A Demographer Considers the Twenty-First Century

Bruce A. Phillips

For demographers the future is embedded in the present. As early as the 1960 census the number of retirees in 2015 was already certain (based on the baby boom). Using current data (the National Jewish Population Survey and local Jewish population surveys) three trends that profoundly affect the Reform Movement are already apparent: intermarriage, migration, and postdenominationalism.

The Impact of Intermarriage

Intermarriage is arguably the single most important demographic factor shaping the American Jewish population. Three aspects are important for considering the future of Reform in the twenty-first century: Jewish numbers, rabbinic officiation, and outreach to the Jewish periphery.

Jewish Numbers

The popular understanding is that Reform is growing as a result of intermarriage because intermarried couples leave less welcoming movements. This is only partially true. The in-migration to the Reform Movement on the part of persons raised Conservative and Orthodox will be offset by out-migration on the part of persons leaving the movement as a result of intermarriage. This is evident in the 2000–2001 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS). Comparing the number of persons raised in each movement with the number who currently identify with that movement measures its growth or decline. Among the oldest NJPS respondents (born before 1940) twice as many respondents identified themselves as

BRUCE PHILLIPS, Ph.D. is professor of Sociology and Jewish Communal Service at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles. He is among the leading sociologists studying the contemporary Jewish community, specializing in the sociology and demography of American Jewry.
Reform as were raised in the denomination, a growth of 100 percent. Among respondents born between 1940 and 1959 Reform identification grew by 20 percent. This cohort consists mostly of baby boomers that were raised in suburban synagogues. Among the youngest cohort, however, Reform identification declined by 12 percent. This decline is largely explained by the presence of a non-Jewish spouse. The vast majority of in-married respondents who were raised Reform continued to identify that way as adults as contrasted with only half of the intermarried respondents. Most of those who dropped their Reform identification described themselves as having no denomination or even no religion at all. This trend has been partially obscured by migration into the Reform Movement on the part of disaffected Conservative and Orthodox Jews over recent past decades. The impact of intermarriage is most dramatic when actual synagogue membership (as opposed to movement identification) is considered: 58 percent of in-married Reform identified respondents reported a synagogue membership in 2000 as compared with 35 percent of intermarried respondents. The impact of intermarriage on Conservative and even Orthodox rates of synagogue membership is similar.

The conventional wisdom is that intermarried couples do not feel welcome in synagogues. The quantitative evidence for this is weak at best. A better explanation for the low rates of synagogue membership among intermarried couples is the concept of the “religiously inefficient marriage.” Religious inefficiency is a concept introduced by economist Lawrence Iannaccone, who applies economic models to the study of religion. He argues that religious experience and expertise create “religious capital” in the same way that education constitutes “human capital.” An interfaith marriage has only half the religious capital as a religiously endogamous marriage because whichever religion is chosen for the household, only one spouse brings the necessary experience and expertise.1 Iannaccone theorized that the most efficient solution for the dual-religion household would be no religion at all. Using data on Protestants and Catholics he found this to be true. Evidence for the religious inefficiency of Jewish intermarriages can be found in the questions on communal attachment in the NJPS. Respondents were asked “Personally, how much does being Jewish involve attending synagogue” and “Personally, how much does being Jewish involve being part of a Jewish community.” Among in-married respondents
who reported that attending synagogue had “a lot” to do with how they were Jewish, the actual rate of synagogue membership was 85 percent. Among intermarried respondents who felt the same way, synagogue membership dropped to 53 percent. The same is true for being part of a Jewish community: 77 percent of in-married respondents who said that being part of a Jewish community had “a lot” to do with how they were Jewish reported paying dues to a synagogue as compared with only 55 percent of intermarried respondents who felt this way. Given that synagogue membership typically costs thousands of dollars, it should come as no surprise that intermarriage depresses synagogue membership, even among respondents for whom attending synagogue and being part of a Jewish community is central to how they are Jewish. Why would a non-Jew want to invest in someone else’s religion? A corollary of religious inefficiency is generational attrition. It is more efficient for two Jewish parents to raise a child within Judaism than for an intermarried Jewish parent to do so. Raising a child in Judaism typically entails practicing rituals in the home, which is harder to do when only one spouse has the “religious capital” to contribute. Add to this the combination of logistics and cost necessary to provide a formal Jewish education. Even the most welcoming synagogue is hard put to convince a non-Jewish spouse to make these investments.

