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**Social Research
and the Jews**



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Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational, religious and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life.

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Social Research and the Jews

In recent years, the Jewish world has come to appreciate the crucial importance of research and evaluation. It is now accepted that without formative analysis at all stages of an initiative's creation and implementation, programs aimed at the revitalization of Jewish life will have a haphazard chance of success.

This is especially true given the makeup of the Jewish professional world, arguably one of the most insulated and isolated industries on the nonprofit spectrum. If Jewish professionals decide to create or fund projects based on what they think Jews want, or what they think Jews feel, it is possible that they will simply create funhouse mirrors of their own presumptions and predilections. Vast amounts of time and resources will go to waste.

But analysis is important not only with respect to specific projects. In a larger sense, research into American Jewry is vital if the organized community is to understand the contours of the population it seeks to serve. After all, without systemic research, all we have are assumptions. Our current knowledge of such basic questions as where Jews live and how they identify is still uneven. The good news is that the community has recently taken steps to apply the science of social research to help shed light on larger issues such as demographics and identification. But social research is a vast science, with many competing theories and approaches. What's more, the community's relationship with research has oftentimes been conflicted. Such questions as who funds the research, how the research is conducted and how its results are applied have led to an uneasy dance between philanthropists, Jewish professionals and social scientists.

This issue of CONTACT seeks to illuminate these challenges and to explore ways in which the varied methodologies of social research might lead us towards a better understanding of the Jewish community. The hope is that one day in the future, social science research will be as common in the Jewish world as fundraising letters focusing on anti-Semitism are today. Armed with a more refined knowledge of the community, Jewish leadership will be better equipped to serve the needs of actual Jews.

Eli Valley

Eli Valley

AUTHENTIC FACTS AND COMMUNAL FALLACIES: Social Research and the American Jewish Community

by JONATHAN D. SARNA



In September 1908, Commissioner Theodore A. Bingham of the New York Police shocked the Jewish community by reporting that “perhaps half” of the city’s criminals were Jews, even though Jews comprised but a quarter of the city’s population. His blockbuster article on “Foreign Criminals in New York” went on to characterize immigrant Jews as “burglars, firebugs, pickpockets and highway robbers.”

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Following a barrage of criticism, including the publication of statistics suggesting that Jews actually committed fewer crimes than non-Jews, the commissioner withdrew his inflammatory charges and apologized. The figures he used, he explained, “were furnished me by others and were, unfortunately, assumed to be correct. It now appears, however, that these figures were unreliable.”

The Bingham incident highlighted the growing importance of statistics in twentieth-century American Jewish communal life. The very fact that the Police Commissioner employed statistical data, historian Arthur Goren shows in *New York Jews and the Quest for Community*,

invested his words “with an aura of objectivity and authority.” Since Revolutionary times, Americans had celebrated the importance of accurate numbers as being “authentic facts.” Americans embraced numbers, Patricia Cline Cohen explains in her book, *A Calculating People*, “because they were genuinely useful, because they were thought to discipline the mind, because they marked the progress of the era, and because they were reputedly objective and precise and hence tantamount to truth.” The hope was that if everyone possessed “authentic facts,” all thinking people would reach the same policy conclusions, and harmony would prevail.

American Jews, too, had come to believe in the efficacy of statistics. In 1880, influenced by European precedents, they published the first census of the American Jewish community, counting Jews, synagogues, synagogue members, the value of communal property and the number of Jews attending religious school. Nineteen years later, they established the *American Jewish Year Book*, designed to provide Jews with the facts needed in order to “grapple successfully

with the large problems of the Jewish situation.” The very

year that Bingham made his

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charges, in 1908, the *Year Book* carried a promise to supply “facts without color or prejudice” in response to nativist efforts to restrict immigration.

But as the Bingham incident demonstrated, that was easier said than done. In the case of crime, for example, statisticians were bedeviled by such irresolvable problems as how to identify who is a Jew and whether Jews were more likely to be criminals or simply more likely to be arrested. Perhaps, some prescient critics suggested, criminality was less related to religion and ethnicity than to class — the fact that so many Jews at the time were recent immigrants and poor. Others noticed that statistics on those serving

time in local jails failed to confirm a high rate of Jewish criminality, and actually implied the opposite. An elaborate study that controlled for age, population size, and location likewise seemed to prove that Jews were *less* prone to crime than native-born Americans. In short, what had seemed, at first glance, to be an “authentic fact” turned out upon close examination to be highly complicated and somewhat dubious. Bingham’s apology seemed to admit as much.

Nevertheless, we know, looking back, that crime was a serious problem within the Jewish community. If anything, the debate over the precise number of Jewish criminals diverted attention from the community’s long history of ignoring the unseemly Jewish underground that had developed in its midst. This “earlier reluctance to confront Jewish criminality head-on” actually “fostered conditions in which a Jewish underworld could take root and flourish,” historian Jenna W. Joselit has concluded.

The decades following 1908 witnessed ever greater efforts on the part of American Jews to quantify the problems that they faced. The first “Community Survey of Jewish Education in New York City,” prepared by Mordecai Kaplan and Bernard Cronson, shocked the Jewish community when it was presented in 1910. Concluding that between 75 and 80 percent of New York’s Jewish children received no formal Jewish education at all and many of the rest faced educational conditions so poor as to be counterproductive, the survey galvanized the Jewish community to action and set the stage for a revolution in Jewish education “to preserve Jewish life in this country.” Jewish educational reformers, led by Samson Benderly, successfully appealed to statistics to generate increased funds for their pedagogic initiatives.

