms with outmarriage and would favour easy conversion. The reasons? In most mixed marriages, the Jewish partner continues to identify with his or her religion of origin. Marriages where the non-Jewish partner does not convert are more likely to end in divorce than those where they do. Also, there is statistical evidence that the entire family is more likely to identify with the father's than with the mother's religion. Hence the paradox that children of a mixed

marriage who are halakhically Jewish (of a Jewish mother) are less likely to identify as Jews than those who are halakhically not Jewish (of a Jewish father). These are the sociological pressures behind the 'convenience conversions' of Reform and its notorious patrilineal decision that children of a Jewish father may be considered as Jewish if they choose to identify. The argument is that the American community has much to gain by accepting these families as Jewish: it would turn intermarriage from an outflow to an influx of Jews.

But a tremendous explosion may be in the making. Clearly, the halakhically committed cannot accept such conversions as valid. Yet they are taking place at an increasing rate: a 1978 survey revealed that they took place in forty per cent of marriages between Jewish men and non-Jewish women. And recent research shows that the children of such marriages consider themselves Jewish, identify positively, and experience few feelings of stress or marginality. At the moment, suggests Heilman in an observation that only a sociologist could make, there is a tacit interdependence between Orthodoxy and Reform. Orthodoxy cannot relax its standards for conversion but is willing to let Reform cope with the pressure of grassroots reality. If children of such marriages subsequently become Orthodox there is always the remedy of a second, halakhic, conversion (a point made recently by Norman Lamm). Reform rabbis in turn "recognise the problems of maintaining a long term commitment to Judaism on the part of the converts and often look to the traditionalists to provide the new Jews with some framework of belief and practise".

Is this a stable state, or is it, as Reuven Bulka and others have argued, the forerunner of a cataclysm? Whatever happens, nothing could be more indicative of the strange developments in American Jewish life than that the phenomenon of intermarriage should be seen by some observers as heralding a major revival of American non-Orthodoxy, and by others as signalling its final demise.

Birthrate and the Family

Goldscheider's other evidence for the stabilisation of American Jewry is less controversial. Thus, for example, the Boston survey reveals that living in areas of low Jewish population density was not necessarily a sign of wishing to break away from the Jewish community. To the contrary: although those who lived in predominantly non-Jewish neighbourhoods had fewer Jewish friends, many of them (forty-four per cent) expressed a desire for more Jewish neighbours, and they did not score significantly lower on tests of Jewish values, ritual performance or even synagogue attendance. Where Jews live seems to be determined by other factors than their Jewishness. Conversely, a strong sense of Jewishness survives even in those who have moved away from close proximity with other Jews.

On marriage and the family, the figures show that Jews marry later than non-Jews, rather than that they are marrying less. Few Jews over the age of thirty remain unmarried. Divorce rates are rising, but are still significantly lower than levels in the general population. The real concern lies with the birthrate. As Heilman documents in his survey of the family, this is

by no means a recent development. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Jewish birthrate has been consistently below the national white non-Jewish average. Jews have the lowest birthrate of all the major religious groups. The dramatic fall during the seventies appears to have righted itself in the eighties; but it is still low in absolute and relative terms.

The cause does not seem to lie in any marked preference among Jewish couples for no children or one child. Rather, it is in the comparative rarity of large Jewish families: those with four children or more. Why is this? Heilman suggests that it may have something to do with the high levels of education in the Jewish community and with the reluctance of educated women to sacrifice careers for the sake of raising families. He cites the apron that became popular among Jewish women in the sixties: on it was written, "For this I went to college?"

Goldscheider, though, using the Boston figures, discovers that whereas high educational levels do have a depressing effect on family size among the general population, they have the *opposite* effect on Jews: the better educated expect to have larger families. The same unexpected result emerges from a study of working wives: whereas non-Jewish women who work have fewer children, Jewish women who work expect to have more. These are enigmatic figures and suggest that further research is needed before conclusions are drawn.

One factor seems relatively clear: the least committed Jewishly have the fewest children. The Boston study showed that Conservative Jews expect to have larger families than Reform or the unattached. It covered too few Orthodox Jews to allow any conclusions. But a recent study undertaken by Heilman and Steven M. Cohen ("Ritual Variation among Modern Orthodox Jews in the United States", *Studies in Contemporary Jewry II*, ed. Peter Medding, Indiana, 1986) showed the same pattern carried through Orthodoxy. Against an average family size of 2.0 among the non-Orthodox, the birthrate in 'nominally' Orthodox couples was 2.1, 'centrist' Orthodox families averaged 2.9, and the rate among 'traditional' (= fully practising) Orthodox couples was 4.2. If the next generation maintains the affiliation of its parents, it is therefore likely to be more committed than the last through demographic factors alone. We are likely in the coming years to hear more about the 'quality' as against the quantity of American Jewry: it may be declining, but the most religiously observant are growing.

