

The Shrinking Jewish Middle – And What to Do About It

Steven M. Cohen

January 4, 2013

The Centrality of the Jewish Middle

In all the reactions to the Pew Research Center's *Portrait of Jewish Americans*, one critical observation has received scant attention: The coming shrinkage of what may be termed the "Jewish Middle," those located in the central region of the Jewish identity spectrum, roughly encompassed by those affirming a Jewish denominational identity other than Orthodoxy.

As a group, *on average*, they are not as consistently and intensely engaged in Jewish life as are the Orthodox. And, *on average*, those who call themselves Conservative, Reconstructionist or Reform are more active and committed than those call themselves "partially Jewish" or "Jewish and something else," "Just Jewish," or atheist, or agnostic, or no-religion Jews.¹

The drop in the number of Jews in the middle of the identity spectrum is visible today only among children and young adults. But, in coming decades, the adverse impact of the small number of children in their households will become increasingly visible, clear and apparent. Put simply, **the number of middle-aged non-Orthodox Jews who are engaged in Jewish life is poised to drop sharply** in the next 20-40 years. And, absent significant policy changes, their numbers will continue to drop for years to come.

Aside from an axiomatic, if not primordial, commitment to the Jewish identity of every child of a Jewish parent, why should we care if thousands of children of Jewish parents are raised as non-Jews or barely-Jews? Of what consequence is it that coming generations contain far fewer engaged non-Orthodox Jews?

The critical concern is that a large Jewish Middle is vital to the sustenance of so many major institutions in Jewish life. Not only do most engaged non-Orthodox Jewish feel that being Jewish is very important to them, as they say in response to questions on numerous surveys, including the Pew study. Most feel likewise about Israel and about being part of a Jewish community as well as other aspects of being Jewish.

Moreover, they manifest their commitment in affiliative behavior that directly and indirectly benefits the institutions they populate and support. Clearly, Conservative and Reform synagogues depend heavily upon these moderately to highly affiliating Jews. So too do Federations, JCCs, and numerous Jewish organizations. Jews of the Middle patronize Jewish cultural events, museums, periodicals and publications. They are the mainstays of a vast Jewish educational enterprise on behalf of their children. In this regard, Jewish day and overnight camps, youth groups, Israel trips, Jewish Studies programs, and day schools all immediately come to mind. All these features of contemporary Jewish life – and more – depend upon hundreds of thousands of Jews who, while not Orthodox, nevertheless display high rates of Jewish engagement however measured.

The effects of a declining number of engaged non-Orthodox Jews are already palpable. The American Jewish Congress is no more. Hadassah, B'nai B'rith and other venerable organizations have been experiencing plunging membership for years, although with some periods of stability if not recovery. Even if one regards these entities as endeavors whose time has come and is now going, one must take cognizance of several other domains of decline over the past decade: the number of donors to Jewish federations; Conservative synagogue members; Reform temple members; youth group participants; and Schechter day school enrollments.

Now, it could be argued that a vital future for American Jews may not depend upon healthy Conservative, Reform, JCC and Federation movements, classic Jewish organizations -- and all the rest. After all, the ever-evolving nature of Jewish life and of its institutions means that new ways of being Jewish and expressing Jewish commitment and community will emerge. Undoubtedly, new forms will eventually supersede current regnant forms of personal identity and social organization.

Thus, the concern (my concern) with the shrinking number of engaged non-Orthodox Jews is not predicated upon a focused anxiety over the future of Conservative and Reform Judaism and JCCs. Rather it is about the population needed to either perpetuate re-vitalized versions of current institutions, or to launch, invigorate and sustain their successors. Successor identities and institutions – be they independent minyanim, Jewish activism in the Third World, Jewish environmentalism, redefining “pro-Israel,” or something(s) else -- will rely upon a committed population outside of Orthodoxy. Hence, tracking, predicting and shaping the number of engaged non-Orthodox Jews is not only of abstract importance and mere analytic consequence. Rather, their number speaks to the very health, vibrancy, influence and impact of American Jewry in the middle-to-late 21st century.

Most simply: Will a vigorous and self-confident Orthodoxy (as seems most likely) be complemented by a full range of Jewish diversity and vitality? Or will the precincts of active American Jewry come to be numerically dominated by Orthodoxy in all its varieties? Right now we speak of four streams of Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist. In forty years, will Jews speak instead of four other streams: Haredi Orthodox, Yeshivish Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, and “liberal” Jews?²

Evidence of Past, Current and Impending Shrinkage

As of this writing, the Pew data set is still unavailable to outside researchers. Nevertheless the published report, as well as data runs performed by the Pew researchers upon individual request, provides some telling evidence of a declining Jewish Middle, as can be readily adduced. Here's what we know from the available evidence:

Most fundamentally, among the non-Orthodox, we find far fewer children than middle-aged people. Among Jews in their 40s and 50s,³ for every birth-year cohort, we have about 75,000 Jews – that is, 75,000 Jews who were born in, say, 1970. In contrast, for every birth cohort among non-Orthodox 0-17 year olds, we have on average just 52,000 Jewish children. That's a drop of about 30% over a 40-year span or about ¾% per year.⁴

One big reason for the projection of a falling population size is the low fertility rate -- about 1.7 children for non-Orthodox Jews 40-59 years old.³ With some child-bearing yet to be recorded, the 1.7 estimated completed fertility rate may yet tick slightly upward, but not by much. Since a stable population requires a birthrate of 2.1, an estimate of 1.7 immediately suggests an intergenerational decline of as much as 19%.