In 1919, taking their cue from urban reformers across the United States, Jewish leaders established an independent Bureau of Jewish Social Research to employ the “best standards in every phase of social endeavor” and to find the “best solution” to the “many problems” of the Jewish community “still awaiting attention.” Through the years, the Bureau and its successors produced a blizzard of valuable data concerning Jewish demography, religious life, education, culture and philanthropy. These “authentic facts,” many of them published in the

American Jewish Year Book and now available online at www.ajcarchives.org, sometimes spurred leaders to remedial action, but often failed to translate into effective policies.

Sometimes data was skewed for apologetic purposes. In 1927, for example, the Bureau reported that Jews were “widely distributed within the states” and could be found in almost 10,000 different locations across the country. While this warmed the hearts of those who feared that American Jews crowded too closely together, it concealed the fact that 90 percent of all Jews lived in the North and almost 70 percent were concentrated in but eleven major cities.

At other times, the community simply ignored important data. In 1950, for example, a demographer named Ben Seligman warned of the “continuous aging of the Jewish population, a process which appears to be more marked than in the general population in this country.” Nobody paid any attention, although 50 years later we know how right he was. Similarly, in 1959, a non-Jewish demographer named Donald J. Bogue reported that “American Jews were scarcely reproducing themselves.” That warning too fell on deaf ears.

What did shock the community, perhaps more than any statistic had since Commissioner Bingham’s report on Jewish criminality, was the 1990 National Jewish Population Study’s data concerning intermarriage. “In recent years,” that survey reported, “just over half of Born Jews who married, at any age, whether for the first time or not, chose a spouse who was born a Gentile and has remained so.” Since 1985, it calculated, “twice as many mixed couples (Born Jew with Gentile spouse) have been created as Jewish couples.”

As with the report on Jewish criminality so many years before, the statistics themselves soon became the issue. “Authentic facts” about intermarriage turned out to be far more complex and debatable than initially recognized. One wonders, however, whether the clamorous debate over the precise number of intermarrieds diverted attention from the very real problems that underlay those contested numbers. Will future historians conclude that American Jews found it easier to argue about statistics, or even ignore them altogether, than to face up to the daunting challenges that those statistics bared? 🌸

How Many Jews?

Synthesizing Data to Understand American Jewry

by LEONARD SAXE

Developing reliable estimates of the size and characteristics of the American Jewish population has long vexed social researchers. Although we know that Jewish settlers arrived in New Amsterdam (New York) in 1654, ever since then our knowledge of the size of the population has been fraught with error. Part of the problem is the complexity of Jewish identity, but the difficulty is also a function of the methodological intricacies inherent in estimating and understanding “rare” populations.

Jewishness is both an ethnicity and a religion — it’s both something one is born into as well as an identity that one has to accept. Many Americans — more than ten million — are Jewish by background and could request citizenship in the State of Israel under the Law of Return. But a substantial number of those who are eligible to be part of the Jewish people do not claim Jewish identity. Recent estimates of the size of the Jewish population in the United States have ranged from around four million to

just above six million. Because the United States Census does not collect information on religion, there are no official estimates. Instead, the Jewish community increasingly has relied on its own surveys. In the last 30 years, dozens of large-scale population studies of American Jewry have been conducted using “random digit dial” (RDD) techniques in which random phone numbers are called and adult members who answer are asked about their religious identity. The largest of these studies are the decennial National Jewish Population Surveys (NJPS) conducted by the federation movement (United Jewish Communities).

Unfortunately, RDD techniques are increasingly difficult to execute properly — response rates have declined dramatically and, as a consequence of the lack of census data, it’s not possible to know who is missed. We suspect that Jews, because of socio-economic differences with the population at large, may be more difficult to reach than others. The most recent NJPS (2000-01) produced highly problematic findings, showing, in part, a dramatic reduction in the size of the Jewish population.

Although knowing the size of the

Jewish population is not the most critical issue facing the Jewish community, understanding the size and character of the population is nevertheless important. It provides the denominator to assess the extent to which our programs and efforts to engage the community penetrate the population. To the extent that our data are linked to socio-demographic characteristics, it also permits us to understand whom we are impacting and whom we are failing to engage.

The Steinhardt Social Research Institute (SSRI) is developing a new paradigm to understand the demography of American Jewry. Our approach is simple in concept: Instead of doing single, relatively small but very expensive RDD surveys, our focus is to combine and synthesize data from multiple surveys which include questions about religious and/or ethnic identity. Despite the prohibition on collection of religious data by the U.S. Census, the U.S. government (along with major research organizations and foundations) routinely collects such information. By combining data from multiple investigations — most of which contain samples that include only a small number of Jews — one can develop reliable estimates of the overall population.

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Many government-sponsored surveys — concerning overall social trends, health care, education, retirement and social welfare issues — include questions about religious and ethnic identity. These surveys often include the same question: “What is your religion? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish or other? In most cases, the data from these studies (with individual respondent identities concealed) are available publicly.

The government invests substantial resources in the conduct of social research and the country’s top research centers compete to conduct the studies.

The goal of SSRI’s synthesis initiative is to produce the equivalent of census data, including data that enables us to do trend analyses over time (back to 1990) of changes in the Jewish population. To develop the analytic procedures, we have focused on the period 2000-2003. Two major Jewish-focused studies were done during this period (ARIS, NJPS), and they will enable us to understand the extent of error in these estimates.

