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THE CHANGING ORTHODOX JEWISH COMMUNITY

Any appraisal of the changing Orthodox Jewish community in this country must be related to the significant developments in the broader American Jewish community. It is therefore necessary to draw on some of the findings of recent national and local community studies, notwithstanding their limitations or flaws, since they indicate trends and patterns that transcend the narrow confines of their researchers' intent and perspective. Above all, they contain serious implication for Jewish survival that must not be disregarded. The American Jewish community with 42 per cent of the world's Jewish population, is not only the largest but it also is the most important. With this in mind, one must take seriously the changes that are taking place on the American Jewish scene.

The Jewish community has always known that "assimilation means sociological death." No unlikelier a witness than Baltimore's senior reform rabbi, on the occasion of his retirement after forty years of service, declared in a front page interview in the Baltimore Sun:

The only hope for survival is the "saving remnant" of young people who are seeking a more intensive Jewish life, a keener concern for the preservation of Jewish values, much more intensive Jewish education than what they have had in religious schools, congregational life, and home training.

Interestingly, in spite of the efforts and successes of assimilationists, the National Jewish Population Study found that 85 per cent of its sample of Jewish household heads are still con-
vinced that "Jewish survival as a distinct people is vital," and that "Jewish people everywhere have some important things in common."4

It must be realized that the American Jewish community is becoming increasingly a native population. Immigrants, generally, do not amount to more than between 20 and 25 per cent even in the large northeastern urban centers. New York City, traditionally the most important port of entry and locale of first settlement, has only slightly more than 35 per cent first generation immigrants. The new immigrants — Russian Jews and Israelis who seek temporary or permanent residence in the U.S. — are not enough to play a significant role in determining the American Jewish community's future. The American Jewish community has to face its future within the confines of its own resources.

Our future is even more ominous when we are confronted with demographic facts indicating a serious decline in the Jewish birth rate while projecting an increasingly aging Jewish population. Recent findings report that the Jewish birth rate of 2.2 is not only considerably smaller than that of the Protestants (2.8) and the Catholic population (3.2) but it is coming dangerously close to the minimal replacement level of 2.1. Furthermore, the size of the Jewish household is dwindling to an average of 3.1 members, and in New York City, not exceeding 2.8, according to recent figures. The Jewish median age is 36.7 compared to the national median of 30.7. And the segment of those 50 years of age and above represent 43 per cent of the total Jewish population. This compares with only 39 per cent of the general American population. The ominous implications of a population implosion are real and serious.

More alarming is the rising intermarriage rate. Of course, it is easy to criticize the reliability of the national sampling procedures that have produced the much-quoted figure of a 43 per cent intermarriage rate, especially among college youth, and in areas with small Jewish populations. But if we consider that practically four out of five Jewish men and women of college age attend college, the danger of almost one half of future marriages involving intermarriage is possible. Local community
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studies, such as the recently updated Greater Baltimore Jewish Population Study still indicate figures that only a decade ago were typical for the country, with slightly more than a 5 per cent intermarriage rate. The overall figures, however, clearly point to a national average of close to 25 per cent. If the situation were not so dangerous, one might be tempted to state that it represents the Jewish American success story come true.

The masses of the present American Jewish community, particularly the native generations, are solidly entrenched in the middle classes. As most studies indicate, only about 25 per cent of Jewish people in this country hold blue collar jobs. Even in New York City whose Jewish population only a generation ago was 53 per cent working class, records now 35 per cent in blue collar jobs, a good many of them older immigrants. On the other hand, between 20 and 25 per cent of American Jews are in the professions, and their number is growing. While the admission of Jews into the upper echelons of the real power elite is limited, and some areas of professional and executive work are almost totally closed to them; and while there is a considerable amount of poverty, especially among the aged and the recent immigrants, the bulk of the Jewish work force is concentrated in the managerial and proprietor categories. The result is the dominance of the typical American middle class lifestyle, with all its concomitant value perspectives.

A second important characteristic of American Jewry is its overwhelming suburbanization. According to the National Jewish Population Study most of the large northeastern Jewish population centers, and even more so the smaller communities, have experienced the shift that moved 608,000 Jews from the heart of New York's communities to the suburbs. Nassau-Suffolk counties, with a Jewish population of close to 200,000 have more Jews than Brooklyn, which once housed the largest concentration of American Jews. Corresponding to the degree of spatial dispersal and the distance from the older centers of Jewish life, from the vital Jewish services, and from the foci of Jewish cultural activities, the processes of social, cultural, and spiritual homogenization are taking their toll. The two traditional bastions of Jewish survival are among the hardest hit. The co-
hesiveness of the Jewish family has suffered from the problems of middle class life in suburbia. The Jewish mother is not as busy instilling Jewish values and tradition into the very atmosphere of her home and the milieu of her children's personality growth but is now very much oriented towards self-realization and towards a life of her own and happiness outside of the home. She is among those most eager to return to school, to higher degrees, professional advancement, and a career. She limits the time allotted to bearing children and to rearing them. Jewish suburban women are among the most adept in the use of birth control, are often proponents of abortion and of Zero Population Growth, and childless marriage. We witness an increase in broken marriages, a phenomenon once very rare in Jewish life. Other alarming facts include rising juvenile delinquency and alcoholism amongst Jews. Recently a high official in the New York City administration, attributed the change to the decline of Jewish education and Jewish tradition.