But not all of the 1.7 born to Jewish parents are raised as Jews, or -- more critically -- grow up to identify as Jews. From the Pew study we can learn of the extent to which today's adults -- those raised by inmarried or intermarried parents over the last few decades -- currently identify as Jews. Of adults with 2 Jewish parents, almost all the grown children (adults today) identify as Jews.⁴ However, among those with just one parent who was Jewish (the offspring of the intermarried), just 43% currently identify as Jews.²

The loss of Jewish population owing in large part to intermarriage is demonstrated by one other figure: Of the 7.2 million adults who had one or two Jewish parents, 5.1 million identify as Jews, but 2.1 million of them (about 29%) do not identify as Jews. Notably, almost all of those who have a Jewish parent or two, but who see themselves as non-Jewish today, report that just one of their parents was Jewish. In short, almost the only way for a child of a Jewish parent to come to identify as non-Jewish as an adult is by way of having been raised intermarried parents.

Of recently marrying non-Orthodox Jews (i.e., those married in 2005-2013), 72% (actually 71.5%) intermarried, that is, married non-Jews who had not become Jewish at the time the survey was conducted (2013).⁵ (The figure is much lower for Conservative Jews and somewhat higher for those with no denomination or no religion.) If 72% of Jewish individuals are intermarried, then of all couples with at least one Jewish spouse, fully 83% are intermarried, and just 17% are inmarried.⁶

Owing to the large number of intermarried individuals and of couples, the "effective Jewish fertility" rate (the number of children who are Jewish, as opposed to the simple number of children) for non-Orthodox Jews falls below 1.7, as it is diminished by the tendency of the intermarried -- who, as noted, constitute 83% of recently married non-Orthodox households -- to raise their children as non-Jews.

Moreover, not only do intermarried couples produce fewer Jewish children. They also provide the youngsters with far weaker Jewish socialization and education than do inmarried Jews. As compared with inmarried couples (even limited to the non-Orthodox), intermarried couples exhibit far lower rates of holiday celebration, ritual observance, institutional affiliation, and informal ties with other Jews (friends, neighbors, co-workers, etc.). Their children experience less formal and less intensive Jewish schooling, and less frequent informal Jewish education experiences (day camp, overnight camp, youth groups, and Israel travel).¹⁰

Not only do fewer children of the intermarried grow up to think of themselves as Jews. In addition, the fraction who do identify as Jews tend to exhibit weaker interest in Jewish life and diminished capacities to partake of Jewish life and to make contributions to the Jewish communities and friendship circles with which they associate. They are simply less familiar with such matters as holiday observance, Jewish communal organization, Israel-related issues,

melodies, prayer, linguistic expressions, and popular culture, to name just a few areas of the everyday Jewish “recipe knowledge,” that constitutes the basis for insider participation in Jewish life, formal and informal.

The cumulative chain effect of intermarriage on both the size and Jewish cultural capacity of the population can be seen by piecing together the multi-generational transitions to the grandparents’ generation. As noted, just 43% of the children of intermarried grow up to think of themselves as Jews. Of these, just 17% marry Jews. In other words, by projection, fewer than 8% (i.e., 17% X 43%) of intermarried couples’ children marry Jews. The vast majority of the grandchildren have two non-Jewish parents, and one Jewish grandparent. When asked what to call the grandchildren of intermarriage, the late Milton Himmelfarb, the resident intellectual of the American Jewish Committee, quipped, “Christians.” He was approximately 92% correct. Over the last fifty years, American Jews’ social prestige has risen enormously, moving from a very low-standing white ethnic group in the 1960s,^u to the highest-standing major religious group in 2009.^u Jews’ rising social prestige along with far more porous boundaries may well produce more Jewishly identifying children and grandchildren of the intermarried in coming years. However, the supplemental numbers are likely to include very few who are particularly engaged in Jewish life.

Yet one more sign of the diminishing numbers of non-Orthodox Jews is exhibited by some startling patterns associated with Orthodoxy and the proportion Orthodox in the population. In the same Pew survey where non-Orthodox Jews reported birthrates of 1.7 children, the Orthodox averaged 4.1 children. While recently marrying non-Orthodox Jews had intermarried at a rate of 72%, the intermarriage rate among the currently Orthodox stood at 2% and for those raised Orthodox at 11%. (Apparently, among the few Orthodox-raised Jews who intermarry, the vast majority of them abandon their identities as Orthodox, either before the marriage to a non-Jew or as the result of it.)

As a result of these disparate rates of inmarriage and fertility, we find some remarkable shifts in the representation of the Orthodox in key population segments. The Orthodox constitute 10% of all Jewish adults, but 27% of all Jewish children, and 35% of all Jewish children under age 5. Moreover, of all Jews who inmarried during 2005-2013, 53% of them are Orthodox. That is, while Orthodox Jews constitute just one-tenth of the adult Jewish population, they constitute a majority of the recently in-marrying Jews.

In sum, low Jewish birthrates combined with high rates of intermarriage are producing two deleterious outcomes for the American Jewish population: possibly fewer non-Orthodox Jews and among them, significantly fewer Jews with moderate-to-advanced education and cultural skills to allow for knowledgeable participation and leadership in Jewish life. That is, the future size of the non-Orthodox population in toto remains difficult to predict, owing in part to the eventual identification patterns of the children of the intermarried. At the same time, the numerical decline of non-Orthodox Jews with some measure of engagement in Jewish life is virtually assured.