Analytically, we have tested two approaches to combining data across the initial sample of surveys. The first, traditional meta-analysis, involves developing prevalence estimates, based on the

weighted estimates of the percentage of respondents who identified as Jewish in each survey. But there is substantial variability across surveys and, in order to understand such differences, we are also using a statistical procedure called multilevel modeling to assess the role of individual and sur-

vey-level characteristics. Individual level data consisted of religious identity and demographic characteristics such as sex, age, race and education. We are also testing the impact of study characteristics such as the type of questions used to assess religion, survey purpose and response rate.

Data from the first 22 surveys (excluding NJPS) have been combined and, depending on technique, we have obtained estimates of the adult population between 3.3 and 3.8 million individuals. These are higher than the estimates provided by NJPS, although the variance is substantial. As we add additional studies to the database, we will be able to develop more precise estimates and will be able to understand the factors associated with differences across studies.

What is clear from our preliminary analysis is that “data mining,” combined with synthesis techniques, has the potential to provide valuable information about the size and character of the American Jewish population. Potentially, it can transform how we understand the Jewish community. It offers the promise of providing, for a relatively modest

investment, reliable estimates of the population and an understanding of how the population is changing over time.

Initial analysis suggests that current data — from studies such as NJPS and ARIS — have underestimated the population. One result is that the denominator for assessing the degree to which communal education and outreach programs and efforts at outreach are successful is too small. This means that we are overestimating the success of our efforts. Thus, for example, NJPS estimated that nearly 30 percent of school-age children receive a day school education. By other data, we know that figure is incorrect.

The issues are not simply “who is a Jew” and how we ask questions about Jewishness. The issue is a more basic methodological problem; it reflects the difficulty of identifying Jews by techniques such as RDD. The costs of doing RDD surveys that obtain adequate response rates may simply be too high.

The synthesis paradigm under development at the SSRI should be seen neither as a panacea nor as the comprehensive solution to information needs of the Jewish community. It is, in fact, only a start. For one, most of the current data focus on religious identity and do not include detailed questions about other ways in which Jews may identify. The surveys also focus on adults and rarely have detailed questions about how children are raised.

Nevertheless, extant data available for synthesis can help us create a broad portrait of American Jewry. Thus, for example, the vast majority of Jewish respondents appear to understand the question about religion as being a broad question about their identity. Even more important, the goal of our effort is to provide the basis to do more detailed and focused studies of segments of the national population and of specific sub-populations.

The Book of *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes) teaches that a two-stranded cord is stronger than a single-stranded one and that a three-stranded cord is even stronger. Synthesizing data from multiple studies is a far more powerful method of understanding than merely looking at the results of a single study. As we work to understand and foster modern Jewish life, we should allow these studies to direct our efforts and help us to create a vibrant community. 🌸

What is clear from our preliminary analysis is that “data mining,” combined with synthesis techniques, has the potential to provide valuable information about the size and character of the American Jewish population.

A search of key databases uncovered more than 125 surveys with questions about religion and ethnic identity. The studies range from the “gold standard” National Science Foundation-supported General Social Survey (GSS) to the National Election Study to the Health and Retirement Survey. Also included are surveys specific to religion (e.g., “Religion and Public Life Survey”) and various surveys conducted by the Jewish community, including NJPS 2000-01, the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) and the Survey of Heritage of Ethnic Identity.

Conceptually, what we are attempting in developing a new paradigm is straightforward: We are simply combining the results of multiple studies. Methodologically, however, the process is exceedingly complex.

We need to take account of the characteristics of each survey/sample and we need to understand exactly how the data were collected and weighted. In some cases (e.g., ARIS), the actual data are not available and we need to rely solely on the authors’ summary.



From Data to Knowledge: A Strategy to Decipher Trends in American Jewish Life

by **BETHAMIE HOROWITZ**

Bethamie Horowitz served as research director for UJA-Federation of NY in the 1990s, and at the Mandel Foundation Israel since 2000. In addition, she writes the "Trend Spotting" column for The Forward.

When I began my accidental career studying the American Jewish community in 1989, one still heard the phrase "the continental Jewish community." The phrase was coined to promote a more expansive North American Jewish collective sensibility in the face of the local concerns of each individual community. The first National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) was conducted in 1971 under the auspices of the Council of Jewish Federation (CJF), and the national portrait of American Jewry it offered helped lay the groundwork for this broader national self-conception. By the late 1980s, CJF's organizational leaders initiated a new NJPS to be conducted in 1990. With a viable research department in place, it would draw on a robust network of university-based social scientists who were actively interested in studying the socio-demographics of American Jewry. CJF viewed itself as the organization of record regarding American Jewry, and so it had a strong will to develop and sponsor a national picture of American Jews.

Today the situation is quite different. UJC, the inheritor of CJF, has given up its quasi-governmental role and become more of a trade organization. At the same time, its commitment to underwriting communal knowledge development has

declined significantly, a situation that was certainly exacerbated by the slew of difficulties that plagued the most recent NJPS (2000-2001). The upshot is that UJC is getting out of the business of serious social research about American Jewry. (Instead, it is considering developing a national portrait of American Jewry based on the much shakier knowledge base of the many local studies of varying quality, a situation that will set us back 25 years.) We are left with a hodgepodge of studies undertaken either by academic scholars who pursue their scholarly interests, independent from the strategic knowledge needs of the communal-organizational world, or by individual Jewish organizations addressing their particular agendas, which may or may not coincide with the broader communal questions.

