

Some Suggestions on Possible Demographic Policies in the Diaspora

Conference Organizing Committee

1. General Considerations

Some of the policies suggested for Israel in background documents presented to this Conference might be applied, with due modification, also in some Diaspora communities. Others cannot. Many activities which influence retention of the Jews within Jewish population are currently carried out in the Diaspora, but some of them might be further developed. Others could be added.

It is expected that the meetings of the Symposium on Policies, which are mostly devoted to discussion of Diaspora problems, will contribute suggestions for some immediate policies, and thereby help to build long-term policies and worldwide cooperation in these fields.

It has been possible to formulate the suggestions with regard to policies in Israel, because policy goals and alternative ways of implementing them have been the object of government deliberation and of considerable research and discussion by organizations involved.

No such preparatory work had been undertaken before the Symposium with regard to policies in the Diaspora. However, a very limited exploration of recent literature¹ and of proposals that the

-
1. See, among others, C. Goldscheider, *The American Jewish Community: Social Science Research and Policy Implications*, Providence, Brown University, 1986; M. Davis, ed., *Confronting Assimilation in Contemporary Jewish Communities: Analysis and Policy*, Jerusalem, *Forum*; S. Goldstein, *Demography of American Jewry: Implications for a National Community*, S. Hollander Memorial Colloquium on the Emergence of a Continental Jewish Community, Implications for Federations, 1987, New York Council of Jewish Federations; L. Davids, *The Jewish Population Situation Today* (in print); L.J. Epstein, "Democratic Zionism," Jerusalem, *Forum*, Winter/Spring 1985/1986.

organizing committee received from different sources have allowed the following to be included in this document:

- a) a tentative definition of some global policy goals covering both the Diaspora and Israel, and the means for achieving them;
- b) some specific proposals listed in the following sections;
- c) a detailed list of policies proposed in 1983 by the National Conference on Jewish Population Growth and reproduced later in this volume.

Obviously, Diaspora policies have to be adapted to environmental conditions, to means available for local communities or national organizations, and to the type of persons to which policies are directed. In some of the proposals published or received, emphasis is put on the need to direct specific efforts to “marginal” or special Jewish persons or groups such as:

- a) mixed families of various types (with or without conversion of the non-Jewish partner);
- b) children of mixed marriages;
- c) unaffiliated Jews of various age groups, living within or outside Jewish families;
- d) uncommitted Jews;
- e) *yordim* and their families and descendants;
- f) immigrants from the USSR who have settled in the Diaspora rather than in Israel.

In other proposals, the view is held that such specification is not desirable, and that it is better to reach, as far as possible, “marginals” through general policies mainly directed to the core of the Jewish community. To simplify presentation, we shall not give any such specification in the following list of possible policies. However, the need is emphasized here to include questions on these “marginal” groups in the planned survey, in order to have factual information on which decisions regarding future policies may be based.

2. Encouragement of Jewish Marriages – Strengthening Jewish Families

Decline of Jewish nuptiality has two basic roots:

- a) a general decline in the tendency for marriage;
- b) an increased incidence of marriage or cohabitation with non-Jewish partners.

Policies connected with (a) can be formed in ways similar to those which have been adopted or are expected to be adopted in other societies (such as Israel) in reaction to weakening of the family.

Policies connected with (b) are briefly discussed below.

Presumably, mixed marriages are today only in very rare cases the result of a determined will on the part of young Jews to find Gentile mates in order deliberately to leave the Jewish environment or to free themselves from any stigma or difficulty attached to being Jewish.

The following determinants of mixed marriages appear to be especially relevant from the policy viewpoint:

(1) lack of or insufficient opportunities for social contacts between Jewish men and women of marriageable age;

(2) lack of opportunity for people determined not to outmarry, to find suitable Jewish mates, within own environment;

(3) decreased (ideological or other) opposition to mixed marriage by the candidates themselves, or by their families and environment.

Problems stemming from (1) are more acute in places where there are few Jews, and these are socialized within large Gentile environments.

Proposals have been made in this respect to strengthen cultural and other activities in formal and informal youth groups, and summer and winter vacation groups, by publicizing such activities beyond the limits of local and national communities, and through contacts between institutions to exchange information and ideas for fostering such activities.