Policy Objectives

Absent any effective intervention, two critical features of non-Orthodox Jews will continue to decline: their absolute number and the extent to which they are socialized into Jewish life, as fewer will have been exposed to home observance, Jewish schooling and other Jewish socialization experiences -- largely because of the rising fraction of them who derive from mixed married homes. Put succinctly, non-Orthodox Jews will be numerically fewer and educationally thinner. As a result, non-Orthodox Jews will contract, as will the more engaged among them, with direct adverse consequences for the entire organized Jewish communal infrastructure outside of Orthodoxy.

The Mishnah teaches, “Im ein kemach, ein Torah” – If there’s no flour (sustenance), there’s no Torah learning. By extension we can intone, “Im ein Yehudim, ein Yahadut” -- If there are no Jews, there’s no Judaism.

To contend with the current and impending decline of the Jewish Middle, effective policies need to achieve some or all of the following outcomes:

1. Bring down the average age at marriage, such that Jewish young adults marry sooner.
2. Increase the rate of inmarriage (i.e., decrease the rate of intermarriage).
3. Raise the fertility rate of non-Orthodox Jews.
4. Raise the Jewish-upbringing rate among intermarried couples.
5. Encourage more non-Jewish spouses of Jews to see themselves as Jews, preferably through conversion or, if not, then by informal personal decision, so that more of their children come to identify as Jews.¹³

The Rationale for Trying

To be sure, influencing family formation patterns has proven difficult, if not impossible, even for national governments. The Jewish community’s resources are limited, as is its ability to influence its members, especially those who are most loosely connected. Yet, at the same time, three considerations argue in favor of making the effort to influence the marriage and fertility patterns of non-Orthodox American Jews.

First, sub-cultures within the United States do display significant variations with respect to marriage and fertility patterns. For example, Mormons, Hispanics, Orthodox Jews and, at one point, Roman Catholics display(ed) distinctive demographic configurations with younger age at marriage, more frequent in-group marriage, and higher birthrates. Admittedly, all are culturally variant minority groups with moderate to high levels of religiosity; yet their very existence does suggest that departing from national norms of demographic-related behavior is, at least, possible.

Second, specific to American Jews, a long line of literature demonstrates that many planned social and educational interventions actually “work.” Birthright Israel, the most thoroughly and systematically researched intervention, demonstrates clear impacts both upon in-marriage (higher) and other outcomes.¹⁴ Over the years, research has pointed, as well, to several salutary outcomes in adulthood associated with a variety of experiences in childhood and

adolescence. Among the most influential are ritual observance in the home, day schools, overnight Jewish summer camps, youth groups, and long-term trips to Israel.¹⁵

Not only do these experiences lead to generalized outcomes including greater feelings of attachment to things Jewish (including Israel), more Jewish friends, higher in-marriage, and more communal participation. In addition, specific ideologically driven educational experiences leave their distinct educational imprints. Habonim Zionist youth movement participation elevates Zionist commitment in adulthood, encourages aliyah, and promotes politically progressive orientations with respect to Israel and the society at large.¹⁶ The Pardes Institute produces commitment to text and greater levels of traditional religious practice.¹⁷ Camp Ramah both elevates ritual observance and produces a measure of alienation from conventional Conservative synagogues,¹⁸ in line with the somewhat subversive intentions of its founders over a half century ago. In short, Jewish educational experiences generally achieve their objectives and produce enduring effects visible in their “alumni” 30, 40, and 50 years down the road.

But, as philanthropist Michael Steinhardt is said to have asked, “If things are so good, why are they so bad?” Translation: If all the research on Jewish educational impact demonstrates so much success, then why is intermarriage high and rising? The short answer is that we’re pretty good at educating but pretty bad at recruiting, with sharp denominational differences in education rates. Over three-quarters (77%) of youngsters in Conservative homes are currently receiving some type of Jewish schooling or education. But, as reported in the *Portrait of Jewish Americans*, less than half (48%) of children whose parents identify as Reform, including the majority who are “un-templed,” are receiving no Jewish schooling or informal education, as do hardly any (14%) of the non-denominational children.

As a general rule, then, the prime policy challenge is not so much to perfect the effectiveness of these educational instruments – as worthy an objective as that may be. Rather, we need to increase young Jews’ participation in the vast variety of reasonably effective Jewish educational and socializing vehicles and frameworks.

A third and final consideration concerns the urgency of the situation.¹⁹ Many times in life the stakes are low to moderate. In such circumstances, tolerable costs are attached to failure and moderate gains are associated with success. When such is the case, policy makers enjoy the luxury of proceeding carefully and methodically, seeking options that are proven and effective, as well as feasible and sustainable. At other times, the stakes are very high and the window of time for effective action is very short. In such high-risk situations, a rational cost-benefit approach dictates massive and immediate action, even with imperfect knowledge, unknown risks, and uncertain outcomes.

With a 72% intermarriage rate among the non-Orthodox, with birthrates well under replacement levels, and with yearly declines in the non-Orthodox population, the Jewish community in the United States is in a state of vulnerability, risk and uncertainty. The centrality of intermarriage cannot be over-stated. Intermarriage is its own engine. Over the last several decades, low to moderate levels of intermarriage in the early years produced high rates of intermarriage in recent years, owing to the increased presence in the population of children of the mixed married whose own intermarriage propensity vastly exceeds that experienced by the children of the in-married. The more the children of the intermarried identify as Jews, the higher

the intermarriage rate in the next generation. Paradoxically, the success in retaining the children of the intermarried, while enlarging the Jewish population, also elevates the intermarriage rate when these children mature.