The Occupational Factor

Socio-economic and educational factors are also playing their part in the unexpected development of American Jewish life. Jews have moved further and faster up the ladders of college and career than any other ethnic group. One might have been forgiven for thinking that Upward Mobility was a Biblical commandment: 'making it' has become the religious pursuit of secular American Jews.

But hitherto it was always thought that the process was a symptom or cause of integration and assimilation. There is ample historical evidence that so, indeed, it was. To get on in America meant casting off the Orthodox tradition, associated as it was with poverty,

undereducation and the lower East Side. Goldscheider argues that the effect has now been reversed. So successful have Jews been in becoming postgraduates and professionals that they have become *less*, not more, like the general population. The educational-economic gap between Jews on the one hand, Protestants and Catholics on the other, is wide and getting wider. Jews are becoming *more like one another*. Goldscheider's conclusion is that "the growing occupational similarity among Jews implies greater similarity in lifestyle, residence, values, schooling, family and economic and political interests. These patterns mesh together in ways to reinforce Jewish cohesion and distinctiveness." They may no longer have common memories: instead they have common membership of the upper-middle class.

There is another effect. Now that the upward social process has been maturing among Jews for more than one generation, more young graduates and professionals have parents who are also graduates and professionals. One of the main sources of inter-generational conflict is being removed. Further evidence of this can be seen if we examine religious affiliation.

Denominational Affiliation

A comparison of the 1975 Boston study with the one done ten years earlier in the same town showed a sharp decline in Orthodox affiliation, a slight decline in the Conservative share, and a marked growth in Reform and the non-affiliated. Goldscheider cautions against drawing any conclusions from this: there may have been special factors at work. The overall 1975 figures showed Orthodoxy at five per cent, Conservative and Reform at roughly thirty-five per cent, and the unaffiliated at some twenty-five per cent of the adult Jewish population. There is certainly evidence of moves down the scale of affiliation: most current Conservative Jews are from Orthodox families, while Reform draw heavily and equally on Jews from Orthodox and Conservative backgrounds.

However there is some sign of change. Among the under-thirties, eighty-six per cent of Conservative Jews identify their parents as Conservative Jews, and seventy-one per cent of Reform say their parents were Reform. The movement, in other words, is slowing down. Only twenty-five per cent of the forty-to-sixty year olds share the denomination of their parents; twice that proportion of the under-thirties do so. But there is one sobering statistic. When American Jews change, they change down, not up. Across the tested Boston population, almost sixty per cent had moved down the scale, from Orthodox to Conservative or from Conservative to Reform. Only one-and-a-half per cent had made the move in the opposite direction.

Stability or Decline?

The picture Goldscheider draws is of a community already past its great upheavals. The age of dramatic transformations in American Jewry seems to be over. Jews have arrived, acculturated, succeeded and come of age as Americans. They marry out more freely than in the past; they go to college, become professionals and managers, marry late, have two-child families, and are less and less observant of religious rituals. But their

Jewish identity persists. They do not seem to wish to assimilate or opt out: not even those who have married out. They are held together by looser associations. They have Jewish friends, Jewish attitudes, and they remain – in their educational, occupational and child-bearing patterns – a distinctive subgroup, influenced by trends in the wider society but still different.

Is this loose identity strong enough to preserve Jews as Jews for the foreseeable future? Goldscheider will not say. Certainly the optimism of the sociologist will be countered by the scepticism of the Orthodoxy, who will question the viability of ethnic Jewishness as a basis for Jewish survival, and who will raise the momentous halakhic question about a community more and more of whose members see themselves as Jews when, by Jewish law, they are not.

Increasingly, it would seem, Orthodoxy will be driven on itself: positively by its remarkable successes via high birthrate, day schools and yeshivot, in raising a powerful new generation; negatively by the marked failure of Orthodoxy to capture the middle ground of Jewish America, which is by now solidly Conservative and Reform and showing no signs of return.

Common Problems

But if there is much driving Orthodoxy and others apart, there are other phenomena drawing them together, or at least forcing them to face the same problems. These emerge clearly from Heilman's study of the family. Perhaps the most obvious is divorce and its consequences. Though it is still below the national average, divorce among Jews is rising fast and the Orthodox community is not immune from it. Ten years ago one rabbi was already voicing "the uncomfortable feeling that the number of divorces in Orthodox circles is increasing to the point of alarm".