With regard to (2), one possibility might be the establishment of Jewish dating systems based on computer information (as suggested by *Dor Hemsbech* of the World Zionist Organization). Relevant problems connected with this method are:

(a) whether information to be computerized concerns only people who ask to be indicated as seeking Jewish mates or is extended also to Jewish single men and women without their authorization;

(b) what type of information is to be given (whether name and address only or also information useful for selecting a date, such as Jewish orientation, occupation, aspirations in life, tastes, etc.);

(c) whether communication will be directly between candidates through personal computers or through an intermediary;

(d) whether the network will include also divorced and widowed Jews desirous of remarrying;

(e) how to avoid the misuse of information by dishonest people.

Presumably, planning in this field should be accompanied by collection of information on the experience gained by a few existing Jewish dating services (including kibbutzim in Israel).

Another very important problem to be clarified is whether a separate computer service for fostering Jewish marriages should be established

in Israel. In this country, too, decreasing nuptiality constitutes a worrying problem. Lack of opportunity for directly finding a suitable candidate for marriage or remarriage is clearly expressed in the mushrooming of newspaper advertising and of commercial matchmakers; these methods are far from being ideal and fear of abuse seems to deter people unable to find a proper mate from using those channels.

Obviously, strengthening the motivation to remain Jewish and creating awareness of the important issue of Jewish continuity from generation to generation are crucial in the struggle against the spread of mixed marriages. Those topics are discussed in following sections.

An important and controversial question on which factual information is needed is that of the role of policy concerning conversion and mixed marriages. The traditional practice of discouraging conversion as a way of testing personal conviction may either (1) serve as an impediment to prospective mixed marriage, if the Jewish partner is strong in the desire that the other mate should become Jewish, or (2) will not impede the marriage and will render the non-Jewish partner less likely to support Jewish life in the home in the long run, influencing negatively the chances that the children are Jewishly raised.

In view of the current crisis in the family, some communities may find interest in having services to help prevent divorces whenever they can and to help solve some of the problems of single-parent homes.

3. Increase in the Number of Children

Proposed policies in this field run along various channels:

a) Education and persuasion in many fields are suggested in order to strengthen the desire of families to have more children. Some educational activities may be coordinated between different local or national institutions and also with Israel. Such educational activities may be directed not only at increasing Jewish awareness but also at general human aspects of the consequences of childlessness or low fertility, such as loneliness in old age.

b) Encouraging adoption as an alternative to abortion. To this type of policy would be added those proposed in Israel in order to help women affected by sub-fecundity problems who want to have more children but cannot afford medical treatment.

c) Creating or enlarging Jewish-sponsored children's day care,

particularly for working parents, but also as a means of providing some Jewish learning and environment in the early formative years. .

d) Ensuring a system of fees for Jewish services graduated according to the number of children, in order to create a pro- natalistic Jewish climate.

e) Financial help to women with children. These are in line with some of the many proposals prepared for Israel in this field.

4. Helping Families to Transmit Jewish Identity to Young Generations

Families strongly committed to Judaism fulfill this basic task in a natural way: Jewish education of children and Jewish family life are here often well harmonized; this is even more so if strong ties exist between the nuclear family and an extended family with a strong Jewish background.

Policy suggestions are designed mainly for Jewish families which live under other conditions. Among policies suggested, some are quoted below:

a) Increasing educational activities involving parents, in order to explain the dangers involved in withholding from children Jewish heritage.

b) Helping parents willing to fulfill this duty by providing educational materials (magazines for Jewish children, books, video films, guidance, contacts with parents in similar conditions, etc.). Parents and children are encouraged to sit together for common study and discussion. Special opportunities for doing so may be during preparation of children for bar mitzva and bat mitzva.

c) Supporting havurot and similar intentionally created surrogate extended families which can be helpful to family units without access to their own extended families.

d) Designing policies aimed at helping single parents to keep their children in a Jewish environment.

e) Interesting young people in the search for Jewish roots and Jewish family heritage.

5. Aspects of Formal Jewish Education, Youth Programs, Campus Activities

Jewish formal and informal education and Jewish youth movements are the subject of considerable research and debate. In the specific context dealt with here, it is suggested that attention be mainly

concentrated on ways for utilizing those channels for purposes such as:

a) Educating and providing basic information on facts and problems regarding the continuity of the Jewish people and risks facing it, and encouraging discussion of these problems.

b) Strengthening the sense of personal commitment to remaining Jewish and Jewish continuity.

c) Education and advice on Jewish attitudes on family life.

d) Strengthening ties between the Diaspora and Israel.

Presently, there is ample room in these fields for cooperation between different Jewish institutions and movements to prepare educational materials (adapted to different settings, age groups, etc.).