When an individual organization commissions research, the study reflects the funding organization's main interests. Given the nature of the Jewish not-for-profit sector, these interests are often motivated by a need to justify funding or to further advocate for the organization's particular agenda, rather than by a more dispassionate or more solidly based "need to know." Thus, in a climate where there is not much research money to begin with, the knowledge outcomes look clumsy and rather wasteful when considered from the vantage point of the

system as a whole. An example of this occurred in recent months when five different organizations released studies, each dealing with various aspects of the lives or venues of younger Jewish adults. While none of the studies was an exact replica of the other, there was significant overlap among them. If the research agendas behind these individual efforts had been coordinated and the research budgets pooled, perhaps the result would have been a smarter, better study, with a more realistic budget, resulting in greater insight and wisdom about the questions on the table.

An additional pattern we've seen arising from the single-organization perspective (as opposed to the more shared, inter-organizational perspective) is a form of silo-ism regarding program evaluation. By this I'm thinking about the continuing call for evaluation by nearly every funder of every program. As part of funders' due diligence and organizational efforts to account for how a program was conducted, we end up with myriad assessments of each program, whether or not its participants were satisfied, and whether the money was actually spent as planned. But the larger questions about the efficacy of the overall communal investment in these programs and approaches as a means of addressing a particular issue remain unaddressed and not subject to collective learning.

You might say that at present, our collective knowledge needs are being left to market forces. As a result, as the Jewish organizational world continues to shift and become even less coordinated, its leaders miss a good overview of the changes afoot.

As a thought-experiment about alternative scenarios, imagine if we were to examine, for example, the basic contours of the many leadership training programs that have been mounted over the years — for executives, rabbis, lay people, educators and so on — to see who received training, to take stock of the numerous approaches and strategies employed and to consider the added value of various programs and their impact. Undertaking such an analysis would require some degree of coordination among the various organizations (including both executives and key philanthropists), as well as a willingness to engage in this sort of con-

versation. It would also require an independent and dispassionate analytic voice. Ideally, we would want to set up a more comprehensive program of research about American Jewish life.

Over the past forty years, the periodic research work involved in undertaking the NJPS led to a tacit program of knowledge production about the American Jewish community. This decennial ritual process of planning the NJPS, gathering the data and analyzing and writing about the findings occasioned a regular cycle of bringing together academic scholars and organizational leaders in common pursuit of an updated portrait of American Jewry. In some ways it worked and in other ways it failed.

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While it worked well enough to learn about the basic socio-demographic contours of American Jewry, some of the most important questions facing the community were not and could not be served through a population survey undertaken once every ten years. For instance, we lack a steady diet of information about our collective institutions (synagogues, Jewish philanthropies) about the flow of money through the Jewish organizational world. We have no comprehensive picture of large-scale communal undertakings that would orient us about the steering of the collective ship — for example, an educational overview of Jewish children in relation to schooling choices and opportunities. We need a regular study of attitudes about such matters as philanthropic giving, developments in the Middle East, the changing occupational structure and emerging family patterns, and about how all of these interface

with the current array of institutions, both Jewish and general.

All in all, we are coming to recognize that as the Jewish communal-organizational world has shifted and changed over the past 25 years — becoming flatter, more decentralized, and also less visibly coordinated than in the past — some of the collective, centralized or coordinated functions have been pushed to the sidelines. This is particularly the case with knowledge development in the service of strategic planning and decision-making. Thus, the American Jewish community needs a comprehensive strategy for developing a knowledge base about American Jewry, its supporting institutions, emerging trends and challenges.

Fortunately, there are some new developments in this regard. One is the new Steinhardt Social Research Institute founded last year at Brandeis University. Its exact focus appears to be evolving, which probably reflects growing awareness by both Brandeis and Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation about the magnitude of content functions that remain unaddressed: providing basic facts about American Jewry, analyzing policy options, addressing longer-range strategic issues and so on. But let's not be daunted by the needs. The significant accomplishment here is the investment of serious Jewish communal dollars in the service of knowledge production for and about the Jewish world. Let's hope that this commitment to developing a serious knowledge base for the American Jewish communal world is the beginning of a new trend.

At the same time, let's bear in mind that the development of a knowledge strategy purportedly in the service of Jewish communal life is itself a political process. This is especially the case in the 21st Century where there are sharp differences about any number of policies, and these differences are being played out on the terrain of research. I am reminded of a quip by the late, wise Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan: "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts." We have a shared interest in building a more thoughtful, comprehensive means of learning about ourselves. 🌸



Qualitative Research on American Jewry

by TED SASSON

Jewish organizations tend to want to know the numbers. How many people participate in events? What proportion lights candles? How do intermarriage rates compare for day school and supplementary school graduates? There is no escaping the need for numbers. Knowing “how many” does matter. So, too, does knowing whether programs are effective on the basis of objective measures.

But we also need to know what being Jewish means to people, how they experience participation in Jewish life, and how their Jewish experiences influence their lives. This kind of knowing is important for its own sake, because we’re curious about the Jewish world, but also to enable us to design programs

that work and to create instruments for quantitative analysis that are calibrated to the real world.