According to the Lakeville Study and the findings of the national sample, Friday evening gatherings and Passover Seders are still among the most cherished traditions retained, but, they have been largely transformed into occasions of gastronomic and nostalgic Judaism. A number of Jewish youngsters turn to radical movements and various eastern and western cults in their search for meaning and for the warmth of belonging that had once been part and parcel of the traditional Jewish family. Similarly, congregational membership and synagogue attendance even on High Holidays has dwindled to slightly less than 50 per cent of the Jewish population. Of the sample studied by the '71/'72 American Jewish Population Study, the largest number, ca. 40.5 per cent belong to Conservative congregations, 30 per cent to Reform congregations. Only slightly more than 11 per cent ca. 209,000 household heads claimed to belong to Orthodox congregations. Of these only 4.2 per cent or 9000 household heads are 30 years or younger. Though one may question the reliability of these figures, the overall patterns seem accurate.

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Against this general background of the problems of the Ameri-
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can Jewish community we turn to the Orthodox Jewish community. From the very outset it must be stressed that it shares many of the significant characteristics of the general Jewish population, even though it differs in certain areas. It is, however, interesting to note that some of the most astute analysts of the American Jewish community agree with the optimistic view of Marshall Sklare who says:

... in less than 3 decades Orthodoxy has transformed its image from that of a dying movement to one whose strength and opinions must be reckoned within any realistic appraisal of the Jewish community.?

Obviously, there are radical changes in the spirit, lifestyle, and structure of the Orthodox Jewish community, (approximately 15% of the total Jewish population) that evoke this new recognition. This is especially significant in light of recent studies that reveal a statistical decline in the membership of the Orthodox community. Adherents to Orthodox Judaism are highest among the older elements, a good many first generation immigrants. Even though most observers speak with respect of the growing Day School and Yeshivah movements as one of the brightest spots on the Jewish horizon in this country, they credit it with no more than 8 - 10 per cent of the approximately 580,000 boys and girls who receive some form of Jewish education in this country. The actual figures are close to, if not above 100,000 students attending the 460 schools, 138 of them high schools, affiliated with Torah Umesorah and the Hasidic school systems, from nursery through institutes of advanced talmudic and rabbinic studies, in 160 communities. There are also about 9000 boys and girls in the 40 Solomon Schechter day schools affiliated with the Conservative movement, and over 1000 in the five day schools of the Brandeis schools of the Reform movement. Significant as this trend is, one cannot close one's eyes to the fact that the bulk of American Jewish youth receive little or no Jewish education.

Two more prefatory comments must be made, one to correct some of the old caricatures of the Orthodox Jewish community, and the other to put its changes into the broader context of the changing socio-economic and socio-political conditions. In the
first place, it must be emphasized that both the over-romantization and the so-called scientific and fictional flood of descriptions of the Eastern European immigrants written by the new historians, writers like Kazin, Malamud, Roth, and others have maligned the thousands of men and women who brought tremendous sacrifices to maintain their Orthodox lifestyle, at a time when there were few resources as available to them as there are now. They fail to credit the thousands of men who crowded the batei midrash of their synagogues and streiblach hours before and after a long and wearing day in the sweatshops. Above all, they underestimated the great contributions made by the scholars and laymen who built great yeshivot in the United States. It is they who laid the groundwork for what was to become the foundation of the renaissance of Orthodoxy in this country after the destruction of Eastern European Jewry.

The changes that did take place in the past decades, especially since World War II, are largely due to a number of social, economic, political, and cultural circumstances — external to the Jewish community. These, as much as the intrinsic factors of change must be credited with providing the setting and the chances for the transformation and the rise of a new and vigorous Orthodoxy in this country.

It is, of course, difficult to be unbiased, when presenting facts and figures concerning the American Jewish community. Much is descriptive and reflects the ideology, opinions, and personal roots of the reporter. Nevertheless, there are a number of significant developments that transcend these limitations.

What impresses the observer of today’s Orthodox Jewish community is its strength and visibility. It is a young, vibrant, and vocal community, able to cope with the realities of American Jewish life as well as any other group. This new Orthodoxy has produced a generation of native American scholars, rabbis, educators, and leaders. The new Orthodoxy is largely an American phenomenon, though it owes much to the superior scholars, the great roshyi yeshivot and the Hasidic rebbes of world stature who found a haven of refuge in this country during the years of the Holocaust and its aftermath.