The climb in intermarriage rates has eased up, if for no reason other than a “ceiling effect.” In addition, the children of the in-married may be exhibiting lower intermarriage rates than the predecessors, if only because a larger number of in-married are Orthodox or highly engaged as Jews. But the consequences for the next generation of Jewish children remain: in each of the next and coming years, about 30,000 children (VERY roughly estimated) born to Jews in mixed married couples will not be raised as Jews. If the average size of a birth cohort of non-Orthodox Jews declined by 30% over a forty-year period, it is reasonable to assume an ongoing loss of an almost one percent annually, especially when the intermarriage rate has risen to levels higher than they were twenty or thirty years ago. An annual shrinkage of 1% would mean a ten percent loss in the birth cohort to be born in 2024, translating into a decline from 52,000 today to 47,000 then. (On the other hand, the “leakage” of the Orthodox population into non-Orthodoxy may ameliorate this decline. As the Orthodox grow, their defectors grow as well.)

With the stakes so high, with the engaged non-Orthodox Jewish population – the Jewish Middle -- falling so rapidly, and with so many erstwhile Jews being lost to the population forever, any delay in provoking, planning and implementing corrective action is highly consequential. The usual standards of evidence as requisite for action may not be applicable in such a period of population decline, as there may not be enough Jews around in the next generation to assure the diversity of Jewish culture, community and politics, or to populate what has arguably been the most productive and influential Diaspora community in Jewish history.

Religious Inspiration: Culturally valuable, but demographically ineffective

In the wake of the Pew study, observers and thought leaders have offered a variety of approaches to addressing the perceived ills in American Jewish life. Most revolve around perfecting religious Judaism and its delivery system: rabbis, congregations, prayer, schools, education and so forth.

Of the Pew findings most responsible for provoking the call for improved religious inspiration, probably the most striking relate to the rise of “Jews of No Religion” (JNR). This nomenclature – created by the Pew analysts – refers to Jewish respondents with a particular pattern of answers to the opening questions. When asked for their religion, if any, they declined to answer Jewish or Judaism, and instead responded atheist, agnostic, or none. They then proceeded to answer affirmatively when asked, if aside from religion, they consider themselves Jewish or partially Jewish. (Further survey questions allowed the Pew analysts to set aside from the Jewish population count those who so regard themselves for a variety of dubious reasons, such as that Jesus was Jewish.)

To be clear, for the most part, these JNR respondents are not committed secular Jews a la the Yiddishists of old or Amos Oz and millions of Israelis today. Rather than constituting a vibrant secular approach to being Jewish as is found among many Israelis, JNRs in the United States are so distant from things Jewish that of those with children, two-thirds of the JNRs are raising them as non-Jews. Correlatively, JNRs score incredibly low on all measures of Jewish

engagement. The Pew survey found that JNRs are more numerous among younger than older adults, suggesting, to some observers, a steady movement over the years from Jews with religion to those without religion. (But, as Sasson correctly maintains,²⁰ the rise of JNRs owes far more to intermarriage than to secularization per se.)

The impression that American Jews' religious commitment is in decline also derived from the implicit sharp decline recorded in the number of self-identifying Conservative Jews. By way of context, in the 1950s, Conservative Jews comprised about two-thirds of American Jews; in the Pew study, they have fallen to a meager 18% of Jewish adults. The plummet in Conservative adherents sparked several critiques of Conservative leadership, communities, philosophy and education. Illustrative are the following remarks by an NYU professor Michah Gottlieb who, in his op-ed, "How Conservative Judaism Lost Me," concludes his critique with the following admonition:

Many people are thinking about how to revitalize Conservative Judaism. This is important, as the world needs a vibrant Jewish religious center. From my experience, I would recommend one thing above all else: Support and nurture the most committed Conservative Jews at local synagogues. Give them outlets for their religious curiosity and passion. These Jews may not write big checks. They may sometimes make the less committed members of the synagogue feel uneasy. But they are the future.²¹ (Forward, November 5 2013)
<http://forward.com/articles/186693/how-conservative-judaism-lost-me/?p=all#ixzz2omp6Ot7X>

Even more pointedly critical are these remarks by JTS-ordained Rabbi Daniel Gordis:

What really doomed the movement is that Conservative Judaism ignored the deep existential human questions that religion is meant to address. As Conservative writers and rabbis addressed questions such as "are we halakhic," "how are we halakhic," and "should we be halakhic," most of the women and men in the pews responded with an uninterested shrug. ... They had come to worship because they wanted a connection to their people, to transcendence, to a collective Jewish memory that would give them cause for rejoicing and reason for weeping, and they wanted help in transmitting that to their children. While these laypeople were busy seeking a way to explain to their children why marrying another Jew matters, how a home rooted in Jewish ritual was enriching, and why Jewish literacy still mattered in a world in which there were no barriers to Jews' participating in the broader culture, their religious leadership was speaking about whether or not the movement was halakhic. ...Who really cared? Very few people, it turns out.²²

These writers (and many others) clearly hold a dismal view of the track record of Conservative Judaism and of its leadership.

For its part, Reform Judaism seems, at first blush, in healthier shape. Rabbi Rick Jacobs, taking pride in the 35% of American Jewish adults calling themselves Reform, confidently proclaimed to 5,000+ Reform leaders that over the last half century, Reform is ...

