

THE ONE IN 2000 CONTROVERSY

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Few issues have so captured Jewish attention in recent years as has the matter of internal division within the Jewish community. And no one has been more responsible for putting that issue on our agenda than Rabbi Irving Greenberg, whose essay "Will There Be One Jewish People by the Year 2000?" published in 1985, was widely noted. Here, a leading social scientist challenges the Greenberg thesis, and Greenberg responds.

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"Will there be one Jewish people by the year 2000?" That is the provocative question with which Rabbi Irving Greenberg, one of America's most respected Jewish thinkers, has captured the attention of the American Jewish community for the past two years. In an article under that title, as well as in speeches to audiences around the country, Greenberg makes it clear that he does not ask the question rhetorically: "If sociological forces are left to operate unchecked, the result will be predictable. *Within decades, the Jewish people will split apart into two . . . hostile groups who are unable or unwilling to marry each other.*" (Emphasis in the original.)

At the base of Greenberg's fears is his concern with what he sees as a sharp growth in the number of people who claim to be Jews, but whose status as Jews is questionable according to *halachah*, Jewish law. These include principally converts, offspring of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers, and those defined by *halachah* as *mamzerim* because they are the children of remarried divorced women who did not obtain a religious divorce from their prior marriage. Given the dramatic rise in the numbers of all three of these groups in the last 20 years, Greenberg concludes that "within two decades, 15 to 20 percent of American Jewry will be socially and halachically separated from traditional Jews." Worse still, if we "add to these people their families, friends, their fellow temple and organizational members . . . they would

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constitute a major fragment of American Jewry. Easily 50 percent of the Jewish people could be, in some way, allied with this group against the traditional Jews who challenge their status.”

No internal issue has so captured Jewish attention in recent memory. Symposia, conferences, lectures, retreats—the issue of pluralism, as it is sometimes called, or of schism, or of Jewish unity, has quite suddenly become the “hot” topic for Jewish public discussion. And much of that discussion is useful and constructive. Greenberg himself has proposed, for example, an increase in serious “Jewish-Jewish” dialogue, as well as the interdenominational study of texts to search for understanding and mutually acceptable remedies. And the organization he heads, CLAL—the Center for Learning and Leadership—has taken a leading role in organizing just such meetings. Indeed, in Greenberg’s view, CLAL “offers the only serious organizational commitment to intra-Jewish ecumenism.” And, as he ruefully observes, “CLAL has sought funding . . . but has found little receptivity to its requests. Nationally, the Federations are giving millions for Jewish-Christian dialogue but only pennies for Jewish-Jewish dialogue.” (Since these words were first written, CLAL has announced the award of “a special \$1-million challenge grant, established by Aaron and Marjorie Ziegelman to initiate *Keren Am Echad* [The One People Fund], expressly to support its activities.”)

Intra-Jewish dialogue is no doubt a good, perhaps even an essential idea. It would be a good idea even without the predictions of an imminent demographic doomsday on which it has come to rest. And that turns out to be an important point to make, because the plain fact of the matter is that the sociological and historical assumptions on which Greenberg and others base their doomsday predictions are, to put it bluntly, mistaken. Greenberg’s prescription is a welcome benefit to a community that is and has been religiously fragmented, and, in the nasty climate that has lately come to characterize our interdenominational debate, the remedy may be doubly important. But the evidence

strongly suggests that Greenberg has misnamed the disease his prescription comes to cure; it is simply not the case that we face an inevitable and irreconcilable schism in American Jewry.

To put the matter starkly, there is no reason to believe that the threat to Jewish unity in the year 2000 will be very different from what it is in the year 1987. We are already a remarkably diverse, even fractious people, yet we have somehow managed to sustain a sufficient sense of unity; we are, today, one people, and that is what we are likely to remain—unless our panic drives us to seek explicit resolution of issues and differences that may well be best left where they have long been, in a benign state of ambiguity.

But before we turn to matters of policy, it is useful to examine the numbers, to see just what it is that Greenberg predicts and why his predictions are almost surely wrong.