One distinctive feature of Jewish divorces is that they occur more frequently among the thirty-five to forty-four year olds, at a time when children are most likely to be affected. The effects of divorce on children are now known to be significant, negative and lasting, often not revealing themselves until many years later.

Another concern is that the Jewish community does not seem yet adequately to have prepared itself for divorce by creating a strong support network of parents-without-partners groups, single-parent organisations and a marriage market for the divorced. Significant shortcomings are being identified in American rabbis' skills as counsellors to those contemplating divorce and to single parents. Heilman reports several examples of individuals who felt let down by their communities and rabbis during and after the divorce process. The result is often an alienation from Judaism, and an increasing tendency for the divorced to seek non-Jewish partners when remarrying.

If Orthodoxy shares the general problem of divorce, non-Orthodoxy may find itself forced to turn to traditional models in reducing some of its social ills. One growing perception is that Jewish schooling alone is not an effective substitute for Jewish practice at home. Recent research discovered that the willingness of Jewish university students to date non-Jews was hardly affected by the degree of their formal Jewish education. Among those who had a high degree of Jewish education, twenty-five per cent said religion was not a factor in their dating, thirty-three per cent said they

would regularly date non-Jews and only fourteen per cent that they would never do so. These were almost the same figures as the overall average. But if Jewish education in this respect makes little impact, Jewish observance does. Recent New York surveys show that intermarriage rates vary in inverse proportion to ritual observance: the more practising the Jewish parent, the less likely the child is to marry out. The power of *mitzvot* as the basis of Jewish cohesion may become increasingly apparent in the coming years as the only alternative to an acceptance of intermarriage.

Implications for Anglo-Jewry

Drawing practical conclusions from these findings is necessarily partisan and tendentious. Extending them to British Jewry more hazardous still. America is different. Its Jewish community is so much larger, more high-profile and self-confident than ours. It is a perceptible factor in national life – especially in New York and academia – in a way ours is not. Perhaps the difference most immediately noticeable is that American Jewry is overwhelmingly non-Orthodox, while British Jewry remains solidly Orthodox, in affiliation if not in practice.

The most obvious parallels are those that belong to general social trends, above all those relating to the family. A sharp fall in synagogue marriages and a rise in the divorce rate have already been observed in Anglo-Jewry. How does one confront this? On counselling the community is relatively well-prepared, through the Jewish Marriage Council and the Jews' College-United Synagogue Practical Rabbis courses. The social network is less clearly defined. Do we have the right environments for Jewish singles to meet? Or for one-parent families? Or for the divorced to meet new partners?

A second set of questions concerns education. Barry Kosmin's research at the Board of Deputies repeatedly raised doubts about the community's education strategy, doubts reinforced by American research. That Jewish education is crucial to Jewish survival is beyond doubt. But in what form? And with what provisos? Formal education is a powerful tool only in imparting information; *not* in influencing attitudes and behaviour. Here the crucial determinants are the experience of home, particularly in early childhood, and later, peer-group example.

Added to this is the much-observed phenomenon that single Jews are least likely to be formally attached to the community. For many, marriage and having children set in motion a process of re-identification after some estrangement. This suggests that new parents be made a key target for Jewish education: parents studying in parallel with their children, or learning experiences for the family as a whole. Not only is this a key moment in the lives of parents but it is also likely strongly to reinforce the education of their children. The success of such ventures as Limmud and the London Board Family Weeks is evidence of the potency of this approach.

Learning-through-doing, informal education, youth groups, residential retreats, adult education and 'outreach' programmes are all likely to figure more prominently in the future as the limits of formal education, particularly for children from non-observant homes, are recognised. Increasingly Jewish education

will be seen in its traditional role – if in modern forms – as the transmission of a total culture to total social entities, rather than as the imparting of information to children in isolation from their family context.

A third phenomenon, one that emerges clearly from Goldscheider's analysis, is that of Jews in situations which would have estranged them from Judaism in the past but who still affirm their Jewishness. The traditional indicators of a desire for assimilation – from moving out of a Jewish district to marrying out – are no longer so. The analyses do not mention the more extreme examples, but they are well enough known: the Jewish Gay movement and Jews-for-Jesus. In short, a rejection of Judaism is no longer a rejection of Jewishness.

