

### III *Policy and Planning Implications*

## THE LEADERSHIP IMPLICATIONS OF THE NATIONAL JEWISH POPULATION SURVEY

BERNARD REISMAN, PH.D.

*Director, Benjamin S. Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service at Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts*

*The Jewish community is today in the midst of a watershed change in which its frame of reference is being redefined from modernity to post-modernity. Rather than being depressed or confused by the NJPS demographic findings, Jewish communal leaders must assume the responsibility of mobilizing the community to pursue innovative approaches. One such approach is to transform the policies and programs of the organized Jewish community to be more responsive to a population of acculturated Jews who are searching for community, meaning, and rootedness.*

I recently participated in two major forums discussing the results of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS).<sup>1</sup> In both cases I, and most of the other participants, initially emerged depressed and confused. It is not difficult to understand why we felt depressed—the findings presented to us were very bleak, suggesting an inevitable decline of the American Jewish community. And if one carries these data to their logical conclusion, the consequences are even more problematic. What is implied is that it is not just Jewish life in America that is in jeopardy, but rather Jewish life in modern, open society. The message underlying the numbers presented to us by the demogra-

phers is that *Jewishness*, a Jewish lifestyle, and *Judaism*, the source of the basic ideas and rationale of that lifestyle, may no longer be viable, at least for those Jews who seek to achieve a blend of being Jewish and part of the general contemporary society.

If this assessment is true, then, although it is today that the future of the American Jewish community is uncertain, it is only a matter of perhaps another generation that such a grim outcome might be expected in other Diaspora communities. Therefore, two-thirds of world Jewry are or will shortly be existing in an uncertain to precarious future. Further, my Israeli colleagues are inclined to see the problematic demographic findings of the NJPS as restricted to the Diaspora—an inevitable outcome, anticipated by Zionist ideology, of living in *galut* (exile). Certainly, the problem of intermarriage, and the assimilation it represents, is most acute when Jews live as a minority in a society with a different culture and values.

<sup>1</sup>“Consultation on Conceptual and Policy Implications of the 1990 CJF National Jewish Population Survey,” held at Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts on October 14, 1991 and the “Conference on the Demographic Policy of World Jewry” held in Jerusalem on February 10–11, 1992.

Yet, it would be shortsighted to believe that even Israel is immune to the erosive forces, illustrated by the demographic data, on the Jewish identity of its population and on Israel as a Jewish state. For what really is at stake is the encounter between the traditional Jewish religious/cultural heritage and the ideas and values of modernity. If indeed the message of the demographers is that a Jewish lifestyle cannot survive the snare of modernity, then this problem also affects Israel.

Given such dire implications, it is easy to understand why I and others were depressed. Yet, I also reported another related reaction: We were confused. What were we, academics and professionals concerned about Jewish life, to do about these very troubling forecasts? Unfortunately, at both of these forums (and I am sure at dozens of other similar meetings), although the problems were articulated clearly, fully, and authoritatively (and at times it even appeared with an unseemly enthusiasm), there was virtually no comparable level of clarity of thinking about policy responses that offered direction for coping with the problems.

For me, and as I discovered later, for many of my colleagues as well, my descent into the pits of depression and confusion bottomed out after the opening day of the recent demographic conference in Israel. On that day, a series of speakers intoned the litany of problematic data: a 52% rate of current intermarriage, the persistence of late marriages and a low birth rate, and the rise in the numbers of Jews who are unaffiliated with synagogues or Jewish organizations, describe themselves as secular, or are converting out or whose children were being reared in another religion (Kosmin et al., 1991).

I am convinced that my depression was a function not only of the "bad news" but also of the prospect that my prior judgment about the American Jewish community seemed to be proven incorrect. I have been in that camp of observers of the American Jewish community who believe that we are

experiencing a resurgence of interest in Jewishness, especially among the younger generation. And as one who is in the senior years of his career and is coming to believe in his own statesman-like qualities, it is not easy to accept the possibility that my judgment is wrong.

Yet, my reaction that day was not just an issue of academic introspection. I had a pragmatic decision to make. I was scheduled to be the opening speaker at the second day of the Israel demographic conference. As requested, I had written and submitted my paper several weeks earlier, but it neither anticipated the extent of the problematic implications of the demographers' reports nor the pervasive depression left in their wake. As I reflected further on this dilemma I decided I could not deliver my prepared paper. What convinced me was the realization that the most important datum emerging from that first day was not so much the demographers' findings, but the depressive affect and concomitant sense of helplessness among the participants. And then I reasoned if we, who were mainly academics, were so demoralized and immobilized, would it not be likely that the professional and lay leaders of the American Jewish community who directly bear responsibility for policy decisions of the community would have even a more severe reaction?