Demography: The Doomsday View

Let us start at the end, with Greenberg’s frightening conclusion, cited above: “[W]ithin two decades . . . 50 percent of the Jewish people could be, in some way, allied . . . against the traditional Jews who challenge their status.” Read rapidly, this statement appears to suggest a 50-50 split in American Jewry within the next 20 years, half the community refusing to marry the other half—which is to say, two Jewish peoples. But that is not even approximately the case, nor does Greenberg say it is. Half the Jews, he says, might be associated somehow with behaviors that would make them unacceptable *not to the other half*, but to “traditional Jews who challenge their status.” And traditional Jews, in all, include no more than 10 percent of America’s Jews.

A split of 50 percent against 10 percent (with the other 40 percent, presumably, “acceptable” to both sides) may offer small comfort, but it is a very different thing from the 50-50 split many of us have imagined as the threat. More important still, a careful review of the data suggests that nowhere near 50 percent of the Jews are likely to be “unacceptable” to tradi-

tional Jews.

When compared with the published demographic statistics of American Jewry, some of the statistics Greenberg uses are reasonably accurate. But other crucial numbers fall substantially enough outside the published range of estimates so as seriously to inflate the number of “unacceptable” Jews and to deflate the size of the Jewish population. In other words, in computing the fraction of the population that will be halachically problematic, Greenberg’s numerator is too large and his denominator is too small. We can observe the effect of this kind of error in the following examples:

○ Greenberg writes that “the Jewish divorce rate could easily be at the 30 to 40 percent level.”

Here our data are imperfect. We do know, however, that for years the number of Jews who have been divorced has remained at about half the rate of other Americans. Unless there is some reason to believe that there has suddenly taken place a major reversal of this pattern—and I know of no such reason, nor of any evidence that it has—the best estimate of the current Jewish divorce rate is on the order of 25 percent. If divorce is a problem in the context of “the impending schism”—and, because of the question of the *get*, the religious writ of divorce, it is—then it is important that we not inflate, or otherwise distort, the number of divorces we experience.

○ Greenberg states, “It has been estimated that the total American Jewish population by the year 2000 will be 5 million. Some say it will be even lower.”

But even the most pessimistic published projections predict a population well in excess of 5 million, owing in large part to the increase in the number of potential mothers who have recently come of age due to the post World War II baby boom.

○ Greenberg estimates that American Jewry will produce between 7,000 and 15,000 *mamzerim* a year. To arrive at this figure, Greenberg claims that Jews participate in 10,000 to 15,000 second marriages a year, and that—on average—these marriages will produce 0.7 to 1.0 children each.

In fact, the number of remarriages

involving Jewish women of child-bearing age is probably far lower—closer, in fact, to 5,000 a year. Moreover, not all of these second marriages are problematic. Starting from more realistic assumptions (about which more below), we end up not with somewhere between 7,000 and 15,000 *mamzerim*, but with a figure closer to 2,000.

Anticipating objections such as these, Greenberg offers a qualification: “If the numbers in the above estimates are too high—and they may well be too low—then it may take until the year 2020 or 2050 to arrive at the same disastrous end. But what difference do a few decades make over the long span of Jewish history?”

As we have seen, however, it is simply not the case that the estimates “may well be too low”; indeed, it is virtually certain that they are in fact too high. And, in any event, the qualification is hardly an adequate defense against the critique. The data we have may be inadequate, and the estimates problematic, but that does not justify stretching them to produce a prediction that must be regarded as far more dire than is plausible, more dire than any reasonable worst-case scenario.

Demography: A Balanced View

Greenberg’s demographic analysis correctly focuses on three problematic groups: converts, cases of patrilineal descent, and *mamzerim*. But these groups are not equally problematic. Converts, in particular, in and of themselves, pose few enduring and deep-seated difficulties for traditional Jews. They enter into the discussion largely because of their children—specifically, those children born to born-Gentile mothers who have converted in ways that do not conform to traditional standards.

How many such children are there? Curiously—the reasons need not detain us here—the number of recent and current conversions cannot be accurately estimated. But we do have some idea of their proportion to the population at large. In a recent study of a national consumer panel I conducted, I found that among younger adults who say they are Jews, about 6 percent say their mother was not raised as a

Jew. This figure is consistent with our best estimates of the intermarriage and conversion rates. About 30 percent (more or less) of Jews who marry, marry born-Gentiles. About a fifth of the born-Gentile spouses (many more wives than husbands) convert—and a fifth of 30 percent is 6 percent.