*the fastest-growing theologically liberal denomination of any religion in North America. And this growth is reflected in the Pew report, which finds that we are not just the largest stream of American Jewry, but larger than all the other streams combined.*²³

Yet, a closer look at the Pew study results shows all is not well in the world of Reform. One troubling issue is the clearly declining share of the population that is Reform – roughly 4-in-10 of those age 50+, vs. under 3-in-10 of those 18-49. Reform may have the biggest denominational market share of American Jews, but it is a diminishing share of a diminishing population.

An even more disturbing issue is Reform Jews' patently low rates of Jewish engagement, symbolized by the small number (34%) of Reform Jews reporting temple membership, meaning that just 11% of American Jewish adults are Reform and belong to synagogues. In fact, on *every* measure of Jewish engagement found in the Pew study, Reform Jews trail Conservative Jews (to say nothing of Orthodox Jews).

Quite telling are the denominational variations in the extent to which people regard Jewish as being very important in their lives: Orthodox (87%), Conservative (69%), and Reform (**43%**). The same denominational rank ordering applies to feeling it is essential to one's sense of being Jewish to be part of a Jewish community: 69%, 40%, **25%**. So too with respect to making any charitable donation to a Jewish cause (92%, 80%, **60%**), as well as having mostly Jewish friends (84%, 39%, **28%**). Perhaps most significantly, we have the same denominational pattern (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform) in terms raising one's children as exclusively Jewish by religion (97%, 88%, **60%**), or raising them as just partly Jewish by religion and partly something else (1%, 4%, **20%**). Other signs of "religious flabbiness" are found in the large number (50%) of Reform Jews who are intermarried, compared to 27% among Conservative Jews. In short as compared with Conservative Jews, Reform Jews are less likely to belong to a congregation, to care about being Jewish, to participate in Jewish communal life, to marry Jewish spouses, or to raise their children as Jews. Reform may be the "fastest growing" and the "largest stream," but here may be a case where more is less.

In light of all these disturbing trends in Jewish religious life, leaders have advocated ideas to heighten the attractiveness of the Conservative and Reform movements, and of Jewish religion in general. After all, it looks like Jews are abandoning their communities of faith, if not their Jewish religious faith entirely. Perhaps – this thinking goes -- better messaging, more inspiring synagogues, more relationship-oriented rabbis, or a host of other widely touted adjustments will bring thousands of Jews back to their faith. Accordingly, some think that a better Judaism, or better congregations, will keep Jews Jewish, recruit wayward Jews, or even attract non-Jews in sufficient number to offset the demographic exodus.

But lack of inspiring communities is no explanation for why non-Orthodox Jews are failing to reproduce themselves or as to why so many are increasingly disengaged from Jewish life to the

point of eschewing any Jewish identity. If this analysis were right, we would have to argue that the quality and level of inspiring leaders, experiences, and communities has fallen dramatically during the last half century or more. Logically, if inspiration produces engagement, and engagement is down, then inspiration must be down as well. Right? Well, no.

Truth be told, American Judaism is NOT more poorly constructed or more poorly communicated than in the past. Rabbis and educators and Jewish leaders are NOT dramatically inferior to their predecessors. Today's congregations (and other communities) are NOT appreciably more unwelcoming, uncaring, and uninspiring than those of the 1950s and 1960s. Let us recall that, in their time, these mid-20th century suburban synagogues generated trenchant critiques of their hierarchical leaders, aloof rabbis, insipid prayer, uncaring community, ostentatious architecture, conservative politics and patriarchal culture.²⁵ Somehow the congregations with all these alleged shortcomings (and the critiques could be overblown at times) co-existed with low rates of intermarriage (7% in the 1950s, by some reckoning) and a Jewish Baby Boom, tracking the fertility patterns of the larger society.

It isn't (so much) that Judaism, the denominations, congregations, religious leaders and educators have changed. Rather, it's the Jews who have changed. Jews in America were never a particularly active or committed in the religious sphere. Pew's 2007 US Religious Landscape data showed that Jews are as about as religious – in terms of God-belief, service-attendance, and congregational membership -- as the religiously unaffiliated, the least religious population group in the country.²⁵ Rather, over the years, Jews have joined synagogues and identified with religious denominations in large part out of ethnic motivations, that is, out of reasons connected with the "ethnos" (Greek for "people"). It was supremely insightful for the great sociologist Marshall Sklare to refer to Conservative Judaism in its heyday as a Jewish "ethnic church."²⁶ Certainly, ethnicity provides a valuable lens for understanding the many ways in which Jews are distinguished from Christian religious groups, of which the most palpable are ... Israel attachment, JCCs, political engagement, organized Jewish philanthropy, and even geographic concentration, to name just a few.

The major shift over the decades is not so much a change in religiosity, but a change in ethnicity – the full texture of social relationships, culture, and collectivity that distinguishes and sets Jews apart from others. Jews in America aren't so much losing their faith (which they never had in great measure); rather, they're losing their family-like ties and the sense of collectivity that accompanied and justified them.

More specifically, what changed over the decades was the rising rate of Jewish/non-Jewish intermarriage. Not only did intermarriage fuel the decline of non-Orthodox Jewish numbers – and set the stage for even more decline in the coming years. It also undermined the ethnic commitment (and the derivative religious commitment) of intermarried spouses and their children.

In short, defects in American religious Judaism (congregations, prayer, rabbis, education, etc.) did not bring about the demographic decline. As a corollary, fixing American religious life – as laudable as that may be – will do little to address demographic decline, even if it might improve rates of participation in Jewish religious life. Bad synagogues and religious leaders

didn't cause the demographic shrinkage; good synagogues and rabbis will not stanch demographic losses.