There are two distinct styles or types of qualitative research. Ethnographies describe slices of life and explain what’s really going on. The ethnographer is often a participant observer who keeps a notebook of detailed descriptions. She or he then tries to create higher-order concepts that capture the dynamics of the particular settings. Samuel Heilman, the leading contributor of ethnographies on Jewish life, has written on Jewish study groups, Jerusalem street life, the ultra-Orthodox and Jewish mourning practices. His recent book, *When a Jew Dies*, is noteworthy for its contribution to both religious studies and sociology. The book provides a detailed scholarly account of the religious meanings of various *halachic* and religious folk practices. Based on his participant obser-

vation of his own experience saying *kaddish* for his father, the book also provides a rich sociological account of how Jewish mourning practices work, step by step, to return the bereaved to the life of the community.

Or take the Cohen Center’s recent research on birthright Israel. Critics of that program have long charged that its popularity is merely the result of providing a fun vacation for free. By implication, it would have been just as easy to send 100,000 Jewish kids to Cancun. Ethnographic research conducted by Shaul Kelner and colleagues at the Cohen Center, however, showed that participants embarked on the trip to explore their Jewish identities. The research also discovered the significance of the social connections established among tour participants. Subsequent to the trip, when participants reflect upon their attachment to the abstract category

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To better understand American Jewry, and to maximize our capacity to enhance its future, we must avail ourselves of all of our various ways of knowing.

“Jewish people,” what they remember are their concrete attachments to other members of their traveling bus community. This spring, the Cohen Center was able to further test these observations through a survey of birthright israel alumni. When asked to choose the single best way of summing up the birthright experience, two-thirds of survey respondents chose either “a journey to my Jewish roots” or “a group Jewish experience.” Just 15 percent claimed that the trip most resembled a “fun vacation.” The quantitative survey research thus built upon and extended the qualitative research.

In contrast to ethnography, the emphasis in interview research is on how subjects interpret their social selves and situations. One illustration of this kind of research is Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen’s *The Jew Within*. Based on interviews with over 50 moderately affiliated Jews, the study found that Jewish identity has become increasingly personal and inner oriented. The study provided a welcome corrective to the tendency in survey research to equate Jewishness with ritual observance (i.e., the more rituals, the more Jewish). It also helped rabbis, educators and activists to better understand a key segment of their constituency. But the mod-

erately affiliated are only one segment of the Jewish public. In the study *Connections and Journeys*, Bethamie Horowitz shows that Jewish identity assumes multiple forms and is dynamic over the course of a lifetime. Even among the moderately affiliated, Jewish identity shifts and changes over time.

Studies more narrow in scope have focused on Jewish identity at particular stages of life. Sylvia Barack Fishman recently examined Jewish identity at two particular crossroads: marriage and conversion. Lynn Davidman studied *ba’alei teshuvah* (the newly Orthodox) and now has her sights on movement in the opposite direction: Orthodox Jews who have left the Orthodox fold. These studies contribute mightily to our grasp of what Jewish means to Jews in varying contexts.

Qualitative research is time consuming and expensive. This explains, perhaps, why there are many subjects that have not yet been adequately investigated. I’d like to conclude by mentioning four areas that would benefit from intensive qualitative research:

The Synagogue. Riv Prell has written on *Havurot*, and Sam Heilman on the Orthodox synagogue, but I can think of no recent book-length study of one of American Jewry’s core institutions: the

non-Orthodox synagogue. Why do the Jews who attend synagogue do so, what are they seeking and what do they find? What are they doing when they pray, sing, nosh or schmooze? How do they differ from those who stay away, and how do synagogue dynamics differ from one type of synagogue to the next?

Jewish Education. There are also relatively few ethnographic studies of Jewish educational settings. The academic study of Jewish education tends to focus on what we ought to be teaching and how. But we should also be asking: What do teachers actually communicate to young American Jews in our various educational settings? What are the core values they seek to communicate and how are those values lived and understood by the learning community? Recent books by Joseph Reimer on Jewish supplementary schools (*Succeeding in Jewish Education: How One Synagogue Made it Work*) and by Amy Sales and Len Saxe on Jewish summer camps (*How Goodly are Thy Tents*) show what is needed. But we need many more such books, covering the full array of Jewish educational settings, including day schools, outreach programs, adult education, preschool programs and more.

Attachment to Israel. Survey research suggests a declining attachment of American Jews to Israel. It also shows that feelings of connection vary across the Jewish denominations. But what does Israel mean to contemporary American Jews? How do they conceive of the country and their relationship to it? In addition to regular surveys, we need new qualitative research.

Jewish Philanthropy. Jewish giving is apparently changing in important ways. As Jews give more money to general causes, observers worry increasingly about generational continuity among donors. There is, therefore, an urgent need to better understand Jewish philanthropists — and those who could serve as philanthropists but do not.

Neither qualitative nor quantitative research stands on its own. To better understand American Jewry, and to maximize our capacity to enhance its future, we must avail ourselves of all of our various ways of knowing. Qualitative research will certainly continue to provide key pieces of the research mosaic. ✨

Several years ago I was invited to pen an op-ed piece for the special section on education in *The Jewish Week* (New York). I responded by issuing a plea for creating a culture of accountability in Jewish education. Specifically, I laid out five pieces of what that might look and feel like: 1) program providers who clearly articulate their goals in measurable terms and can define success; 2) educators who function as reflective practitioners in the most robust sense; 3) funders who require and provide resources for evaluation in their grantmaking process; 4) social science researchers who are encouraged and funded to learn about what works in Jewish education and to widely disseminate those learnings; and 5) end-users of the Jewish educational system who are consistently encouraged to (and when asked always do) provide feedback about what's working, what's not working and ideas about how the educational offerings in which they take part can be improved.