Not only is this new Orthodoxy a native phenomenon, but,
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except for the growing Hasidic communities, its members are from the same socio-economic level as the broader American Jewish community. (In fact, amongst the younger Hasidic Jews there is a growing number with similar backgrounds.) They speak and write English, play baseball, basketball, tennis, and handball. They are products of the affluent society at its best and its worst. Many come from families that are bare of any Jewish knowledge and traditions. They are Americans, but they are proud of both their American and Jewish heritage. They work on various levels of city, state, or federal governmental or corporate hierarchies. They help research and produce the miracles of scientific and technological progress in the prestigious laboratories and research centers of the country. Though there are few statistics available, their number is large and growing, paralleling the occupational distribution of the American Jewish community in general. For example, the number of those affiliated with the Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists has more than doubled in the past ten years, from approximately 500 in 1964 to over a 1000 in 1975. The recently organized Association of Orthodox Jewish College Faculty and Personnel has an enrollment of several hundred. Not only New York City colleges like Kingsborough Community College with 30 Orthodox members of the faculty but universities outside New York like Temple U. has 25 Orthodox faculty members on various levels. In Baltimore’s colleges and universities there were, at the last count, 34 Orthodox full time and part time teachers, several department chairmen, and administrators, such as the associate dean of the University of Maryland Law School. The Orthodox Jewish Teachers Organization in New York has over 6000 members, and the powerful head of New York’s Teachers Union, Albert Shanker, who once refused even to respond to their mail, now pays homage to their strength. These are just a few of the figures indicating the participation of the members of the new Orthodoxy in the professional world. Their growing numbers are visible, and their self-assurance and conscientious observance of Judaism are a major factor of the changing public image of the Orthodox community. More important, they have the organizational expertise and the concern to make their influence
felt, even though, in statistical terms, their number is small. They are playing an increasing role in the web of the Jewish communal and organizational networks, something the old Orthodox community had never done to a significant degree.

What is very noticeable is the superior Jewish educational background of the new Orthodoxy. They are the products of an intensive Jewish educational system that places them on a level comparable to the best of past generations in this country and elsewhere. As one renowned Rosh Yeshivah in Israel recently remarked:

The American b'nai Torah — Torah students — are among the finest, most sincere, and most devoted in the Yeshivot of Israel.

In fact, among them are a number who head institutes of advanced talmudic study or who have founded institutions of their own.

The arrival of Roshei Yeshivot and several hundred of their students who came to the U.S. during and after World War II was an important factor in producing a strong Orthodox community. Building on the foundations laid by preceding generations of dedicated educators, these scholars established their academies anew in Jewish centers in this country. They produced generations of native American scholars who represented the new-old ideal of years of intensive concentration on advanced talmudic study, on ethics, philosophy, and the rabbinic literature. Thus graduation from a yeshivah has almost become the norm in the Orthodox Jewish community. There is a respect for genuine scholarship, and a lifestyle for the average man that makes continuous study even after one enters the professional world a matter of routine. Similarly, a number of the world's most famous Hasidic rebbes have established their own Yeshivah systems. While their curricular approach and ideology differ from those of the yeshivot of the Russian-Polish or Lithuanian tradition, they have been devoted to talmudic, halakhic and philosophical study, and a communal lifestyle that meets the standards of traditional Judaism. The combined impact of these two streams of intensive Orthodoxy, i.e., the students and graduates of American yeshivot, and the Hasidic institutions and com-
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communities, is felt far beyond the ranks of their immediate followers. It has provided a broad range of varied resources for an Orthodox life style that was almost totally lacking before World War II. There are now a large number of kosher food products, ritual articles, publications, and religious functionaries.

Israel, too, has played an important role. The continuous exchange and cross-fertilization of American and Israeli Torah institutions, scholars, and rabbis have helped shape the new reality of Orthodoxy in this country. The average young man, may plan to spend some time on concentrated Torah study after high school in the United States or in Israel, knowing that afterwards (or even concurrently) he can enter the professional and educational training systems and job market.

A number of today's young scholars continue their study for years, even well into their married lives. They dedicate themselves to the life-time task of becoming and producing a new generation of American rabbis and authorities in Jewish law. They speak the language, understand the problems, and communicate the intellectual and halakhic fundamentals that Orthodoxy in contemporary America requires.

Until shortly prior to World War II there were few schools for Jewish girls in the United States, except for several fine Talmud Torahs or Teachers Institutes. Now there are networks of day schools for girls as well as for boys, with a growing number of high schools, teachers institutes, and even a college for young Orthodox Jewish women. Many of the graduates of these schools spend a year or more at Israeli institutes. A large percentage of Orthodox girls have a college education and professional training. They bring up their children in the finest tradition and on an intellectual level that compares favorably with the best of their parents and grandparents' generations — with obvious consequences for the growing strength of the new Orthodoxy in this country.