To be sure, more meaningful communities can – and do – increase not only the quality of engagement and the quantity of engaged Jews. In other words, “better Judaism” may well increase Jewish market penetration of the shrinking pool of engaged or engageable non-Orthodox Jews; but it is not the most propitious route to stabilizing or expanding that pool. In sum, better Conservative and Reform and Reconstructionist congregations, rabbis, cantors, leaders, prayer, and education are all valuable and highly desirable objectives. But improvements in these areas will do little to induce young adult Jews to marry each other, or to persuade young married couples to raise more Jewish children – the two prerequisites to securing the demographic future of non-Orthodox American Jews.

Building Jewish Social Networks: What is to be done

When thinking about why some Jews are more engaged in Jewish life than others, and more specifically, why some marry Jews and some marry non-Jews, the discourse among Jewish leaders, observers and rank-and-file engaged Jews, inevitably falls upon motivation. Jews who are committed to being Jewish and motivate to acting Jewish do so; those who decline (or more judgmentally: fail) to act Jewishly are presumed to lack the interest or value commitment necessary to do so. As a result, much discussion about how to get more Jews engaged in Jewish life (or to persuade them to inmarry) inevitably devolve around motivations and values.

But, as any criminal lawyer knows, two components are essential to the performance of a crime, and by analogy, to performing a mitzvah: motivation and opportunity. Indeed, for a wide variety of social behaviors (well, actually all of them) motivation alone is insufficient to explain behavior; what social scientists call the “opportunity structure,” is equally (if not more) critical.

For in-marriage, the opportunity structure boils down to friends and friends of friends, as these are the primary sources of romantic partners and romantic referrals. And the power of social networks has gained increasing recognition in recent years. More pointedly, social scientists have long emphasized the power of intimate association with like-minded people to sustain a minority religious group or subculture. Peter Berger, one of the century's leading thinkers on society and religion, once famously wrote that religious believers need to “huddle together with like-minded fellow deviants — and huddle very closely indeed. Only in a counter-community of considerable strength does cognitive deviance have a chance to maintain itself.”²⁷

Just in the last decade, researchers have turned to the study of social networks (real, not virtual), demonstrating that family and friends strongly influence a wide range of behaviors and characteristics, among them smoking, voting, promiscuity, obesity, and happiness. By following changing behaviors and changing connections, social scientists have largely concluded that while what we do affects who we know (smokers come to associate with other smokers), it is also the case that who we know affects what we do and who we are (overweight friends cause weight gain among their friends).²⁸ Against this background, it should come as no surprise that the most intimate social relationships — the people with

whom one lives and one's closest friends — strongly relate to Jewish engagement, and to the prospects of Jews marrying Jews.

Of course, the Jewish tradition doesn't need contemporary social science to teach it the value of Jewish family, friends, and community for enacting and sustaining Jewish life. At its core, Judaism places a high and explicit valuation of Jewish social connectedness: the Jewish people, the nation, community, and family among them. The history, religion, and culture of Jews are replete with normative emphasis on the conduct of Jewish life in concert with other Jews. Examples include the aspiration for Jews to live in the land of Israel, liturgical praise for those who are involved with the affairs of the community, and the preference for prayer to be conducted with at least 10 adults present. "Don't separate yourself from the community" intones *Pirkei Avot (The Ethics of Our Fathers)* 2:5. More than other Western religions, Judaism embraces a huge variety of rites, rituals, and ceremonies that take place in the home, ideally with other Jewish family members present. The very title of a celebrated and classic anthropological work on East European shtetl society as seen through the eyes of Jewish immigrants to the United States makes the point: *Life is With People*.²⁹

The long line of research on Jewish/non-Jewish intermarriage confirms the notion that a combination of motivation (Jewish values, Jewish commitment) and social networks (residential propinquity, density of Jewish social networks, etc.) strongly influence the prospects of in-marriage. As I wrote in 2006:

The role of Jewish education in promoting in-marriage is fairly well-recognized in Jewish communal circles. In contrast, the equally powerful (if not more powerful) influence upon intermarriage of proximity to other Jews, Jewish residential density, and association (informal ties among Jews—friends, neighbors, co-workers, and the like) has received far less recognition than this domain deserves. Who one happens to meet or know has as much to do with the chances of marrying a Jew as does one's Jewish commitment and education. Jews living in areas of high density (with lots of Jews relative to the surrounding population) are more likely to marry Jews.

Thus, Jews in Nassau County (for example) report lower intermarriage rates than those in Suffolk, while Jews in Philadelphia report lower rates than those in, say, Denver. Also linked to more in-marriage is having had more Jewish friends in high school and college, which is a corollary of living in areas with high Jewish residential density. Zip code may in fact be more predictive of in-marriage than Jewish education in that people still date and marry those they live near. (Cohen, 2006, p. 17)³⁰

- In short, not surprisingly, Jews who marry Jews are those who dated Jews over the years; and those who date Jews disproportionately have many Jewish friends, associates, and neighbors. While the organized Jewish community has (properly) responded to rising intermarriage by investing in Jewish education (day schools, camps, Israel travel, campus activities, and more – all of which are linked with higher rates of in-marriage), it has never explicitly adopted a policy of **strengthening Jewish social networks** among adolescents and Jewish young adults. Given the declines in Jewish social networks (fewer Jewish friends, neighbors, romantic partners, and spouses), the act of bestowing Jewish friends upon young adult Jews becomes paramount. The boundaries and meaning of Jewish education have shifted and expanded with the shifting conditions and needs of the Jewish population. In this day and age, building Jewish friendships ought to be regarded as a constituent part of Jewish education, and not just a fortuitous by-product.

