

JEW IN THE U.S.: THE NEXT GENERATION

By Steven M. Cohen

How do younger American Jews differ from their elders? To rabbis and other leaders in the organized Jewish community this question is not a matter of idle curiosity. Many are concerned about the very survival of Jews as a distinct American religious and ethnic group. Inevitably, visions of the future are entangled with assessments of the commitments of the next generation.

Most educated observers in the Jewish lay and scholarly communities perceive a slow erosion in religiosity, communal affiliation, and cohesion. However, respected views on the American Jewish future range from nearly unqualified pessimism to equally unqualified optimism. The most gloomy pessimists see only the Orthodox surviving as a distinctively Jewish population well into the next century; the most rosy optimists see contemporary American Jewry as in the midst of a major cultural revival. In fact, the evidence supports both pessimistic and optimistic perspectives on American Jewry.

More Intermarriage

Any assessment of the American Jewish future must come to grips with rising intermarriage. To most observers, the rate of marriage of Jews to non-Jews reflects and promotes declining involvement in Jewish life. Younger Jewish adults are indeed more likely to marry out of the faith than were their elders in their time. At least one Jew in three marries someone born a non-Jew, an incidence more than twice the rate in the early 1960s. Moreover, those whose spouses do not convert report far lower levels of religious and communal activity than do Jews who marry born-Jews or persons converted to Judaism. Not only do more (and younger) Jews have non-Jewish spouses, they also have more non-Jewish friends and neighbors.

Jews who marry non-Jews stand a much greater chance of raising non-Jewish children than the endogamous, those who marry other Jews. This said, a paradoxical observation is also in order: Although intermarriage is individually risky for Jewish continuity, it may have only marginal demographic consequences for the group. Jews who out-marry create twice as many potentially Jewish families as they would have had they married each other. In other words, despite growing intermarriage and the low levels of Jewish religious involvement and communal activity among the mixed married, the next generation of Jews figures to be no smaller in size than their immediate elders.

Because about one fifth of the born-Gentiles convert, because so few Jews leave the faith, and because at least a third of the mixed married couples (Jew married to unconverted Gentile) raise nominally Jewish children, the Jewish population does not seem to be suffering massive losses due to intermarriage. Just as intermarriage can be "blamed" for causing some Jewish families' descendants to leave the group, so must it be credited with provoking both conversion to Judaism and the acquiescence of many Gentile spouses to raising Jewishly identified children.

Fewer Births

Young Jewish adults now have fewer children than did their parents at the same time in life. Does this datum portend smaller Jewish families among the next generation? Not necessarily. Today's Jewish women may be having almost as many babies as their mothers, only later in life. Studies show that, on average, Jewish women 35-44 have had around 2 children, just about enough to provide for population stability. Whether their younger counterparts will have fewer children remains to be seen.

Geographic Dispersal

Continuing a pattern spanning a century or more, younger Jews have been moving from areas of established Jewish settlement, where the Jewish population is rather densely concentrated and Jewish institutions well-established, to areas of new settlement. There we find, on the whole, lower Jewish density as well as fewer synagogues, philanthropic agencies, Jewish community centers, and other Jewish organizations. By moving to places like California, known for its high intermarriage and low synagogue affiliation rates, are younger Jews moving to what their ancestors would have called a "trefe medinah" (un-kosher land)?

Perhaps historic patterns in Europe offer a guide to the future of newer Jewish communities. For centuries, Jewish migration to new frontiers of settlement eventually resulted in the construction of newly organized Jewish institutions and communities. In each era, leaders of veteran communities worried that the migrants were leaving established Jewish communities for undeveloped areas. Yet, in time, the newer settlements created rich communal infrastructures. Whether today's newer and currently under-organized Jewish communities will, in time, coalesce and develop remains an open question.

Drift From Israel

Younger Jews are less attached to Israel. This trend is largely confined to those who have never been to

Israel. (Almost 40% of adult Jews have visited Israel.) Since attachment to Israel underlies much Jewish philanthropic and political activism, a shrinking base of enthusiastic support for Israel may imply difficulties in related areas of communal involvement.

Fewer "Civic" Jews

In general, younger Jews are more distant from "civic Judaism," that collection of activities and beliefs in and around Jewish federations (the major philanthropic institutions) and other Jewish organizations. Anecdotal evidence indicates less enthusiasm among younger Jews for fund-raising drives organized on behalf of the United Jewish Appeal and local service agencies.

Developments with the Three Main Branches

The Orthodox camp shows new vitality and justified self-assurance. All signs point to a more affluent and more institutionally complex Orthodoxy -- that now retains the vast majority of the next generation rather than loses it to other Jewish denominations or even the non-Jewish world, as in the not-too distant past.

At one time, Conservative Jews were Conservative by default, finding Orthodoxy too rigid, Reform too assimilatory. Today, after more than a generation of Conservative movement camps and all-day schools, an ideologically committed and knowledgeable core group of Conservative lay people is found in many if not most Conservative synagogues, promising the basis for ideological renewal and institutional re-vitalization.

The Reform movement has become far more Judaically traditional than in the past. Responding to the expressed needs of congregants, the movement has rethought its earlier rationalist opposition to ancient customs and spirituality. Today, the Reform liturgy and Reform education place far more emphasis on Hebrew, traditional texts, and ancient ceremonies.

Expanding Jewish Education

The next generation may well, on average, be more Judaically knowledgeable than their parents. Several factors come into play here. All three movements

have vastly expanded day school enrollments. Most middle-aged Orthodox never went to yeshiva or day school; probably 90% of their children attend full-time Jewish schools. The Conservative day school movement has expanded to nearly 70 schools with generally increasing enrollments. In the 1980s, the Reform movement dropped its historic opposition to day schools and has quickly established a dozen such schools with more on the way.

In addition, at almost every university with a sizable Jewish population, students now have available serious courses in Jewish studies, a situation that characterized just a few campuses a generation ago. Moreover, anecdotal reports indicate stability if not growth in adult Jewish education sponsored by synagogues and Jewish community centers. Since most younger Jews hold graduate degrees, the next generation on average possesses greater intellectual capabilities than their parents.

Ritual Stability

The most telling piece of evidence weighing in on the optimistic side relates to private religious observance. Despite the growth in intermarriage, younger Jews are no less religiously active than their elders. If anything, they probably celebrate more than their parents did both the more popular holidays (Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Hanukah, and Passover) and some of the less popular children-oriented holidays (Purim and Succot).

What does all this evidence portend for the next generation of American Jews? In a word, they will be more committed to the private sphere of Jewish life and less attached to the public sphere. More will be intermarried, but more will also feel denominationally attached and identified. Fewer may feel close to and support Israel (and the charitable drives that revolve around it), but as many if not more will celebrate holidays and family life cycle events (births, bar/bat mitzvahs, confirmations, marriages, and mourning) in a specifically Jewish context.

Rabbis, Jewish educators, scholars, and Jewish communal leaders will remain unhappy with what they perceive of as the sorry state of Jewish learning, piety, affiliation and involvement. But, all things considered, the next generation ought to be neither much better nor much worse than the current or previous generation in these respects.

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