My concern was that a massive self-fulfilling prophecy would be set into motion: Community leaders would be so intimidated by the experts and their hard data that they would lose hope in the future of the American Jewish community and drift into policies and programs that then would only abet the community's decline.

I decided to scuttle my original paper and address these new concerns directly. I spent several hours that night reflecting on the issues raised that day. By the time I appeared to speak early the next morning, I was convinced that I had made a wise decision. The essence of my position was not to try to rebut the specific demographic

findings, but rather to call attention to the accompanying, more critical danger: the assumption that these data were deterministic and that nothing the community leaders could do would "avert the severe decree."

I believe it is accurate to report that the second day of the conference was quite different from the first. I would like to claim all the credit, but at least am ready to share it with several other American Jewish academics and social planners who also spoke from a more upbeat perspective. By the end of the second day there was a new surge of energy among the participants, a shared recognition that a new agenda is confronting the American Jewish community, and the sense that the situation was not beyond repair.

#### INSIGHTS FOR COPING WITH CHANGE

It is important to note the key insights emerging from that day that enabled the participants to begin to mobilize themselves to define policies appropriate for the changing American Jewish community. Such insights could well serve as the basis for constructive policy responses of Jewish community leaders.

#### Caveats about the NJPS

Although the NJPS is an impressive, well-conducted state-of-the-art demographic study, there are inherent limitations in such a methodology that should be recognized. First, are the data that come from a sample of 2,441 individuals representative of both the diversity and total number of Jews in America? Second, does information from phone interviews utilizing fixed-choice, quantitative questions provide adequate information to make judgments about Jewish attitudes and behaviors of American Jewry? Third, how does one deal with the unexpectedly large number of respondents who were included in the survey sample because they reported that someone in their household is Jewish? This

decision can result in a difference of over 2 million in the total American Jewish population figure and of 7% in the critically important figure cited as the rate of intermarriage (Cohen & Berger, 1991).

#### What is Highlighted?

The choice of which findings of the study are to be highlighted affects the response to them. The selection of the first reports to be released seemed to indicate an attraction to those dramatic findings that tend to confirm a decline in Jewishness of the population. Alternative statistical inquiries that might have produced evidence for a more hopeful future for the Jewish community were not pursued, including the following:

- Is there a lower rate of intermarriage among younger people ages 24–35 as compared to older people now marrying (Cohen & Berger, 1991)?
- Do acculturated American Jews (in the sense of higher levels of education and income) have a lower rate of intermarriage than Jews with lower levels of education and income (DellaPergola, 1992)?
- Are third- and fourth-generation American Jews observing more Jewish practices than second-generation Jews (Cohen & Berger, 1991)?

#### Acculturation and Assimilation

A distinction needs to be made between assimilation and acculturation. The majority of American Jews today are third- and fourth-generation Jews. Given their near-universal level of college attendance (over 85%) and their full involvement in all phases of American society, it is clear that they are highly acculturated. Intermarriage seems to be more a function of acculturation than of assimilation, explained more by Jews living among non-Jews and going to school and working with them than by a desire to shed their Jewish identity and to blend with the non-Jewish majority.

### On the Use of Demographic Data

The veteran Israeli demographer, Roberto Bachi, has always taught that demographic findings should not be viewed as ends unto themselves, but rather as data to be used by policymakers to help them make decisions about directions and priorities for the community. The initial response to the NJPS is that community leaders have essentially abdicated their policy responsibilities to the demographers. The survey findings have become the end—the message—rather than the means to understand changes underway in Jewish life that call for new leadership initiatives.

### Critical Voids of Modernity

What is the NJPS' message concerning the changes now underway in American Jewish life? This is the critical question that needs to be clarified.

My interpretation is that Jews today are in the midst of a major change, of watershed proportions, that is transforming the nature of Jewish life (Goldscheider, 1989; Goldscheider & Zuckerman, 1984). Over the course of their long history, Jews have experienced several watershed changes, brought about by changing societal conditions that typically placed the Jewish people in jeopardy. Examples include the destruction of the two Temples, the Crusades, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, the onset of modernity, the Holocaust, and the establishment of the State of Israel. At each of these critical junctures the Jews made adaptations, often in their areas of settlement and in their ideology, which enabled them to survive the challenge or threat that confronted them. This pattern of adaptiveness and change undoubtedly is a key factor in accounting for the survival of the Jewish people through the years.

In the current watershed change, the frame of reference for Jewish life is being *redefined from modernity to post-mod-*

ernity. Most American Jews have accommodated to the challenges and opportunities of modernity. Living in an open and attractive society, they have fully availed themselves of the attractions and benefits of modernity. Indeed, American Jews might be described as the most successful and influential subcommunity in America today.