I didn't hear from a soul — not even a nibble. I can't say I was surprised.

But here's the good news: Even though my op-ed didn't stir a soul to respond directly to me in the moment, slowly but very surely a number of individual educators, local organizations and national bodies involved in the Jewish educational enterprise (and here I include program providers and funders alike) have begun to get educated about and take seriously questions of impact, accountability, measurement and more. Alongside, and I dare say because of, these developments, we have also witnessed the exponential growth in the size and scope of JESNA's Berman Center for Research and Evaluation in Jewish Education; an increase in the amount of Jewish education research and evaluation being conducted at Brandeis's Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies; and the establishment of a plethora of independent consultants providing similar services. In my estimation, all of these developments point toward some significant advances in the culture of accountability, with signs of even more positive change on the horizon.

However, although we as a Jewish community are finally showing signs of intelligent life in this regard, the role that social

Towards A Culture of Accountability

by WENDY ROSOV

science research (including and, in some cases especially, program evaluation) does and could possibly play in the development of discourse about Jewish educational policy is quite limited. From my vantage point, I see three reasons why this is the case:

1. Although there has been some positive change, few foundations and other philanthropic entities require evaluation and data gathering as part and parcel of their grantmaking processes. While many want numbers to help quantify the scope of a problem (such as the questionable crisis of Jewish educator recruitment and retention), and increasing numbers want to know what is/isn't working and what impact a program is having, too few are willing to devote financial and/or human resource to these critical tasks. Without the demand for and the provision of funds to support research and evaluation in Jewish education on the part of our community and private philanthropic partners, policy discussions about Jewish education are based mostly on opinion, anecdote and hearsay.

2. As a form of social science research, evaluations are, by their very nature, proprietary as they focus on the learnings from a particular program or initiative. Many funders and program providers don't want to share the results — even when the news is good, let alone when it is bad. Consequently, general learning as well as specific data from the growing number of evaluation studies currently conducted in Jewish education rarely, if ever, become educational policy. This is a downright shame.

3. From my vantage point, there is no such thing as educational policy in the Jewish community. I say this for two reasons. First, the Jewish Community is really a multitude of Jewish communities where, by definition, no single, hegemonic educational policy could possibly apply. Second, Jewish Education is also a multitude of Jewish educations. At best, it is a loosely interconnected web of vastly different educational venues, target populations, denominationally-based ideologies and educational philosophies. At worst, it is

sheer chaos. Throw into the mix weakened (or non-existent) central agencies for Jewish education in many communities (large, small, and everything in between), along with philanthropic partners (be they individual donors, community endowments, family or other private foundations) who are increasingly taking matters into their own hands, and the few interstitial strands that enable Jewish education in North America today to look anything like a system with a policy-making function is all but an illusion. Bottom line: We don't have an identifiable forum in the Jewish community where educational policy is discussed or debated, let alone made.

So, how do we fix this? After all, I am an evaluator by trade and it is my job to make recommendations.

1. Develop funding streams for research and evaluation in Jewish education. The Jewish Funders Network could lead the way in exposing our collective lack of sophistication in this area and by providing workshops, technical assistance and overall advocacy around this agenda.

2. Those who do conduct and/or commission research and evaluation studies should do so on the condition that the learnings be disseminated. At JESNA we are now asking ourselves the question of whether we should sign on to work with a client who is not willing, with certain parameters, to have the learnings shared with others.

3. We need to engage a serious discussion about how/whether we can define what we mean by "Jewish educational policy" and identify the key players who are best positioned to contribute to so-called policy discussions.

One of the hallmarks of Jewish life throughout the centuries has been the existence of robust communal infrastructures that enable us to organize ourselves to tackle great challenges. Our next frontier is the creation of a communal forum devoted to policy analysis and discourse in Jewish education that is informed by funded research and rigorous evaluation in the field. 🌻

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Experimenting with Jewish Education: Towards a Science of Understanding

by **BENJAMIN PHILLIPS** and **LEONARD SAXE**

In 1747, James Lind, a Scottish physician, conducted an experiment with a dozen sailors afflicted with scurvy, the disease that felled more sailors than wars, storms and all other diseases combined. Divided into six pairs, the ill sailors were given the same diet, save different supplements. After a week, the pairs who had received orange and lemon supplements dramatically improved. By way of a simple study, Lind had found a means to prevent and cure scurvy and, in the process, transformed medicine and science.

Experimentation has matured considerably since Lind's early study, yet the basic idea remains of comparing groups that are treated the same except for the intervention one wants to study. Today, experiments are routinely conducted not only in medicine, but in virtually every area of health, education and social welfare. For many scientists, experiments are considered the "gold standard" of research.

Despite their central role in other areas, true experiments are rare in Jewish education. Much research on Jewish education is conducted without systematic assessment. Typically, investigations examine changes solely in the treatment group — examining only those exposed to the intervention. Such study designs, however, make it difficult to separate the effects of the intervention from maturation and other natural changes.

The evaluation of Taglit-birthright Israel is an exception to the typical studies of Jewish education. Since the program's inception in early 2000, more than 100,000 participants aged 18-26 have taken part in its ten-day educational experiences in Israel. The evaluation of program impact, conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University, examines changes in the attitudes and

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“Science ... is the knowledge of proximate and ultimate causes, which one must investigate if one is to know anything ...”



behaviors of participants regarding their Jewish identity, sense of peoplehood and relationship to Israel. Key to the evaluation is that participants are compared to non-participants.

