Vitality and resilience in the American Jewish family

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TODAY, in Jewish communal circles in the United States, it is commonplace to hear that, at best, the American Jewish family is threatened; and at worst, it is in shambles. The prophets of doom for the American Jewish family cite the growth in four types of families: the Singles, the Childless, the Intermarried, and the Divorced. If you string together the first letters of each of these types, you get "SCID." In short, quite a few observers have been saying the American Jewish family is on the skids.

I would like to suggest that these prophets of doom, though intelligent and well-intentioned, may be wrong. The American Jewish family may be changing dramatically—young adult Jews are staying single and childless longer, divorcing and intermarrying more frequently. But, surprisingly, none of these trends holds out serious dangers for Jewish familial or communal continuity in demographic terms, even though they may well affect the quality of Jewish family life. Numerous arguments, data, and interpreta-

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tions counterbalance the unduly pessimistic perspective with which most of us are familiar.

First, let's take singlehood. Like Americans generally, and like highly educated Americans in particular, Jews have been marrying much later than their parents of the postwar years did; for example, about two-thirds of Jewish men in their early twenties have never married. Nevertheless, something like 95 percent of Jews aged 35 to 44 have married. There is simply no reason to believe that the decline in marriage of those in their twenties today is not limited to: those in their twenties today. Young American Jewish adults may not be getting married as early as their parents did, but they are getting married—albeit later in life.

We have a similar picture when it comes to Jewish fertility. You've heard no doubt the projection that today's Jewish women are having no more than 1.6 or 1.7 babies. That estimate assumes that they will have children at the same young age as their mothers did. In fact, today's Jewish women are not only marrying later, they're having babies later too—and I suspect there's some connection between these two trends. I recently collected data from the Greater New York area—a region that includes not only heavily Orthodox Borough Park but also the trendy Upper East Side and Greenwich Village, as well as Westchester and Long Island, communities very similar to suburban areas throughout the United States. In all, it is an area that encompasses nearly a third of American Jewry. In this region, the birthrates for women 35 to 44 are at the replacement level. Those who are now married have had over 2.1 children, while all women in that age group—married, never married, and formerly married—have had an average of 2.0 children. There has been a dramatic upturn in childbirth in the later years among American women, and apparently Jews are no exception to this trend; in fact, they may even be leading it. We simply don't know whether today's women age 20 to 34 will have as many babies as those slightly older; we can say that they'll have them later in life.

You've also probably heard a lot about the rising Jewish divorce rate. Actually, it's risen (and probably has stopped rising) in line with the increase (and the recent downturn) in the overall American divorce rate. The only national comparative data we have demonstrate that the Jewish divorce rate has remained at

around half of the white Protestant rate, and it shows no signs of significantly surpassing that ratio. The little data we have also suggest that Jews who divorce remarry faster than others. In short, fewer Jewish Americans than others experience divorce, and those who do are better able to establish second marriages.

Finally, as for American Jewish intermarriage, I can tell you that the figures you may have heard—32 percent, or even 50 percent—are simply inaccurate. The most careful analyses to date of the 1971 National Jewish Population Survey intermarriage data have been conducted by several highly respected social scientists right here in Israel. Professors Schmelz and DellaPergola of Hebrew University report that 22.5 percent of Jews of all ages who married between 1965 and 1971 married a nonconverting Gentile. Sociologist Bernard Lazerwitz of Bar-Ilan University, analyzing the same data, reports that fewer than 10 percent of Jews under 35 married a nonconverting Gentile. In the Greater New York Jewish Population Study conducted ten years later, about 11 percent—about one Jew in nine—who married in the 1970s married a non-Jew who did not convert, and we can assume the national rate is probably over twice as large as the New York area figures.

So it is not all that clear that intermarriage is going through the roof. And to the extent that it has increased—and indeed it has—not all the consequences of intermarriage are bad for the Jews. First, Jews who intermarry—and especially those who assimilate upon doing so—come disproportionately from weak Jewish backgrounds. Meanwhile, outmarriage is also the immediate cause for conversion to Judaism of about a sixth of the born-Gentile spouses. They typically turn out to be as committed to Judaism as the average American Jew who marries another Jew. Thus, intermarriage may serve as a salutary escape and entry vehicle—allowing less committed Jews to in effect leave the community, and a smaller number of newly committed Jews to enter.

But what of the net balance of gains and losses? It turns out that in Jewish/Christian homes where there has been no conversion, most children are raised as Jews, especially when the mother is Jewish, but in only about a third of the cases where the father is Jewish. If we accept a very minimal definition of Jewish identity, then as a result of conversions and of the triumph of Jewish identity in the contest over the group affiliations of mixed mar-

riages' offspring, we would conclude intermarriage may be serving to increase the Jewish population slightly. If we use a more stringent definition of Jewish affiliation, one that demands not merely affirming one's Jewishness but manifesting it in ritual practice, communal affiliation, or friendships, then, at worst, we would say that intermarriage is contributing to the erosion of the Jewish population by only 10 to 15 percent per generation of that small fraction that intermarries.

If all this is true—and I certainly believe that it is—then why is pessimism about the state of the American Jewish family in particular, and the fate of American Jewry in general, so rampant?

Aside from some cultural predilection to worry about survival, there are, I believe, at least four reasons why many observers see the Jewish family and American Jewish life not simply changing—as they always have—but on the verge of disintegrating.

First, there is the problem of elite standards. People who are in the business of observing American Jewry—rabbis, educators, communal workers, *shlichim,* and even Jewish studies professors—hold their subjects up to the highest of standards, standards the average Jew has always failed to meet despite idealized and romanticized notions about the good old days.