Moreover, concern with assuring densely Jewish social networks for one's children should and could influence the thinking and actions of parents, especially when thinking of where to live and where their children attend colleges and universities.

From Analysis to Action

If the shrinkage of the non-Orthodox Jewish population is the central challenge illuminated by the Pew study, and if strengthening social networks among young adult Jews is the appropriate overall policy objective, then advances in several areas can bring about significant change in the extent to which and depth to which Jews are connected to one another. Jewish social networks that are thicker, stronger and richer will surely raise the inmarriage rate. They may even help (or persuade) more Jews to marry sooner. And the evidence points to higher birthrates in general among those who marry earlier and marry endogamously (within the group).

Specifically, in moving from childhood and adolescence to the young adult years, policymakers, philanthropists and others should be aiming at the following changes:

1. Capitalize on and support recent efforts to secure tax credits for **day school** tuition.³¹ Lower costs may induce some of the parents ambivalent about day schools to enroll their children. For day school parents, lower costs may translate into additional spending on informal Jewish educational experiences such as camp and Israel travel.
2. Increase participation in a wide variety of Jewish **youth groups**. NCSY and BBYO are the two groups with significant external financial support and both seem unusually healthy. Can such financial support be extended to other youth movements?
3. Provide more and lower-cost opportunities for overnight Jewish **summer camps**; and more generally, provide a Jewish summer experience every summer for every Jewish child. Specifically, growth in camp patronage over the last decade has produced a shortage of camp facilities. New camps – whose facilities can be rented – can be established with initial grants of \$1,000,000 apiece, after which they are sustainable. Thus, \$20 million could expand the number of camp beds by as many as 10,000.

4. Broaden participation in **high school-age trips to Israel**. Birthright begins at age 18 and, in effect, “penalizes” adolescents who participate in trips for high school-age youngsters. Removing the penalty is one action that will raise teen travel to Israel; so will additional funding.
5. Encourage more prospective Jewish college students to attend **campuses with high concentrations of Jews**, ideally in the Northeast and the Midwest. One idea: Summer institutes for high school students on Jewish and Western civilization at select universities.
6. Significantly augment **campus outreach workers**; provide workers dedicated to major schools of law, business, and other professions. Notwithstanding the expansion of Hillel over the years, the ratio of professionals to Jewish students remains low, with considerable room for augmentation.
7. Sponsor non-Orthodox **campus rabbis with spouses** to serve as educators and informal role models of Jewish family life.³²
8. Increase the number of Jewish film festivals, concerts, and other cultural events in urban **Jewish development areas** with large numbers of non-married Jewish young adults.³³ At minimum, such events multiply random contact among younger – and older – Jews.
9. Stimulate participation in **Shabbat tables** undertaken by and for young adults. JCCs and synagogues should provide space and other support for such endeavors.
10. Saturate the market with **Moishe Houses** (<http://www.moishehouse.org/>).
11. Fund **experimental Jewish outreach teams**, headed by young rabbis (married if possible) and supported by educators and outreach workers.³⁴
12. Field **conversion-dedicated rabbis** in areas with high rates of intermarriage such that the potential untapped market in conversion can be addressed. They may be attached to JCCs or congregations.³⁵ Current programs manage to produce converts at a cost of about \$3,000 per capita and the market is far from saturated. Converting non-Jewish spouses immediately converts intermarriages to in-marriages. Unmarried converts expand the Jewish marriage pool.
13. Provide an alternative pathway to joining the Jewish people, such as **Jewish Cultural Affirmation**.³⁶ The acquisition of Jewish identity by non-Jewish spouses, even if not by way of religious conversion, may well raise the rate at which their children come to identify as Jews in adulthood.
14. Subsidize Jewish-sponsored **day care and pre-schools**, along the lines of “Right Start” programs.³⁷ These programs strengthen Jewish social networks among young parents, possibly promoting further affiliation and the likelihood that intermarried couples will raise their children as Jews.

15. Engage in massive “**Jewish public health education.**” That is, instruct the Jewish public as to the many small actions that can improve the chances that their children and grandchildren will marry Jews and marry them sooner. Just as public health education has helped change diet, exercise, and smoking in the well-educated population, parallel efforts may influence more Jewish parents to approach Jewish child-rearing with greater information and intentionality.
16. **Work across the Orthodox/non-Orthodox divide** to increase interaction between Orthodox and non-Orthodox children and young adults.

A Moral Claim to Action

Any one of these initiatives may produce only marginal increments in Jewish friendships, in-group marriages, and Jewish child-rearing. But, taken together, these efforts may well prove synergistic; one initiative will interact with the others, producing more participants in each area of activity and beyond. Youth group participation may promote camp enrollments and both will produce more Israel travelers; a well-educated core of Jewish adolescents – “alumni” of youth groups, summer camps, and Israel travel – will enrich Jewish campus life, in turn producing organizers and Jewish consumers in the young adult years; and so forth. Decades of research, and of accumulated observation, testifies to the capacity of these ideas – some proven and others consistent with proven approaches – to influence not just marriage patterns, but all forms of Jewish engagement.

The capacity to act upon these ideas is neither in the Heavens, nor across the sea, but well within the capacity of American Jewish leaders. All of this can be had at reasonable costs. Indeed, the financial resources are well within the reach of the circles of major Jewish philanthropists.