The non-participants — our comparison group — are individuals who applied to birthright israel but did not participate. Although it is not a pure experiment in which participants are assigned to the program or to the waiting list randomly, for the most part random factors determine whether someone participates or not. For most of the history of the program, there have been many more applicants than slots; random factors like logistics tend to determine who actually goes on a trip. In the most recent round of the program (Summer 2006), only 10,000 places were available for North American participants, while more than 25,000 applied.

Analyses comparing participants and non-participants prior to each program round indicate that there are few systematic differences between the groups. We are fairly confident that the post-trip differences observed between the “treatment” (i.e., birthright israel participant) group and the comparison group indicate the actual impact of the program. In fact, if anything, the comparison is conservative. Early in the program, the most committed Jews were given lower priority (it was assumed they would find another way to go to Israel). Those early applicants who did not go on a subsequent birthright trip might, in fact, be even more committed to their Jewish identities and to Israel than are the participants. In addition, those who con-

tinue to respond to our surveys over time are likely more engaged, particularly among nonparticipants who do not owe anything to birthright.

The key advantage of having a comparison group of equivalent participants is that it allows one to obtain a relatively unbiased estimate of the impact of the program. If one only measured changes in participant attitudes before and after the program, it would be impossible to know if any obtained changes were due to the intervention or not. Attitudes toward Jewish identity are in flux for young adults and some change is to be expected.

Application of “gold standard” experimental designs gives us the confidence to attribute impact to the program. In the case of birthright israel, the program appears to produce substantial changes in attitudes and behaviors. The ways in which participants view their identities and connections to Israel differ sharply from those of non-participants. These differences are striking and there are no plausible alternatives other than the effect of the program itself.

Change comes in many forms, so it was vital to include multiple measures (both quantitative and qualitative) of many different kinds of outcomes. Change can also be short-lived or late-blooming, so it was important that the design be longitudinal, including measurements three months, nine months and several years after participation.

Can the design used to test the impact of birthright israel be applicable to other Jewish education programs? Although comparing random samples of those who do or don't participate in a

program may be untenable in some cases, there are many situations in which the design is appropriate and able to be implemented. Birthright israel represents a classic situation in which randomization is feasible: the “treatment” is in short supply. Such is often the case when educational programs are in a developmental or expansion phase.

Even if the experiment itself is not feasible, the logic of the experiment is still important. If we are to develop excellent practices in Jewish education, we need to continually ask outcome questions. The experimental twist involves asking if there are alternative explanations for the results.

We can learn much through our use of experiments. Perhaps most important is that this model of research encourages us to try new approaches and, inherently, reminds us to be skeptical about our efforts. The challenge for Jewish education of Diaspora youth — to engage heart, mind and body and, by doing so, to ensure Jewish continuity — requires that we apply ancient as well as modern wisdom. To do otherwise is to ignore our tradition and place our future in peril.

In this regard, the wisdom of our sages seems ever-more relevant. The Rambam, Moses Maimonides, was a physician as well as a Torah scholar. As he explains in *Shemonah Perakim* (2:3), “Science ... is the knowledge of proximate and ultimate causes, which one must investigate if one is to know anything. ...” Understanding “causes” is at the heart of experimentation and is essential for the development of a modern and effective system of Jewish education. ✨

Beyond The Myths of Jewish Identity: The Need for Social Theory

by **BILL ROBINSON**

A minor flurry of research studies has recently sought to yield unto the Jewish community the fruits of social scientific knowledge about young Jewish adults, the nature of their Jewish identities and what can impact identity in a positive way. Yet, these studies emerge within and are, in a sense, defined by a culture of myth. I am not equating myth with falsehood, though particular statements describing young Jewish adults may or may not be true. Rather, by myth I refer to powerful, orienting beliefs that guide research and focus policy deliberation. Myth influences our agendas, creates a lens in which research findings are received and sets the parameters of meaningful dialogue. In this way, myth can often hide the realities that we face.

Currently, the myth of the young Jewish adult (also called Generation Y) consists of at least three interrelated propositions. One, young Jewish adults are unusually self-confident about their Jewish identities. Two, for the young Jewish adult, particularly those who are unengaged Jewishly, culture is a vital and powerful portal into Jewish life. Three, in these and other ways — including the individuality of their religious expressions and the fluidity of their identities — young Jewish adults are significantly different than previous generations. What is most interesting about these recent studies is that while they often do their best to support the myth, the findings do not lend much

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support to it and, in some instances, actually contradict it.

The UJA-Federation of New York released a study, *Cultural Events and Jewish Identities: Young Adult Jews in New York*, which analyzed the NJPS 2000-01 data and conducted participant observation and select interviews at thirteen cultural events in New York City. The researchers observed that among the participants interviewed, almost all had come from Jewishly educated and involved families. “Their biographies are sprinkled with references to home observances, day schools, Jewish camps, synagogue youth groups, Israel, Hillel activities, and a host of parallel experiences.” The NJPS data, analyzed by the authors, also supports this conclusion. The authors did their best

to fit their findings within the myth, noting a number of times that cultural engagement plays a greater role in the Jewish lives of the unaffiliated than the affiliated. However, this is only because comparatively speaking, Jewish ritual and institutional life play almost no role among the unaffiliated. While a number of the unaffiliated read books, watch movies, and listen to music with Jewish themes, substantially fewer of them do so than affiliated Jews. This is not to say that culture cannot act as an important portal (or even destination) for young Jewish adults; it is just that there is no scientific support for this hypothesis.