Parents in the Orthodox Jewish community have another characteristic that sets them apart from their contemporaries in the Middle American suburban main street: they are not limiting their families to the barest minimum. The young married couples of the Kollel, the Hasidic communities, and the other Orthodox
couples have a birth rate far above the norm. They generally have between 3 and 6 children.

In a congregation of young professionals in Monsey, New York, with a membership of approximately 100 families, the average household has four children. In a Boro Park congregation of professionals and executives or businessmen in their early forties, the average family has between four and six children.

Orthodox Jewry's concern for their families is expressed frequently by their selection of where they live. A good many of the scientists, government employees, and lawyers who now reside in Baltimore, for example, commute daily to their offices and jobs in and around Washington, D.C., so that their children can avail themselves of Baltimore's superior schools on all levels. Similarly, in Washington itself, some of the older and most of the new congregations in the suburbs consist of scientists, government officials, lawyers, and political experts who combine their secular careers with an intensive Orthodox life style. This new generation combines both Hebrew and secular education (many of them have Ph.D.'s with Semikhah) which demands higher standards for both the religious and secular departments of their children's schools. They are more competent to serve on boards of education, and they speak with greater knowledge and authority, and with the proper respect for Torah than many of the old lay members of boards. The same young professionals are among the leaders of most communal, ritual, and cultural activities in the Orthodox Jewish communities. In Baltimore, for example, they now are officers in practically all congregational and communal organizations. They have reorganized the Vaad Hakashrut and made it a viable, powerful means of raising the level of kashrut far beyond that of most communities outside of New York. Close to 80 per cent of its over 250 members have varied expertise and organizational talent. They also have the will to improve the religious, educational, and ritual standards.

In some congregations, the zeal and activism of the new generation may lead to some problems. In their desire to improve standards they may step on some toes unless their zeal is mixed with tact. It is important to prevent internal strife and frag-
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mentation in the very congregations that would benefit most from the infusion of younger members. In addition, their loyalty to the roshei yeshivah or rebbes that are responsible for their learning and ideology, does not always coordinate with the discipline of the older community and its organizational structure. And since knowhow and sincerity of purpose do not always make up for tact and skill in human relations, the consequences of this latent or open conflict are hurting the unity of the Orthodox Jewish community.

But these are growing pains. They are characteristics of wholesome development, and, in many respects, they augur changes for the better. For, these younger masses of the new Orthodoxy know enough to know what they want. They flock to or establish Shiurim, adult education classes, educational, ritual, or communal activities that offer substance. They rise to the top levels of the local and national Orthodox Jewish organizations. The growing numbers of their rabbis, communal leaders, educators, and professionals will continue to make their weight felt in the broader community as well. Many are themselves products of such reach-out programs as Yavneh, N.C.S.Y., or the Chabad Houses. Hence, they speak the language, and provide the guidance which the Jewish masses, especially the young, are seeking. They serve as capable and respected spokesmen of traditional Jewish values, of Torah.

In summary, the new Orthodoxy is the product of the social changes of the period of affluence and social mobility, of the rising significance of ethnicity and of the search for the historical roots of Judaism. They are deeply affected by the reality of Israel and its impact on the spiritual life of the Jewish world. Many of them are the products of the intensive Jewish school systems. They have a superior secular education and are respected for their competence in the professional or business world. Their growing contributions, their active leadership, and ability to serve as recognized spokesmen are too valuable to be disregarded.

Jewish educational, communal, cultural and ritual life in the United States (as well as in Israel where some now live) have gained much from the members of the new Orthodoxy. Though their numbers may be limited, their knowledge, expertise, or-
organizational knowhow and activism are among the most positive factors for a bright Jewish future.

NOTES

Most demographic figures cited here are direct or indirect quotes from the preliminary reports of the findings of the National Jewish Population Study, Fred Massarik, Scientific Director, N. Y.: Council of Jewish Federations, '74 (NJPS).

5. From the preliminary findings of a '75 follow-up of The Jewish Community of Greater Baltimore — A Population Study; Baltimore, Md.: Association of Jewish Charities, 1968.
7. Sklare, Marshall, ed. The Jewish Community, N. Y.: Behrman House, 1974, p. 181. Cf. Liebman, Charles S., ibid., p. 174, "... there is a recognition and admiration for Orthodoxy as the only group which today contains within it a strength and will to live that may yet nourish all the Jewish world."
8. In a recent study of 8 Young Israel congregations, Rabbi Bertram Leff found that 63 per cent of the members hold jobs in the professions, 20 per cent have M.A. degrees, and 3 per cent have or are working towards a Ph.D.