The first national data on intermarriage were from the 1970 NJPS. The study director, Fred Massarik, opined that if only half of the children of intermarriages were raised as Jews there would be no net loss to the Jewish people. Thirty years later the NJPS 2000 reveals that this did not happen. The report released by the United Jewish Communities (since renamed the Jewish Federations of North America) showed that only 31 percent of children with a non-Jewish parent were being “raised as Jews” in some way. This figure alone would indicate a numerical decline in the Jewish population, but a more important measure was not included in that report: children being raised exclusively in Judaism as opposed to the more nebulous “raised as a Jew.” Being raised in Judaism is a better indicator of what the future holds because it is only these children that will be exposed to such socialization experiences as religious school, youth group, and Jewish camping. Only 22 percent of children with a non-Jewish parent, and 60 percent of all Jewish children were being raised in Judaism per se. While other
forms of Jewish identification (such as culturally Jewish) might emerge to ameliorate the attrition of total Jewish numbers, the anticipated decline in the number of Jews by religion will have an impact on all the movements. Persons with no religion don’t join synagogues.

Rabbinic Officiation

Proponents of officiating at intermarriages by Reform rabbis took comfort in the 2008 study by Arnold Dashefsky, *Interruption and Jewish Journeys in the United States*, which found that intermarried couples married by a rabbi were much more likely to belong to a synagogue and raise Jewish children than were those who were married in some other way. Moments after the study was released, one such proponent proclaimed on his Web site that this finding conclusively made the case for rabbis performing intermarriages (although Dashefsky himself did not draw this same conclusion). In an as yet unpublished paper I analyzed the NJPS and found this same pattern, but did not reach the same conclusion. The intermarried respondents in the NJPS who were married by a rabbi also had much stronger Jewish backgrounds than those who were married in some other way. They had also typically contacted more than one rabbi. In other words, their Jewish background better explains their subsequent Jewish engagement than does the officiation by a rabbi. Indeed, they wanted a rabbi to marry them precisely because of their strong Jewish backgrounds. These intermarried Jews would probably have found their way into Jewish life because it is important for them. From a purely methodological point of view, the only way to conclusively demonstrate that rabbinic officiation has a positive effect on subsequent Jewish engagement is to randomly assign couples to a rabbi or a justice of the peace.

I am not saying that rabbinic officiation does not make any difference, only that the data do not support this conclusion. The data do suggest another equally important consideration. If the most committed of the about to be intermarried are the ones who seek out a rabbi, then this is a potentially fruitful opportunity to talk to them about what kind of family they will have. We do know, after all, that intermarried couples are far less likely to join a synagogue than in-married couples, even if a rabbi performed the ceremony.
Connecting with the Periphery

In earlier times the progeny of Jewish intermarriages usually opted for assimilation. Norton Stern has documented this with regard to the Jewish population of the Colonial period. The descendent of the German Jewish migration of the middle nineteenth century have also by and large disappeared as a result of intermarriage. The dynamics of class and numbers combined to bring this about. Persons of mixed Jewish ancestry (one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent) have three options: identify with the majority, identify with the minority, or create some sort of hybrid identity. We see this most clearly with mixed-race persons of African American ancestry. Under Jim Crow segregation, the one drop rule dictated that a mixed-race person would be classified as black. Recent research has found that mixed-race persons identify as black in some contexts, and as mixed-race or white in others. In the absence of the social visibility attached to race, Jewish offspring of intermarriages could present themselves as Christians and there were strong numeric and status incentives for doing so. The majority of Americans are Christian, making Christianity the norm in America. For a person of mixed Jewish ancestry, Jewish identification is non-normative. Throughout much of the twentieth century, Jews were a lower status group. For the mixed-ancestry Jew, abandoning Jewish identification could open new doors to opportunity. By the end of the twentieth century, the status of Jews had changed dramatically. Based on household income and education, Jews are now higher status than Episcopalians. Moreover, the American view of Jews had also changed. In the early twentieth century, Jews were judged to be less socially desirable than Irish, Polish, and Italian Americans. Jews were ranked just above Mexicans, Negroes, and Japanese (the terms used in the original research). By the end of the century, Jews had come to be highly regarded by their fellow Americans. Unlike the early twentieth century, it is not clear that identification as a non-Jew in the twenty-first century will result in any status gains. To the contrary, being “part Jewish” is as much an asset as a liability. The NBA star Amar’e Stoudemire is a case in point. Having recently discovered Jewish ancestry on his mother’s side, he went to Israel to explore his Jewish roots and had himself tattooed with a Star of David. A generation or two earlier the grandparents of John
Kerry and the parents of Madeline Albright found it prudent to hide their children’s Jewish roots from them.