This is a new and paradoxical development and one that will pose problems. There will be increasing demographic pressure on the Reform movement here, as in America, to offer a home for some of these Jews; and the more it does so, the more it will find itself in conflict with Orthodoxy. We are also likely to see the growth or peripheral, independent organisations – Yakar and the Spiro Institute are obvious examples – as Jews seek modes of association different in kind from synagogue membership. Whether or not the Anglo-Jewish religious establishment enters the field may be a crucial policy question for the future. If it does, it will find itself sponsoring outreach programmes, cultural events, and possibly a residential or social-educational centre. The synagogue service, for so long the central event of Anglo-Jewish life, may become only one of an increasing variety of contexts for Jewish affirmation.

Anglo-Jewish Orthodoxy

Finally the crucial question which is already simmering in Anglo-Jewry. What is to be the future of the great Central Orthodox mainstream? The singular achievement of British Jewry in the nineteenth century was to lay the foundations of an Orthodoxy which still commands the allegiance of seventy per cent of the known community. Is it strong enough to move securely into the twenty-first century?

The key to this question is to look at all sides of the equation – the gains and the losses of the various possible Orthodox strategies. The most buoyant sectors of American Jewry today are the Hassidic and yeshiva worlds: the groups who have Americanised least. Through a powerful educational network, strong social sanctions and maintenance of a closed, intense and non-integrationist environment, they have done what was hitherto thought impossible and resisted general demographic and cultural trends.

What should not be forgotten are the special circumstances in which this took place. It occurred only when a new group of immigrants arrived in the 1940s with their charismatic leaders – Rabbis Schneersohn, Teitelbaum, Kotler, Hutner and Breuer – determined to reconstruct in this once *'treifa medina'* the European communities that were in the process of being destroyed. Between them they established the most brilliantly successful institutions in the whole of the Golan.

What has not happened – and current research makes this manifest – is any general and widespread effect on the rest of American Jewry. There has been no significant move back to Orthodoxy. What movement

there has been is in the reverse direction. There *has* been an effect on Orthodoxy itself, with 'modern' Orthodoxy losing much of its momentum as 'traditionalist' Orthodoxy proved itself more intense, fulfilling and protective. The effect of this on the community at large has been small because Orthodoxy itself is small, no more than ten per cent of the Jewish population except in some urban concentrations.

The gains of non-integrationist Orthodoxy were thus made at the cost of any concern with the fate of American Jewry as a whole (with some exceptions, Lubavitch being the most notable). In America this cost must realistically be estimated as low. The great leaders who arrived in the 1940s were already committed to a policy of secession and non-involvement, a strategy they had evolved in Germany and Eastern Europe. The American Jewry they encountered can have done little to discourage them, non-Orthodox and assimilationist as it was. There were few chances of success except among their own followers, and they rightly saw that what was necessary was that their own groups should grow and multiply, through high birthrate and intensive education.

The same considerations apply to the Hassidic and yeshiva groups of British Jewry, currently estimated at five per cent of the community. But as a model for the leadership of the mainstream religious establishment it is disastrously inappropriate. Orthodox concern with the fate of British Jewry as a whole is inescapable, since it is the clear majority of the community as a whole. One would have to ask whether the American pattern – with its overwhelming preponderance of non-Orthodox and non-affiliated, its vast hinterland of mixed marriages and convenience conversions – is preferable. The answer – whether on halakhic, aggadic or pragmatic grounds – must be No.

The demoralisation of 'modern' Orthodoxy in America by its yeshiva and Hassidic critics may have resulted in many gains and few losses. Were a similar demoralisation of 'central' Orthodoxy to take place in Britain, there would be some gains but enormous losses.

Nor is there reason for demoralisation. If the general processes now evident in America are at work here too, then we are likely to see less desire for assimilation, less defection from Orthodoxy to Reform, more desire for Jewish education and experience in the future than in the past. This may not stem the demographic decline of Anglo-Jewry as a whole unless there is marked change in the birthrate. Nor will it lessen the challenges indicated above: will the mainstream be quick enough to develop the more varied educational, social and cultural modes needed to support Jewish identity in a less synagogue-orientated (but not less Jewish) generation?

A delicate strategy is called for. If the mainstream were to cut itself off from the yeshiva and Hassidic worlds – by declaring itself, for example, a distinctive 'movement' – it would lose its access to the most dynamic currents in contemporary Jewish life, and to many of its future rabbis and teachers. If it were to ally itself fully with those worlds it would lose its role, purpose and responsibility. It may find itself, for the next few decades, walking a tightrope. But the best way to walk a tightrope is with confidence, looking not around but ahead. ■