This means that Greenberg’s estimate of 300,000 to 400,000 converts by the year 2050 (but not by the year 2000) is reasonable; six percent of nearly 6 million American Jews works out to around 350,000. (But the six percent figure implies about 5,000 conversions a year and not the *Wall Street Journal* estimate of 10,000 cited by Greenberg.)

But it is not the case that each and every conversion is problematic from the halachic point of view. Greenberg estimates that “90 percent or more [of the converts] will be Reform,” but he cites no source for his estimate. On the face of it, it is difficult to accept that the Reform movement will convert 4,500 people a year, and the Conservative and Orthodox movements together merely 500. Indeed, one might suppose that Orthodoxy alone claims a higher annual number than 500.

Still, even if we accept that 90 percent of the women who convert are in some sense problematic, the consequence is that out of every 18 or so people today’s young adult Jews encounter who claim to be Jewish, one will have been born, from the traditional perspective, a Gentile—that is, to a mother whose conversion is regarded as inauthentic by traditional Jews. Given the patterns of socializing, intermarriage, and conversion, that number will be higher for Reform young people and lower for Orthodox. Even so low a figure may be thought a problem—but it is hardly cause for alarm.

While converts may present relatively few real problems for traditionally minded Jews, the cases of patrilineal descent pose a potentially more perplexing problem. Conversion is at least familiar; patrilineality, at least as an “official” status, is new.

For purposes of discussion, a “patrilineal Jew” is one who claims to be Jewish, but whose mother is a born

None of the deep-seated conflicts over the last 200 years has provoked an irreparable fracturing of the bonds of Jewish kinship.

A *mamzer* is the product of certain categories of a forbidden relationship. For present purposes, the kind of *mamzer* we are interested in is the child of a Jewish woman from her second (or later) marriage who was previously divorced and failed to obtain a *get*; the halachically required bill of divorce. To estimate the number of *mamzerim* in a generation, we start with a hypothetical cohort of 100 Jewish women. Let us assume that, on average, they will give birth to 2 children apiece, for a total of 200 children. (Since we will be working with percentages, the number of children per mother is not a crucial factor.) How many of these 200 will be *mamzerim*?

Out of the 100 Jewish women, only 95 will ever marry. Of the 95, about 28 will marry non-Jewish men; the rest, 67, will marry Jews. If 25 percent of all Jews who ever marry, divorce, then about 24 of the 95 women will divorce. But divorce is more common among the intermarried. Thus the 24 divorcing women will probably divide equally, into 12 who were in-married and 12 who were out-married.

Of the 24 female divorcées, no more than two-thirds—or 16 of them—will remarry (among American women generally, only 55 percent remarry within five years of the divorce). Of these 16, 8 will have been married to a non-Jew and thus pose a ready “out” for those concerned with *mamzerut*. Of the other 8, it is reasonable to assume that some have obtained a *get*. After all, these are the women who were formerly married to Jews. Both Orthodox and Conservative rabbis will strongly recommend a *get*. Together, Orthodox and Conservative Jews make up over 40 percent of all American Jews, the majority of married couples, and an even larger majority of in-married Jewish couples. All Orthodox and Conservative rabbis require presentation of a *get* before performing a Jewish woman’s second marriage.

Accordingly, we are left with no more than 8 women out of the original 100 who meet all the following criteria: They first married a Jew; they

were divorced; they failed to obtain a *get*; they then remarried. How many of these will have children, and how many children will they have?

It turns out that, for Jews, the median length of first marriages is 12 years. In other words, 4 (or fewer) of the 8 (or fewer) will have divorced (to say nothing of having been remarried) after they are likely to have any more children. Of the other 4 women, we can suppose that they have half their children in their first marriage and half in their second. That means a total average of four *mamzerim* for the entire birth cohort of 100 women. Of these four *mamzerim*, some will not identify as Jews, especially as the intermarriage rate is higher among remarried divorcées than it is among first-time marriers.