As of the turn of the twenty-first century, based on the NJPS, one million adults of mixed Jewish ancestry identified at least nominally as Christians. Despite their self-description as Christian, there are multiple indications of their Jewish sincerity. To begin with, they were interviewed for the NJPS 2000–2001; that alone was an act of Jewish identification. More than half of them affirmed that they felt “very positive” about being Jewish, but a far lower percentage averred that being Jewish was “very important” to them. Jewish ancestry did not stigmatize them (just the opposite) but it was also not very much part of who they are. Thus, most agreed with the statement that “Being Jewish has very little to do with how I see myself.” Being Jewish is not particularly important in their lives, but they value it nonetheless. Another eight hundred thousand adults identified with no religion at all. These secular Jews are overwhelmingly the progeny of intermarriages. Some secular Jews were raised in no religion, but others were raised as Christians and later rejected that identification for no religion at all. The adult children of intermarriage constitute what sociologist Joel Perlmann terms the “Jewish periphery.” With every passing year the population of mixed-ancestry Jewish adults will have grown further. Although their Jewish heritage has little practical religious significance for them, they value it nonetheless. They rarely step foot inside a synagogue, but might be curious about what is inside. As the twenty-first century progresses, the Reform Movement would do well to consider how it might connect with the ever-growing Jewish periphery.

Migration

While the impact of continued migration is less dramatic than that of intermarriage, it is no less important. Migration has been reshaping the physical contours of the American Jewish community for more than a century, and the process continues. Three aspects of migration have important implications for Reform Judaism: the changing regional distribution and the emergence of new Jewish population centers, discontinuity of affiliation among migrants, and a new distribution of Jews within metropolitan areas.
The Changing Regional Distribution of American Jewry

In the 1987 *American Jewish Year Book* Barry Kosmin examined the changes in Jewish regional distribution over the half-century between 1936 and 1986: “Whereas in the mid-1930s, 90 percent of the country’s Jewish population was found in 17 metropolitan areas, in the 1980s, in order to reach 90 percent it was necessary to include 30 metropolitan areas.” In 1936 the New York-New Jersey metro area accounted for 56 percent of American Jewry as compared with 38 percent in 1986. As of 2010 only about 33 percent of American Jews resided in this largest metro area.

The geographic dispersion of the American Jewish population has brought about the decline of some older communities and the emergence of new Jewish population centers. Detroit and Cleveland continue to lose Jewish population even as communities such as Atlanta, San Francisco, Phoenix, and San Diego have experienced double-digit population growth. The combined Jewish population of California and South Florida is now greater than the Northeast. More Jews live in Southern California than in all of the Midwest. These emerging Jewish population centers in the West look very different than the traditional Jewish centers in the Northeast and Midwest. Detroit Jewry, for example, looks pretty much as it did in the 1950s: very low intermarriage rates, high rates of affiliation, and lots of stay-at-home mothers. Jewish communities in the Western states, by contrast, have high rates of intermarriage and low rates of affiliation.