Second, some influential observers command institutions or maintain portfolios that cater to various Jewish social problem cases—be they divorces, or troubled families in the case of our concern today, or that of so-called *yordim* or the so-called unaffiliated in other instances. For good or not-so-good reasons, these observers are very struck by the enormity of the Jewish social problem they are addressing. Insofar as they are intent on making sure that dollars, shekels, and jobs flow to treating their particular problem, they, wittingly or unwittingly, exaggerate the dimensions of their problem.

Third, we have the influence of folk Zionism. Many good Zionists are taught from youth that the Diaspora, especially after 1948, is not only historically peripheral to the State of Israel; but in light of assimilation and anti-Semitism, it is also inherently unstable. These ideological perceptions color the selective interpretation of anecdotes and facts of Diaspora Jewish life, and lend a pessimistic tinge to the portrait that many good, committed Zionists draw of Diaspora Jewry.

Finally, we often live off outmoded models of Jewish social behavior. At one time, the Jewish contact with modernity meant severe disruption of family life and communal ties. At one time, it meant that some Jews saw their group ties as a social handicap and fled their Jewishness. At one time, it meant massive dislocations in so many spheres of life. Today modernity means, for most American Jews, none of these adverse consequences. Instead, American Jews have adapted wonderfully to modern society. They are making extraordinary achievements in the political, economic, and cultural arenas, even as they are preserving their group identity and community.

To illustrate that Jews are adapting their Jewishness to their changing family life, and how first impressions can often be deceiving, I'd like to turn to a recent analysis I and my colleague Paul Ritterband did of differences in Jewish identity between today's older and younger adults and between people in different family statuses. We found that young adults, those under 34, were indeed very uninvolved in Jewish life. For example, the majority belonged to no Jewish institutions as compared with only less than a quarter unaffiliated among those 55 to 64. Only half of the young adults said that all their closest friends were Jewish, as opposed to more than four-fifths of the middle-aged Jews. However, when we compared the never-married with couples with school-age children, we found the same sorts of huge differences. Over a third of the never married said they didn't celebrate Passover and Chanuka as opposed to only 10 percent of the couples with children; almost three-fifths of the singles belonged to no Jewish institution as opposed to less than a quarter of those with children; and most of the never-marrieds said they had a Gentile close friend as opposed to only a quarter of the parents.

When we compared people in different age groups, all of whom were married parents, we found virtually no differences in Jewish identity between the old and the young. In other words, the reason that young people seem less Jewishly committed is that they haven't yet started the families that once led their own parents and now many of their contemporaries to the types of activities that most observers recognize as the hallmarks of visible Jewish commitment. When today's young adults marry and have their own children, they too—I believe—will reach the same levels

of Jewish commitment as did other married parents in the past and in our current time. In short, today's young adults who aren't married or are childless are not lost; but they are on the periphery of the community. The SCIDs are indeed very uninvolved in Jewish life, and there is evidence that they have become less involved of late.

Thus, the Jewish family remains central to Jewish commitment and continuity. Yet, its shape and its relationship to Jewish continuity may well be changing.

In sum, as for the policy implications, I believe it is morally right, if not necessary, for Israel, organized Diaspora Jewry, and concerned Jewish individuals everywhere to react vigilantly to social change in the Jewish family, which is such a crucial area of communal life and social policy. But, I am sorry to say, that the most typical reaction has been an unrealistic, though well-intentioned attempt, to try to slam the brakes on demographic change, rather than tending to the needs of troubled couples, new parents, singles, and others in alternative family situations for their own sakes. In the last few years the Jewish community has organized numerous conferences, issued scores of reports and recommendations, and established dozens of ongoing task forces to design ways to get large numbers of Jews to change their family-related decisions—that is, to marry young, marry each other, stay married, and have many children. Unfortunately, in the face of the massive influence of the larger society, such efforts at demographic jawboning are doomed to frustration and ultimate failure. Even whole governments have vainly sought to influence the demographic behavior of their citizenry with only minor effect, if any. How much less can be expected in this regard of a voluntary community?

But just because it is unrealistic to expect the voluntary American Jewish community to influence demographic behavior on a large scale, it may still be morally necessary for that community to exemplify certain values and to conduct itself in a caring and sensitive fashion. Singles looking for Jewish marriage partners, parents willing to bear the expense of time, money, and intergenerational conflict to send their children to Jewish schools but who are nevertheless left wanting, couples under strain in need of counselling, and mixed married families searching for ways to

conduct their Jewish lives, all deserve a community that attends to their legitimate, Jewish needs for their own sake and not merely because we are concerned—rightly or wrongly—with the demographic numbers. Thus—to take only one area—the decisions to support quality day care and low-cost effective Jewish schooling and camping should be made on sound moral grounds, on a value basis, and not because of an ill-advised attempt to raise the Jewish birthrate. In short, the nature of relations between Jews and Jews, and between Jews and their institutions, is within our control, but the ability to influence millions of personal decisions about marriage and childbearing probably is not.

Instead of trying to get today's young Jews to revert to a model of family life that may have existed only in the minds of a few well-meaning romantics, the U.S. Jewish community ought to learn to accept the reality of Jewish family life while striving to improve the quality of Jewish life. We will probably have large numbers of singles, childless, intermarried, or divorced for some time to come. The challenge is to redesign our schools, synagogues, organizations, Israel programs, and the numerous other features of Jewish life to make room not only for the married couple with children, but to members of alternative families as well. In fact, today, almost all the married parents affiliate with some Jewish institution at some time, even if these affiliations are perfunctory or unrewarding. The challenge is to adjust our programs and institutions to the emergence of vast constituencies of Jews who through no fault of their own live in Jewish families much different from the traditional model. Our task is not to fight the Jews, but to respect them so as to help them, and lead them to adopt greater and qualitatively superior levels of involvement in the life of our People.