Reboot commissioned and distributed two related studies: *OMG! How Generation Y is Redefining Faith in the*

iPod Era and “Grand Soy Vanilla Latte with Cinnamon, No Foam...” *Jewish Identity and Community in a Time of Unlimited Choices*. To quote from the latter, “we find that Generation Y Jews feel incredibly self-confident about their Jewish identities. In contrast to the survival ethic of many of their grandparents’ Jewish journeys, and contrary to the continuity fears of the 1990s, Generation Y Jews are very positive about being Jewish.” But, what are they self-confident about? By the authors’ own admission, the participants in the study may have felt proud of being Jewish, but they had little idea of what that meant or what (if anything) it demanded of them. Perhaps it is not an issue of more or less self-confidence, but of a different relation to identity. Generation Y’s self-confidence, as described in the study and the UJA-Federation of NY study, does seem to have less in common with that of their elders than with (for example) soccer fans during the World Cup. Both often involve wearing t-shirts, socializing and

We must ask: Toward what are you, as a Jew, committed? In what ways does Judaism inform that commitment? And, what is the nature and extent of that commitment?

yelling excitedly at others performing. While soccer fans are not known for their ironic sense of ambivalence (as one of the reports describes young Jewish adults), they at least know the team-mates they’re rooting for.

As for the generational differences cited in the study, this simply lacks social scientific support. Most studies in the current crop rely predominantly on telephone surveys. Due to low response rates and other methodological difficulties, such surveys cannot be counted upon to offer a truly representative picture of young Jewish adults. Forget about having sufficient methodological similarity to past studies to allow for valid comparisons. While some prominent Jews were certainly concerned in the 1990s about the demographic demise of Ameri-

can Jewry, I would hypothesize that many more were happily and self-confidently engaged in being Jewish. Of course, whenever this issue is discussed in Jewish forums, members of Generation Y will argue vociferously that they are different than their parents. And perhaps in that, they are the most similar.

This is not to say that there are no differences; but in focusing on distinct generations, we lose sight of ongoing and cumulative sociological trends. It is surprising that in the one area in which there is ample data to substantiate a critical difference, comparably little attention has been paid. Beginning with the baby boomers, but having increased with each generation, young adults are getting married and having children later than prior generations. In and of itself, this trend may explain much of everything else. Yet, perhaps given the power of our myths, it remains oddly at the margins of research and policy-focused deliberations.

Most poignantly, these studies speak to a loss of a shared conception of Jewish identity — what it means to be and become Jewish. Once upon a time, we could define the degree to which someone was actively Jewish by their ritual behavior. When we conducted a survey, we asked them how often they lit Shabbat candles and attended services, or if they kept kosher. This is no longer the case. We must recognize that we have multiple definitions of being Jewish, which include shared values (that are distinctive from the general culture), a commitment to Israel, marrying another Jew, a shared historical narrative (that creates a sense of mutual obligation), a member of the family or tribe, and cultural identifiers of Jewishness, as well as others. Even more perplexing is that for many of us, we are not even really sure what any particular definition means. For example: What values are core? What constitutes a commitment to Israel? Thus, through qualitative methods such as focus groups, interviews and participant observation, these studies described above are seeking to answer these questions, albeit while simultaneously studying the relationship of identity to different interventions designed to increase Jewish identity.

It has become common to talk about identity by using the metaphor of computer Windows, in which each of us has multiple identities that we can bring to the fore or minimize at will depending

on our desires and the social contexts we are in. As a fourth study, *Particularism in the University: Realities and Opportunities for Jewish Life on Campus*, commissioned by Avi Chai (in partnership with Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation) states, “identity for today’s emerging adults is multiple and distributed, not unitary and fixed, although at any given moment a particular aspect of identity may predominate.” Thus, when we seek to engage young Jewish adults in becoming more Jewish, we must ask ourselves: Do we want to deepen the aspects of their identities that are Jewish? Or, do we want the Jewish aspects of their identities to be dominant more often? And, going against the myth of generational difference, should we not hypothesize that the multiplicity of competing identities is a condition that we all increasingly share?

So how should we define Jewish identity in contemporary society? I don’t propose to offer an answer in this brief essay. Though if we take seriously the admonition that today every Jew is a Jew by choice, then being a Jew involves foremost a commitment. Perhaps that commitment is to preserve a heritage or perhaps it is to heal the world alongside those who don’t see themselves as doing Jewish. In either case (or in many others), Jewish identity becomes not a question of ritual adherence or content-less pride. Rather, we must ask: Toward what are you, as a Jew, committed? In what ways does Judaism inform that commitment? And, what is the nature and extent of that commitment?

We need to move beyond the myths of Jewish identity not only through conducting qualitative research, but through scholarly deliberation — informed by general social theory — on the nature of identity. As the authors of the Avi Chai and UJA-Federation of NY studies recommend, we need to encourage experiments — “laboratories of change” — from which we can learn through action research. However, we must also devote as much if not more time to understanding and clarifying the meaning(s) of being and becoming Jewish in contemporary society. Not until we replace our current myths with more philosophically and psychologically sophisticated and reality-based theories of Jewish identity will social science research yield the fruits of knowledge that we seek. ✿



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I am reminded of a quip by the late, wise Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan: “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts.” We have a shared interest in building a more thoughtful, comprehensive means of learning about ourselves.

— BETHAMIE HOROWITZ