6. Policies on Population Distribution in the Diaspora

In some countries, particularly in the USA, Jews have a very high degree of internal mobility, closely related to their educational and occupational patterns. Such migration may weaken family and community ties and lead to continuous redistribution of the Jewish population over the national territory. This poses difficult challenges to Jewish institutions. Other problems are caused by the tendency of young people to choose to study in campuses far from family residence, by the tendency of elderly to change place of residence, and by the increasing proportions of people with two residences.²

Among the consequences of such high internal mobility are: the exhaustion of some longstanding communities, which are greatly diminished in size; the formation of a local Jewish population group in places where there are no Jewish organizations. Similar developments are also found outside the USA. In other countries, the decay of formerly large communities and the splintering into small groups is due not only to emigration but also to aftermaths of the Holocaust, to aging and demographic decline.

Difficult problems are created too by mobility within metropolitan areas. Organizational and other problems arise from population redistribution and require new ways to ensure fruitful cooperation between different communities having similar problems. More specifically, problems arise (a) from distribution within countries, (b) from distribution within metropolitan areas, and (c) from the need to strengthen small Jewish communities.

2. See, among others, S. Goldstein: *Demography of American Jewry: Implications for a National Community* op. cit.

With regard to (a) and (c) considerable experience exists in countries in which Jews possess strong national organizations, responsible toward all local communities. Policies have been suggested regarding intercommunal cooperation, following up on families which move and providing Jewish contacts for newcomers, furnishing religious and cultural services also to isolated groups not having local Jewish institutions, and using modern communication methods in order to reduce the sense of isolation of small groups.

With regard to metropolitan areas, it has been suggested that policies should address problems such as:

a) How to encourage the formation and stability of Jewish neighborhoods. This policy should be based on the one hand on a clear understanding of forces acting on the local housing market, on changing housing needs in the course of the family cycle, etc., and on the other hand on evaluating the strength of the tendency still existing among Jews in many places to prefer locations near to Jewish services (synagogues, schools, cultural centers) or to live in areas with a comparatively high proportion of Jews.

b) Better utilization of community surveys for grasping trends in redistribution of Jewish population and avoiding costly errors in the location of Jewish services (synagogues, schools, cultural centers, etc.).

c) Adapting to isolated Jewish groups within a metropolitan territory some of the policies suggested for isolated groups within a national territory.

7. Increasing Public Awareness of Demographic Trends and their Implications

The need to increase public awareness of demographic trends involves mainly problems such as:

a) The degree to which the Jewish public in various Diaspora settings is aware of current Jewish demographic trends and their underlying causes (decreased nuptiality, mixed marriages, low fertility, assimilation).

b) How this awareness can be increased.

c) How through the message of concern – implicitly included in the increased awareness – it is possible to add the important message of hope that the trends are not to be seen as absolutely determined and that action can be undertaken to change them.

d) How theoretical or ideological attitudes with regard to current trends and possible policies can be transformed into an active feeling

of participation of families and individuals in the efforts to improve the chances of survival of the Jewish people.

It is hoped that discussion of these problems may contribute 1) to some immediate action, and 2) to well-planned, long-term and continuous systematic work for spreading awareness. Obviously, synagogues, Jewish schools, and communal and cultural Jewish institutions are expected to contribute to such action. It is hoped that also "unofficial" Jewish groups and individuals will join. Awareness will, one expects, penetrate both through large-scale activities (publications, mass media, etc.) and through grass-roots efforts.

Skepticism is sometimes voiced concerning the possibility that theoretical or ideological concerns can influence private behavior. However, two points are emphasized in the literature dealing with this problem: Diaspora Jewry today consists largely of highly educated people, who are mainly sensitive and receptive to general problems, and still largely Jewish-oriented (despite their different interpretations of Judaism). An indirect proof of such sensitivity is found in the influence on the demographic behavior of some Jewish families of the broad humanistic message of the Zero Population Growth - ZPG movement: obviously, in that case impact has been negative, being based on a misinterpretation of the demographic situation.

e) Specific proposals on channels and methods for increasing awareness may perhaps be discussed. One hopes that such discussion may define questions which should be asked in any future Jewish community survey, to be used as a factual basis for better planning of educational work.

f) Possibly, methods for intercommunal and even worldwide cooperation in this field may be clarified.

g) One important method for increasing awareness is including information on Jewish population issues at various levels in Jewish studies curricula. Approaches to this problem should obviously vary according to the type of educational institution and level. In some setups, objective factual information may be accompanied by discussion of policy problems which may arouse the interest of the pupils and have some impact on future attitudes.