Since this cohort will produce roughly 200 children, an average of four *mamzerim* (assuming they all claim to be Jewish) works out to two percent of the total. If there are 40,000 women in each year of birth cohort, and they give birth to 80,000 children in all, we end up with fewer than 2,000 *mamzerim* per year, a far cry from the 7,000 to 15,000 Rabbi Greenberg projects.

who has converted under auspices that many Orthodox and Conservative rabbis find objectionable. There is some overlap between this category and the category of converts we have been discussing above. The distinction is that here, the claim to Jewishness is based on the Jewishness of the father. This is a radical deviation from the commonly accepted view that one’s status as a Jew derives from one’s mother. It has become an issue in the past several years because of the decision of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the organization of Reform rabbis, formally to validate patrilineal descent. This decision, which gave *de jure* status to what had been widespread *de facto* practice within the Reform community, has infuriated the Orthodox community, and irritated, at the least, most Conservative rabbis as well.

From the rough estimates we have of intermarriage, conversion, and birthrates, we can derive a very approximate estimate of the proportion of children who will claim to be Jewish who will be only patrilineal Jews.

Let us take a hypothetical group of 100 Jews who decide to marry. Of this group, about 70 will marry one another (that is, other Jews). Of the 30 who are left—who marry non-Jews—about 14 will be female. Their offspring are no more problematic halachically than the offspring of the in-married; in both cases, the Jewishness of the mother is all that matters. Of the 16 Jewish men who marry born Gentiles, were they all to have children, about 8 would raise children whom they (the fathers) would consider Jewish. The mothers of these 8 divide equally between converts to Judaism and unconverted Gentiles.

Even if *all* the conversions were halachically invalid, and even if the mixed-married had birthrates equivalent to the in-married, and even if all their children were to maintain their claim to Jewish status into adulthood then the proportion of all Jews of those born recently and in the next few years who are “only” patrilineal Jews would not exceed eight percent. And in fact, when we adjust for the fact that a higher proportion of mixed mar-

riages are second and subsequent marriages, after the childbearing years, and when we adjust for the lower birthrate of the mixed-married, and when we take into account that at least some of the offspring of such marriages will drop their claim to Jewishness upon reaching adulthood, a reasonable estimate of the number of patrilineal Jews is most likely closer to five than to eight percent. (This works out to a total of under 300,000 people in several decades. Greenberg's estimate of 220,000 children of patrilineal descent as a current figure is probably overstated, but we ought to reach that figure once the children of those now intermarried mature.)

This five percent contains both patrilineal sons and daughters. From a halachic point of view the marriage of one's daughter to a patrilineal son poses fewer problems than that of one's son to a patrilineal daughter. The former results in Jewish grandchildren; the latter, halachically, does not. If we reduce the number of problematic patrilineals by half, we arrive at a figure of under three percent of the generation of Jews being born this year.

Finally, we come to *mamzerim*.

Those who want to follow the reasoning here can do so in the accompanying sidebar (page 14). Our best estimate is that the problem of *mamzerim* will directly affect no more than two or three percent of the children born in the next two decades or so.

In sum, the number of problematic Jews, even for the next generation 20 to 30 years hence, amounts to no more than from 4 percent to 9 percent of the recent and current birth cohorts, depending on one's estimates of *mamzerut* and other factors and on whether one regards patrilineal men as problematic. This estimate is obviously far smaller and applies to the population at a much later time than Greenberg's original projection—within two decades, 15 to 20 percent of American Jewry will be socially and halachically separated from traditional Jews”).

In other words, Greenberg is right to project a sharp growth in the number of problematic Jews. But he is

wrong to estimate that that number may reach 15 to 20 percent of American Jewry; that estimate is not reasonable even as a worst-case scenario.

Nevertheless, even four to nine percent of a birth cohort is a sufficient number to cause some traditional Jews consternation. What are some of the likely (or even some of the far-fetched) outcomes of such a situation?

Remedies

Greenberg believes that the growth in the number of problematic Jews may induce a schism in the Jewish population. In fact, however, reasoning both from recent Jewish history and from current Jewish social reality, the demographic situation will in all likelihood not lead to a new schism in Jewish life; if it does, the schism will not tear the Jewish people asunder; and even if that should happen, the fault line will not run down the middle, but will divide just *some* of the Orthodox off from the others. As sociologist Samuel Heilman of Queens College has observed, “Past splits in the Jewish people have seemed, in their day, at least as dangerous, if not even more threatening—yet the unity of the Jewish people has endured.”