Migration and Affiliation

One reason these new communities have relatively low rates of affiliation is what Robert Putnam dubbed “re-potting” in *Bowling Alone*. It takes a while for migrants to set down their Jewish roots. But migration can also strengthen emerging communities, particularly in the West. The Western states (with the exception of Utah) have long had an individualistic culture that eschewed religious affiliation for Jews and non-Jews. Jewish in-migrants from the Midwest and East bring with them an ethos of communal attachment as Sid and Alice Goldstein predicted in their classic migration study *Jews on the Move*. In the 2004 San Francisco Jewish population study I found that recent in-migrants were more likely to affiliate and less likely to be intermarried than Bay Area natives.
Post-Suburbanization

Postwar suburbanization has had a profound influence on Reform Judaism. With the exception of the large urban temples once associated with classical Reform, the majority of Reform congregations are suburban. The Reform Movement grew in step with suburbanization. The twenty-first century is witnessing what we might call an era of post-suburbanization, which will also have an impact on the movement. The literature on urban sociology differentiates between inner-ring, middle-ring, and outer-ring suburbs (also referred to as first-ring, second-ring, and third-ring suburbs). The inner-ring suburbs, developed just after World War II, are becoming heavily ethnic and some have even become immigrant suburbs. In the Los Angeles metro area, Monterey Park is mostly Chinese while Huntington Park is heavily Latino. The North Hollywood area in Los Angeles and Skokie in Chicago are both ethnically diverse inner-ring suburbs with significant concentrations of Orthodox Jews. A recent Brookings Institution study found that as inner-ring suburbs are increasingly dominated by ethnic and racial minorities, white Americans are moving to new residential developments outside of traditional metro areas. These new areas are commonly referred to as edge cities, Boomburbs, or outer-ring suburbs. They are found at the far edges of metropolitan areas but are not linked to them economically. Their growth is explained partly by continued white flight and partly by the large-scale entrance of women professionals into the labor force. The large office parks in edge cities were designed to attract working mothers who want to stay close to home. Jews are part of this centrifugal movement but are also more likely to remain closer to the metropolitan core in what could be called middle-ring suburbs. Even as the white non-Hispanic population has moved to the third ring of suburbs, the middle-ring suburbs have remained remarkable stable as regards Jewish population concentrations.

Fifty years ago when the middle ring was what Marshall Sklare referred to as “the suburban frontier,” contemporary observers were skeptical about the viability of Jewish identity there. In his classic study of the new Jewish suburb of Park Forest, Illinois, Herbert Gans discovered that Jewish out-migrants from Chicago who had no previous religious involvements in their ethnic inner-city neighborhoods were now joining synagogues in droves. They
did so for largely nonreligious reasons. They joined suburban synagogues because they wanted their children to have some sense of Jewish identity (in part so that they would be able to handle encounters with anti-Semites) and because they wanted to make friends. Gans noted wryly that Saturday night dances had much larger attendance than Friday night services. Sklare ended his classic study of “Lakeville” by wondering about the future viability of “Jewish identity on the suburban frontier.”

Would Jewish friendship networks provide a sufficiently solid foundation to sustain a viable and vital Jewish community? His pessimism was certainly supported by his survey data and was widely shared among social scientists at the time. Suburbanization is still considered part of the assimilation of ethnic minorities and indeed is now referred to as spatial assimilation.

It turns out that these fears were unwarranted. Using the Chicago Jewish population surveys conducted in 1980, 1990, and 2000, I revisited “Lakeville.” The North Shore suburbs (which include “Lakeville”) have for decades been the most Jewish area of Chicago along multiple dimensions including Jewish population density, Jewish friendship networks, high rates of synagogue affiliation, and low rates of intermarriage. Using these same measures, a similar pattern was found in Los Angeles. The Valley Hills communities (Studio City, Sherman Oaks, Encino, Tarzana, and Woodland Hills) were also the most Jewish among all the communities comprising the Los Angeles metro area. Silicon Valley is similarly the most Jewish area of the San Francisco metro region. These middle-ring suburbs are the most affluent suburbs in their respective regions. A generation ago these were considered the most likely places for Jews to assimilate. The contrast Philip Roth draws between Newark and Short Hills in Goodbye, Columbus no longer applies in many Jewish communities. It is no longer the case that the most affluent suburb is the least Jewish. To the contrary, in Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, the most affluent suburbs are now the most Jewish. They have replaced or at least compete with urban Jewish neighborhoods as to which constitutes the Jewish core.