Yet, costs and frustrations are exacted by this achievement. The most obvious costs are expressed in the problematic demographic data, the most dramatic of which is the rise in intermarriage. Not as obvious, and this is the type of qualitative finding that the NJPS could not measure, is the frustration American Jews are increasingly experiencing as they have immersed themselves in American society. Many of them are becoming disenchanted with the core values of that society: individualism, materialism, and existentialism. These very modern American Jews are increasingly coming to sense they are missing something, that there are basic voids in their lives they would like to fill. Their quest is for *community*, to offset impersonality and transience; for *spirituality and transcendence*, to replace the lack of meaning; and for *tradition and rootedness*, to provide a link to the past and a lifestyle for today and tomorrow (Reisman, 1989a & b).

What is becoming increasingly clear to these searching Jews is that these voids can be best and most authentically fulfilled by their finding a closer connection to their Jewishness.

### A Watershed Change: From Modernity to Post-Modernity

Now the issues are joined, and perhaps we can make more sense out of the depression and confusion initially generated by the NJPS. The fact is that contemporary American Jews are in the midst of a watershed change in which the ground-rules and definitions of Jewish life are being radically redefined. Since the scope of this change is only now coming into focus, there is a lag in the perception and responses of

today's leaders of the American Jewish community. Confronted by the unprecedented new data of the NJPS, these community leaders resort to the perspectives and criteria that they have developed for responding to Jews coping with modernity and that have worked well for their generation and that of their parents and grandparents. Yet, given the radical changes in the ground-rules of Jewish life today, community leaders need to similarly radically redefine their orientation and adopt new policies and programs if they are to be responsive to a post-modern Jewish constituency.

The most obvious change highlighted by the NJPS is the comfortable integration of third- and fourth-generation Jews into American society. At the same time there is the recognition by American Jews that this acculturation does not require them to give up their commitment to sustain their Jewish identity. This is a different Jewish balance than that achieved by the first- and second-generation Jews who preceded them. First, it is fully self-chosen, both in terms of the range of viable options available in American society and of the psychological autonomy of today's young Jews. It also is a different Jewish identity because it is not automatic; it is contingent upon the fulfillment of the expectations that these young Jews have for community, meaning, and rootedness. Finally, the most obvious and most problematic difference of this generation's Jewishness concerns intermarriage. I think it is fair to say that, although most of them would prefer to marry a Jew, they clearly have fewer constraints—personal and communal—about accepting the possibility of a mixed marriage. I think it is also fair to say that if they do marry a non-Jew (and it is likely that as many as half will), most of them presume they can still maintain their Jewish identity, even if the mate does not convert.

Will the leaders of the Jewish community be accepting and supportive of this very different attitude?

#### SUMMARY: POLICY OPTIONS

The NJPS has created quite a stir in America, in other Diaspora communities, and in Israel. Clearly, this response is a function of the important issues raised by it—questions that bear on the future of the Jewish people. I have sought to understand the NJPS' demographic findings and what they tell us about a changing contemporary Jewish community. At the same time I have become aware of some misuses that can be made of the NJPS—the assumption that it provides a full picture of the Jewish practices and prospects of the American Jewish community, the tendency to accept that the data are deterministic and irreversible, and the tendency for leaders of the Jewish community not to assume responsibility for using the research data for shaping the policies and priorities of the Jewish community.

I became particularly aware of the danger of the self-fulfilling prophecy, of the tendency—especially of Jews when coping with “bad news”—to be attracted to the “worst scenario,” which then generates attitudes among both leaders and followers in the Jewish community that add to the likelihood that the worst scenario will come to pass. My experience at the demographic conference in Israel helped me see how leadership can dramatically influence the response of the folk.

My thesis is that the Jewish community is undergoing a watershed change and is currently poised at a critical juncture; it is not sure which way to turn. The NJPS has served as a catalyst, bringing the issue of change to the fore. What is not yet clear is how the leaders of the American Jewish community will respond. It appears that two positions are emerging, framed primarily in terms of how to respond to the findings of the NJPS.

The first position might be described as the “*Saving Remnant*” approach. Advocates of this position view the surge in the rate of intermarriage, coupled with the decline

in levels of observance of Jewish rituals and of affiliation with Jewish organizations, as clear evidence of the assimilation of a large segment of American Jews. Initiatives to reach out to this population are seen as counterproductive. On one level, such initiatives would weaken negative sanctions with regard to intermarriage and secularization. In addition, such initiatives inevitably result in diluting the authenticity of the Jewish tradition by compromising standards of expected behavior. In sum, this group argues that it is futile to try to reverse the assimilation of these marginal Jews, and therefore, they propose that the community invest its resources in strengthening that small group of committed Jews—the “saving remnant.”