That said, we certainly have no guarantee that they will prove equal to the task of stabilizing the non-Orthodox Jewish population and augmenting its capacity to sustain a morally worthy and culturally significant American Jewry. Yet, we do have one guarantee: Without significant policy changes, the non-Orthodox Jewish population surely will decline both in number and in its ability to produce and sustain a rich American Jewish civilization.

Thus, both rationality and morality demand extraordinary responses, and not only by policymakers and philanthropists, but by the thought leaders who influence them. Rabbis, social scientists, reflective practitioners and other opinion molders can choose to educate and alert the Jewish public to the demographic losses to the Jewish People of America that have already occurred. They can vividly present the additional losses that are in the offing if no effective action is taken. They can join in the call for action to save millions of Jewish souls and the Jewish body at the heart of the greatest Jewish Diaspora community the world has ever known.

Or they can choose, as many have, to minimize the likely outcome of current tendencies. They can pretend that intermarriage is of minor consequence, such as by claiming that Moses was intermarried and became our greatest leader. Well-intentioned but misguided (and misleading) leaders can choose to project an ill-founded aura of success, even amidst the

two million adults with Jewish parents, living in our midst, who today do not identify as Jews – or the 30,000 babies born to Jewish parents every year who will not be raised as Jews. They can argue – as some do – that since we can't know the future, we shouldn't be concerned enough to rise to influence it. They can maintain their good relations with activists and donors by reassuring them with soothing tales of how Jews and Judaism survived mortal threats in the past, but then omitting how Jewish leaders in those times undertook prescient and dramatic action to change what for them was the future course of Jewish history.

Rather than mobilizing their people and marshalling their forces to battle for the vibrant survival of a creatively significant Jewry, their crowd-pleasing words of reassurance work to undermine the sense of urgency that current trends demand. Given the massive and obvious evidence, such approaches go beyond the merely counter-intuitive, counter-factual, or counter-productive. They abjure the responsibilities of leadership – or worse. Unlike the priests and prophets who heroically led B'nai Israel into battle in Biblical times, their leadership resonates with the words of 1 Corinthians 14:8, “For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?”

In contrast, we who serve the Jewish People need to fully internalize the depth of the threat to the Jewish future, and to communicate both the challenges and the ways to respond to them. Our predecessors in 19th century Europe understood the dangers that confronted the Jewish People, and some, understandably and tragically, under-estimated them. But only by appreciating the perils around them, and ahead of them, did they embark upon the most successful Jewish communal policy endeavor since the Second Commonwealth. These days, and today's challenges, demand as much clarity of perception – and honesty.

Truth be told, we may not reverse the demographic decline and educational thinning of non-Orthodox American Jewry. But we're still obligated to undertake what's possible, hoping to bring about the improbable. As John Kennedy said, “One person can make a difference – and everyone should try.”

1 Jews of No Religion – a Pew survey neologism, about which more below -- should not be confused with committed secular Jews (small in number in the US) who, by definition, are deeply connected to Jews and Jewish life and culture.

2 “Liberal” here refers to all non-Orthodox Jews. Although a useful and widely recognized nomenclature, although a bit problematic in that it subtly disparages Conservative Jews whose very name is the antonym of “liberal.”

3 To be precise, the mean was calculated for the 40-57 age range using a total of 1,350,000 supplied by the Pew researchers.

4 The figures for numbers of Jewish children adopt the Pew researchers definition of Jewish children, amounting to 1.3 million in all, both Orthodox and not. Other researchers have argued for including another 300,000 children as Jews.

5 Conservative Jews report having had 1.8 children, Reform 1.7, and others even fewer – suggesting that 1.7 is a reasonable average.

6 By Pew’s definition, Jews qualify as such if they identify their religion as Jewish, or if they consider themselves Jewish and have no religion and were raised or had a parent who was Jewish. Those with any identity as a Christian or other non-Jewish religion did not so qualify.

7 Apparently, as Ted Sasson reports <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/151506/young-jews-opt-in> , for the offspring of the intermarried, the rate of identifying as Jewish is higher (59%) among those 18-29 than the 40% registered among those 30-49. The uptick may portend an ongoing increase in Jewish identification among the offspring of intermarriage. Alternatively, it may simply reflect the fact that hardly any of these 18-29 year olds have married. For those who marry Jews, marriage solidifies Jewish commitment; but intermarriage works in the opposite direction. Notably, among the children of the intermarried, as many as 83% intermarry. Since intermarriage leads many Jewish spouses to abandon their Jewish identity, the levels of Jewish identification among today’s 18-29 year olds may well decline as they marry -- and frequently marry non-Jews. Of note is that a slight majority of the 59% identifying as Jews, identify as Jews of No Religion, about twice as many as among age peers whose parents were in-married. Of the 59%, 30% have do not see Judaism as their religion.

8 That rate may fluctuate slightly as Jews in such marriages drop their Jewish identities, or non-Jewish spouses assume Jewish identities through conversion or personal decision, or the marriages dissolve.

9 To illustrate the difference between the higher couple rate and the lower individual rate, think of a population of 6 couples, five of whom are intermarried and one in-married. The couple intermarriage rate is 5/6 or about 83%. The individual intermarriage rate is 5/7 or 71%. The difference derives from the fact that each inmarriage “uses up” two Jews, while intermarriage uses up only one Jew apiece.

10 See, for example, Steven M. Cohen, Jack Ukeles, and Ron Miller, *The Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011*, New York: UJA-Federation, 2012, particularly chapters 4 and 5. Found at <http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=14186> .

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