Jewish residential enclaves in the outer-ring suburbs are paradoxical. Jews are rarely found in the outer-ring suburbs to the west and south of Chicago. Instead they are concentrated in the outer-ring Northwest suburbs that are contiguous with the middle-ring
North Shore suburbs. In this respect they represent a continued pattern of residential concentration to the north of the city. But the Northwest suburbs are also different from the middle-ring North Shore suburbs in significant respects: intermarriage is higher, Jewish density and affiliation are lower, families are younger, and housing is more affordable. The West Valley of Los Angeles\textsuperscript{12} is a western parallel to the Northwest suburbs. The outer-ring Jewish suburbs are contiguous with the middle-ring suburbs. As in the Chicago metro area, there are many outer-ring suburbs in the Los Angeles area from which to choose. Just as Chicago Jews moved to the Northwest suburbs, Los Angeles Jews stayed concentrated in the western part of Los Angeles County. Like the Northwest suburbs of Chicago, the Conejo Valley communities are contiguous to the established and very Jewish middle-ring suburbs. The same outer-ring demographic patterns observed in Chicago are also evident in Los Angeles: Affiliation is significantly lower and intermarriage higher in the outer-ring suburbs than in the middle-ring suburbs. Jewish communities will be differentiated by the types of Jews who live there. The farther away from the center of Jewish population a congregation is, the greater the proportion of intermarried couples. Thus, some synagogues will have many non-Jewish spouses and others will have few.

**Postdenominationalism . . . Maybe**

The final trend is more of a question: will the existing Jewish movements be relevant in the twenty-first century? There are persuasive indications that they may not be relevant much longer. Writing in 2005 for the Steinhardt Foundation magazine, *Contact*, Steven M. Cohen described communities of young Jews who were deeply committed to Judaism, but not to any particular Jewish movement. Two years later he published a landmark study on *Emergent Jewish Communities and Their Participants*, noting that there were already more than eighty such communities that provided “experiences and activities that they believe to be unavailable in conventional congregations and other such settings.”\textsuperscript{13} The liberal Orthodox International Rabbinic Fellowship and the nondenominational rabbinical school of Boston’s Hebrew College are commonly cited as evidence of trend toward the irrelevance of Jewish movement labels. Another bit of evidence for the waning
importance of movements is the recent downsizing of the URJ in response to congregational pressure. While it is true that this came about in conjunction with the economic meltdown, it also revealed a long-standing competition between support of the institutional apparatus of the URJ and the needs and desires of individual congregations. A Jewish law school professor recently complained that having to go through the movement to find a new rabbi was detrimental to his congregation and probably illegal.

Observers of the Protestant scene have noted the popularity of nondenominational megachurches among Gen X and Gen Y youth that has accompanied the decline of the “mainline” denominations (e.g., Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists). One of the reasons that the “mainline” Protestant denominations have become “sideline” is that the twentieth century reasons for denominational attachment are becoming less relevant in the twenty-first century. In 1929 Helmut Richard Niebuhr published *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* in which he argued that socioeconomic status was as important as theology in differentiating Protestant denominations. Episcopalians were upper class, Baptists were lower class, and Methodists were middle class. This had a Jewish parallel as well. There was a time when Reform was associated with the German Jewish upper class and neo-Reform was the result of upwardly mobile Russian Jews bringing their liturgical and cultural preferences with them. As Sklare argued in his classic *Conservative Judaism*, upwardly mobile orthodox Jews were joining Conservative synagogues. In the twenty-first century the class differences among Jews have largely disappeared (except for the ultra-Orthodox who remain less affluent than other Jews). Liturgical differences that separate the Reform from the Conservative Movement are less apparent than they used to be. The contemporary Reform service has a more traditional feel than classical Reform. Reform congregants who in previous decades were not allowed to wear a tallit or kippah now often see their rabbis wearing them on the bimah. Hebrew is now an integral part of the service: The *Aleinu* has regained its place as the closing prayer, having been pushed out a century ago by the “Let Us Adore the Ever Living God” hymn that concluded the service in the *Union Prayer Book*. For its part the Conservative Movement feels more like Reform in some ways. When Sinai Temple in Los Angeles introduced “Friday Night Live” with Craig Taubman, attendance
grew more than tenfold, in the same way that new music such as Debbie Friedman’s has become integral to Reform synagogues.