I refer to the second position as “*Transforming*,” taking the title from the writings of Calvin Goldscheider, in which he describes the significant changes occurring in the contemporary American Jewish community (Goldscheider, 1989; Goldscheider & Zuckerman, 1984). As a result of these changes the traditional religious and cultural determinants of Jewish identity have been weakened, and new factors, such as shared social, economic, and political background, are increasingly important in influencing today’s American Jews in their identification with the Jewish community.

In light of these transforming changes in the shaping of Jewish identity, it can be misleading to assess the level of Jewish interest and commitment of today’s Jews based on the standards of prior generations. This is a critical consideration in policy decisions, specifically with regard to the controversial question of outreach initiatives to the “marginals”—primarily the intermarrieds and those minimally or not affiliated with synagogues or other Jewish organizations.

The advocates of this second position are more sanguine about the importance and the utility of outreach. First, they do not read the problematic data from the NJPS as totally indicative of a lack of Jewish interest, but more likely of a lack

of fit between the style and priorities of the Jewish community and its organizations and the radically changing needs and interests of most of this generation of American Jews. Moreover, given that these “marginals” have now become the majority of American Jews, we are referring to a significant element of the population. Therefore, the assumption is that, if the Jewish community recognizes the new interests of this generation (i.e., community, meaning, and rootedness) and responds accordingly, it will discover a receptive population. Accordingly, the strategy of the Transforming position is to seek to transform the policies and programs of the Jewish community to be more responsive to a different, but not inaccessible, population of Jews. Such policy and programmatic initiatives would seek to shape Jewish organizations that operate as “caring communities” and that transmit the essence of the Jewish religious/cultural heritage in ways that can inform the lifestyle of acculturated Jews and their families.

#### A FINAL NOTE ON LEADERSHIP

I began this article describing my initial state of depression and confusion on being confronted with the bleak demographic findings of the NJPS. I conclude feeling much more upbeat and with a sense of direction. This transformation from despair and impotence to hopefulness and a surge of energy—a readiness to go to work—symbolizes the leadership message I want to transmit.

American Jews are indeed at a critical juncture, which means they can choose to move in different directions. How shall they choose? Do the data confirm that the third- and fourth-generation American Jews have capitulated to the “snare of modernity” and are hopelessly on the path to assimilation? Or is the more pertinent reality the evidence of resurgent Jewish interests of the third and fourth generation? I believe leadership *can* make a difference, and what leaders believe and the

direction in which they choose to move are the keys.

The image that comes to me as I think about the leadership choices at this critical historical juncture is that of two approaching ships: one representing searching, receptive Jews and the other representing the Jewish religious/cultural heritage, eager to provide guidance to its people. Will they pass each other in the night or will they connect? My hope is that they will connect.

I must confront one final issue. Some readers will deprecate my position, saying, "He is a naive optimist." I pose this question to them: How do you want your leaders to respond? Is it to highlight danger and despair or to emphasize hope and action? Is it to capitulate in the face of new and problematic challenges or to mobilize the folk to pursue innovative solutions?

How have Jewish leaders responded to prior critical watershed changes? Consider these examples: Johanan ben Zakkai after the destruction of the First Temple and the defeat by the Romans of Bar Kochba; Ezra and Nehemiah after the destruction of the Second Temple and the Babylonian exile; Moses Mendelssohn at the onset of modernity; Theodor Herzl in the face of the rise of modern anti-Semitism; and Ben Gurion in the post-Holocaust era, coping with the obstacles to the establishment of the modern State of Israel. Would such Jewish leaders not have been seen as "naive optimists"?

To cite perhaps the quintessential words

of optimism for Jewish leaders confronted by life's dilemmas: Moses, in his concluding discourse to the Israelites who are poised to enter the Promised Land, transmits this message from God: "I have set before thee life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that thou mayest live, thou and thy seed" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

#### REFERENCES

- Cohen, Steven M., & Berger, Gabriel. (1991, October 2). *Understanding and misunderstanding the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University.
- DellaPergola, Sergio. (1992). *New data on demography and identification among Jews in the U.S.: Trends, inconsistencies, and disagreements*. Occasional Paper #11. Jerusalem: Hebrew University Institute of Contemporary Jewry.
- Goldscheider, Calvin. (1989). American Jewish marriages: Erosion or transformation? In: Peter Y. Medding (Ed.), *Studies in contemporary Jewry: An annual 5*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Goldscheider, Calvin, & Zuckerman, A. S. (1984). *The transformation of the Jews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kosmin, Barry A., et al. (1991). *Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey*. New York: Council of Jewish Federations.
- Reisman, Bernard. (1989a, Spring/Summer). A revolutionary change in American Jewish life. *The Forum*, 1 (4).
- Reisman, Bernard. (1989b, Summer). The ideology of post-modern American Jews. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 65 (4).