In other words, disunity has been an ever-present feature of Jewish life. There may well be dispute regarding just what we mean by “schism,” but it is worth noting well that none of the deep-seated conflicts over the last 200 years or so has provoked an irreparable fracturing of the bonds of Jewish kinship. The more recent fractures include several breaks of Orthodox Jews from the non-Orthodox majority, particularly in nineteenth-century Europe; the rejection of *halachah* by Reform Jews and the de facto abandonment of *halachah* by the Conservative laity; and the deep divisions over the Zionist enterprise since the late-nineteenth century. As for the present day, is there any doubt that large numbers of Orthodox Jews—and not just the Chassidim or the Misnagdic “yeshivish” Jews—already avoid any form of serious interaction with the non-Orthodox? In other words, we already find a substantial number of Jews who are hostile to others and “who are unable or unwill-

ing to marry” many other Jews. The question, then, is whether we expect that large numbers of Jews will join these rejectionists in the near future.

The noted Jewish historian Robert Chazan observes that “Our image of the Jewish past is shaped by a necessarily very narrow and selective reading of normative material, written chiefly by rabbis. Actually, beneath this artificially uniform and taciturn surface there have been numerous fractures and deviations.” And Calvin Goldscheider, the Brown University sociologist, makes a similar point: “I don't think we've ever been one people. We have always been, and continue to be, split in a variety of ways.”

Not all splits are schisms, and as we have seen, not all schisms result in two or more Jewish peoples. But even if the rise in halachically questionable Jews provokes a rupture in the Jewish people more severe than that which now divides the so-called ultra-Orthodox (*haredim*) from the rest of world Jewry, the division will be located far from the middle of the religious spectrum. The Orthodox now constitute about 10 percent of American Jewry, and the Conservative camp amounts to another 30 to 35 percent. The rest are Reform (about 35 percent) or nondenominational (about 25 to 30 percent). How many of these Jews have even heard of the question of *mamzerut*? How many truly would be anguished over the marriage of their children to patrilineal Jews (bearing in mind that these are children of Jewish fathers who were raised as Jews and see themselves as Jews)? Probably the only people with deep-seated concerns are most of the Orthodox, and the small number of Conservative religious professionals who take the traditional interpretation of *halachah* very seriously.

If the problem Greenberg cites is a potentially divisive issue, the fault line may well run down the middle of modern Orthodoxy rather than down the middle of the Jewish people. Both the more traditional Orthodox and the non-Orthodox have made up their minds. The traditionalists already will have nothing serious to do with the non-Orthodox; and the vast majority of non-Orthodox have no prob-

lems with sociologically defined Jews, those who say they are Jewish and are so regarded by most others.

For the Orthodox, even the modern Orthodox, the problematics of Jewish status are minimized by their tendency to socialize almost exclusively with other Orthodox Jews. Moreover, on the off chance that an Orthodox Jew were to consider marrying a patrilineal Jew or an alleged *mamzer*, halachically viable options exist. As Rabbi Greenberg himself notes, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (z'l) opined that the first marriages of the mothers of potential *mamzerim* (to say nothing of first marriages to non-Jews) could often be regarded as invalid if they were conducted by non-Orthodox rabbis. In the case of marriages with patrilineal Jews, the prospective couple either will or will not be committed to Orthodoxy. If they are not committed to Orthodoxy (or halachic Conservatism), they will have no problem in going ahead with their marriage plans. If they are Orthodox, then the suspect Jew can go through a simple conversion ceremony that most modern Orthodox rabbis would be happy to perform (after all, we are talking about someone committed to leading an observant life and to marrying into an Orthodox family). In such a circumstance, the Orthodox patrilineal Jew is likely to be receptive to the conversion so as to be sure to remove any doubts as to his or her status.

As for a communal rather than personal policy, the Orthodox have options other than promoting the division of the Jewish people "into two, mutually divided, hostile groups who are unable or unwilling to marry each other." A good example is afforded by the 250,000 Soviet Jews who have emigrated since 1968. The conditions Rabbi Greenberg and others worry about—high intermarriage and high divorce without the benefit of a bill of divorce—are thought to have characterized Soviet Jews for several generations (longer in Russia per se, and somewhat less in Georgia and the Baltic Republics). In addition, some say that several non-Jewish relatives of Jews also emigrated to Israel with their families in the last decade and more. If all this is so, then many Soviet Jews now living in Israel and the

United States are halachically suspect. Nevertheless, the Orthodox rabbinat has chosen to turn a blind eye to these problems, possibly for reasons of practicality, and possibly so as not to impugn or discourage the Soviet Jewish emigration movement, which yet promises to bring thousands more bona fide Jews to freedom.