Postdenominationalism means that the Reform Movement is being challenged on both the right and left. If Reform and Conservative congregations are coming to resemble each other, why keep them separate? Why not meet in the middle? If emergent communities are an indication of new trends, will synagogues not opt to define themselves rather than identify with a movement? The Reform Movement will not be seriously challenged either by its immediate right or immediate left. On the right the Law Committee of Rabbinical Assembly will keep Conservative Judaism separate from Reform. Just as the Conservative Movement was divided over the role of women, it is now at odds over the acceptance of gays, the permissibility of musical instruments, and the role of the non-Jew in the synagogue. The Conservative and Reform movements will remain separate because they will have different policies regarding inclusion of gays, intermarried families, and new models of synagogue music, even if some Conservative synagogues come to resemble their Reform counterparts. Emergent communities at this point do not present serious competition for two reasons. Jews are far more likely to join an existing synagogue than to start a new one. The many existing Reform synagogues have an organizational advantage over the emergent start-ups. A case in point is congregation Netivot Shalom in Berkeley, California. Originally meeting in the home of its founding rabbi and later renting space in a Jewish community center, the congregation continued to grow and recently purchased a building that it remodeled as a synagogue. When the founding rabbi retired, Netivot Shalom joined the United Synagogues of Conservative Judaism in order to find a new rabbi. More progressive than the USCJ, the congregation decided to remain in the Conservative Movement and advocate for change rather than become unaffiliated again. Despite differences over the inclusion of gay Jews and intermarried families, Netivot Shalom decided it was best defined as a Conservative synagogue. Labels still mean something, at least for now. The staying power of conventional movement identification is evident in the National Jewish Population Survey in which respondents were asked which “Jewish religious denomination” they considered themselves to be. Virtually no respondents answered postdenominational or anything even close.
The second reason that emergent communities do not currently represent serious competition is that they are specifically oriented toward the spiritual needs of a Jewish elite. They are niche congregations. This being said, the emergent Jewish communities will greatly influence the Reform Movement in the twenty-first century in the same way that the Chavurah Movement did in the twentieth. In the 1970s there was great concern that the Chavurah Movement would pose a serious challenge to both Conservative and Reform synagogues. That concern ended when both movements incorporated the Chavurah model. A person not familiar with the Jewish Catalogue would probably not be aware that chavurot were not always part of synagogues. The Reform Movement would do well to learn from emergent communities because the future vitality of the movement will depend in part on retaining its most committed and most creative sons and daughters.

Conclusion

Because of both intermarriage and assimilation the number of adherents of Judaism will decline. Judaism (including Reform) will be less prevalent among the next generation of adults who identify as Jewish in some way. The unfortunate predilection of Jewish press (especially the influential Forward) to criticize social scientists that predict numeric decline as purveyors of doom and gloom has discouraged serious discussion of increasingly apparent trends. One implication is that synagogues will be smaller. Even if Reform maintains its current share of Jews by religion, it will be a slice of a smaller pie. The Reform Movement can counter this trend to some extent by considering ways to connect with the Jewish periphery. Making synagogues more welcoming is not enough. Reform Judaism has to take seriously the dynamics of the intermarried family.

Migration trends will create three different kinds of synagogues. The geographic and participatory centers of local Jewish life will be found in the middle-ring suburbs. I have documented this only in Chicago and Los Angeles so far, but I expect that my continued research will find this pattern in other communities as well. The old, architecturally substantial classical Reform synagogues found in urban neighborhoods will see at least a mini-renaissance to the extent that gentrification is taking place around them. They may even gain some new members from suburban congregations
as some baby boomer empty nesters move back into the city. The outer-ring suburbs are the most likely to see the emergence of new synagogues, but they will face two challenges. The Jewish population is more widely dispersed in these suburbs, and these are the areas where intermarried families are most likely to live. Finding and attracting both in-married and intermarried families will be crucial to their success. Outer-ring suburban Jews are generally less affluent than middle-ring suburban Jews and they may well face a resource challenge.

Finally, those studies that have asked about how Jews choose a synagogue generally find that the rabbi is a significant (and often the most common) consideration named. If I might take the liberty of plugging my own institution, the recruitment and training of talented and innovative rabbis will have a lot to do with the continued success of Reform Judaism in the twenty-first century.

Notes


12. The West Valley consists of Calabasas and the Conejo Valley.