Samuel Heilman, who is a leading student of Orthodoxy, tells me that the technique of "disattention," as he calls it, is a time-honored tradition in the application of *halachah*. Practices, concepts, and customs fall into disuse and eventually lose their compelling force through no means other than studious avoidance. In this case, in light of the rather paltry numbers of patrilineal Jews and *mamzerim*, their social remoteness from the Orthodox community, and the case-by-case remedies that are available, a policy of disattention may well be one of the best ways to avoid the fracture in Jewry that Rabbi Greenberg fears. "Historically," Heilman remarks, "the rabbis have demonstrated a tremendous capacity to apply the *halachah* creatively, especially when the unity and survival of the Jewish people are at stake."

In other words, our people has, over the centuries, managed to contain its diversity most (though not all) of the time. And even today, the reaction that Rabbi Greenberg's proposals have elicited indicates that most Jews of all denominations want to preserve Jewish unity. The suggestion that our unity is newly threatened by deviations from halachic purity has at least as much to do with the response of the purists as with the provocations of the deviationists. The problem we now face is that once the issues have been raised, there is almost no way for the several camps to back down without feeling that they are surrendering their principles. Orthodox Jews frequently have a hard time in understanding that the other movements are not merely "accommodationist," that they, too, have principles they hold dear. Hence the preservation of Jewish unity may depend on our ability to return to a patchwork set of imperfect arrangements, implicit compromises, inconsistent ad hoc rulings, and even benign neglect. It depends more on the

attitudes of the actors than on their ability to develop a substantive consensus on matters of personal status.

And the attitudes that are brought to bear on the threat of a 50-50 irreconcilable rupture are necessarily very different from those invoked by the prospect of a 90-10 or a 95-5 split—which, as I have shown, are the more plausible eventualities. The 90 have no disposition to run roughshod over the 10; indeed, there are very many areas in which their tradition is to defer to the sensibilities of the 10. But if the 90 were led to believe that they are only 50, and the 10 were led to believe they are not 10, but 50, then the sense of a battle joined would most likely replace the tradition of mutual accommodation and deference.

The Costs of Undue Alarmism

The sounding of the alarm is a venerable tradition in Jewish life. Often, it is justified by the facts; as often, it is a device employed by leaders who believe it is the only way to awaken otherwise lethargic audiences to the gravity of the problems that concern them. But where, as in the case at hand, the alarm—sincere though it surely is—rests on a faulty foundation, it can be dangerous.

The awesome possibility of a Jewish people divided into two equal halves within the next two decades is a prediction in the service of noble ends. Specifically, it is intended to draw denominational leadership together to explore areas of potential accommodation, to lower the level of animus in the interdenominational debate, to develop ways of living and working together despite our disagreements with each other. And, by all accounts, Rabbi Greenberg's efforts at encouraging interdenominational dialogue have been extraordinarily successful.

Yet if, in fact, we are incapable of convening serious thinkers from the several denominations without resorting to distortion and exaggeration, we ought at the very least to be aware of the risks of our approach.

When we overstate the dimensions of the difficulty, we may well create battle lines where none existed before. Such analysis, for example,

feeds Orthodox self-righteousness, their widespread belief that only they are the bearers of the true tradition and only they stand a chance of surviving as Jews in an open, pluralist society. It also feeds the non-Orthodox image of Orthodoxy as an insular, medieval, and intolerant sect with little to offer the inquiring non-Orthodox Jew. And, perhaps most troublesome, the very public focus on all that divides us might easily cause some—perhaps many—Jews to throw up their hands in despair, to conclude that they want no part of these arcane battles.

In short, it ought not be necessary, in order to “sell” the prescription, to exaggerate the symptoms it comes to heal.

Undue alarmism has one additional liability: It is factually wrong. For many good reasons, we have a commitment to the truth. No self-respecting rabbi would fail to challenge what he regarded as an inaccurate interpretation of the text. Similarly, we ought to exercise greater care in presenting historical, sociological, or demographic evidence of the Jewish condition. ★