

# **Jewish Family and Community in Historical Perspective**

## **Perpetuation of the Jewish Family in Pre-Emancipation Times**

**Yaakov Katz**

It is a fallacy to view the ultra-Orthodox communities today as models of how Jewish family life was conducted in pre-Emancipation times. The continuity of Jewish life was much more precarious in the past, as very few children would survive to maturity. Deaths were so common, in fact, that it was not even considered necessary to say *kaddish* for deceased children.

General remarks on the traditional Jewish way of life may not apply to Jewish life as a whole. This paper discusses the Ashkenazi family in pre-Emancipatory times, but Oriental and Sephardic communities may have differed, since they were surrounded by a different environment. The high point when these communities were flourishing, in all senses, lay further in the past than for Ashkenazi Jewry: the twelfth and thirteenth centuries for Sephardim in general, and Talmudic times for Iraqi Jewry. The following points thus apply mainly to Ashkenazi communities just prior to the Emancipation.

The first point is that Ashkenazi Jews, in most communities at least, were fortunate enough to receive a general Jewish education, thus making them prepared for adaptation to the conditions of the modern world.

Secondly, in a traditional community, career and economic success were largely determined by the status of the nuclear family. Young couples would get their start in economic life from the parents of one or the other spouse, and so the status of the family was important, indeed a decisive aspect of a young man's career.

Thirdly, marriages were always arranged by the mediation of a third party, and decided upon by the parents, who saw themselves as making

a rationally-based decision in the best interests of the families concerned. Love, as it is thought of today, was by no means a factor which entered into the choice of a mate. However, when it came to the question of divorce, family interests no longer prevailed to such an extent. Divorce could be requested by either the husband or the wife, on the grounds of sexual incompatibility, childlessness, or mistreatment of any sort. Thus, outside influences could bring a couple together but, in the face of severe incompatibility, could not prevail on them to stay together.

However, since the married state was the norm for adults, there was social pressure for remarriage very quickly after a divorce or the death of a spouse. On this point there was little sentimentality. In fact, the halakhic rules governing the various waiting periods for former husbands and wives were very flexible and often waived by the rabbis, on the basis of such reasoning as, in the case of a widower, "He can't manage without a woman in the house." The real reasons for the pressure to marry were the following:

- a) There was no sexual outlet except in marriage. Prostitution was never approved of in any Ashkenazi community.
- b) An institutionalized way of life for single people, especially for women, was totally lacking.

Due to this overwhelming social pressure, then, each individual would seek or be available for marriage at his or her particular level in the marriage market. The rich or scholarly families would prefer to marry outside their local communities rather than demean themselves by choosing mates of lesser status within their own communities.

Procreation was considered a *mitzvah*, of course. In practice, however, it did not govern the behaviour of people. They would marry and remarry independently of whether they had already fulfilled the *mitzvah*, i.e. they had procreated the prescribed minimal number of children. As mentioned above, there was at any rate great social pressure to marry, and birth control was forbidden. Infant mortality, as we have seen, was very high, but due to the fact that women were constantly bearing more children, an adequate number was usually reaching maturity to ensure the continuity of the community. Social conditions ensured not only quantity but also quality in perpetuating the Jewish people. The individuals who had the best chances in the marriage market, running little risk of being passed over and wasting their prime reproductive years in celibacy, were the most gifted – the offspring of rich and scholarly families. Though this statement may

appear somewhat harsh and Darwinistic, it was a simple fact of life in a stratified society. It did not necessarily impede social mobility either, as gifted children, even if from less wealthy families, would be given particular encouragement by their community, and thus had better chances of finding a mate and building a family.

One should qualify the above observations by mentioning that in the Hassidic communities, the family unit was actually less important than the community of males, as shown by the fact that on religious holidays, the men would leave their families behind in order to spend their time with their rebbe. However, the central role which the family played in Jewish life in pre-Emancipation times is in profound contrast with the role of the family in present-day Jewish life.

## **Three Models of Jewish Historical Demography**

**Robert Cohen**

This paper examines the communities at the end of the seventeenth century and during the eighteenth century. They are all Sephardic communities, and were at the time to some extent marginal and distanced from the mainstream of Judaism.

The communities are those of London, the Caribbean, and Surinam, formerly known as Dutch Guiana.

According to censuses taken in London in 1684 and 1695, the average size of the Sephardic family declined from 3.7 people per family to 3.3 persons. This appears to have occurred, according to the data, in just over a decade. The trend was for the Jewish population to conform more in its characteristics to the general population. The distribution in 1684 differs in almost all respects from the general population. For example, the majority of Jewish families did not have servants. Neither were they servants, a category which in the general population accounted for a large number of young single women. In general, by 1695, Jewish demographic behavior conforms more closely to the local demographic pattern. The main exception is the category of widows and widowers.

There is a theory that once a Jewish population becomes settled, an excess of females usually occurs, and obviously holds true in the Sephardic population of London. In 1684 the Jewish community had only been in existence for a little over a quarter of a century, and still bore all the marks of an immigrant society. Eleven years later, when the

community was almost forty years old, it was on its way to normal demographic behavior, conforming to its surroundings. Thus the above case study is one of progressive conformity to the non-Jewish environment.

The second case study, of the Caribbean around 1700, shows a very similar pattern. There were five different censuses, taken between 1680 and 1715, and covering three islands – Barbados, Jamaica and Martinique. Information exists on two hundred households and shows a consistent pattern of size, ranging from 3.4 persons to 4.8 persons. Sephardic Jews in Bridgetown, Barbados and Port Royal, Jamaica, had a similar household size. These, again, are similar to that of non-Jewish households in these urban centers. Jewish and Christian households are essentially different from their rural counterparts, and this holds true for family size as well as household size. The Sephardic age structure is also very similar to that of the general white population, except for life expectancy, which seems to be slightly higher for the Jews than for the general white population.

## **Truths and Counter-Truths About the Contemporary Jewish Condition**

**David Sidorsky**

Demographers have to deal with three levels of truth: historical truths, statistical truths, and the maddeningly paradoxical “deep truths,” of which Oscar Wilde has said, “A deep truth is anything the opposite of which is also a deep truth.” When one succeeds in identifying contradictory deep truths, at least one can arrive perhaps at a new perspective not so much on truth as on what is the challenge, the framework, within which the debate on population issues will continue. In this way, we may perhaps succeed in not merely adjusting to the condition, but in identifying the problems for which we want to seek solutions.

There are five deep truths the opposite of which can also be convincingly formulated for the contemporary Jewish condition. The first truth, concerns the correct approach to Jewish history, and it asserts that there is in common currency a negative metaphor referring to Jewish erosion, and a positive one referring to Jewish revival. The second is the question of whether, from a historical point of view, we are still living in the period of Jewish Emancipation, or whether we are

already in a period of post-Emancipation. The third issue is whether or not the centrality of Israel is, demographically or otherwise, a fact for the Jewish world. The fourth question is whether the Jewish community is still in the era of mass migrations, or whether they are already over. And the fifth is whether the Jewish people views itself as a people in search of normalcy, or as one reluctantly or willingly reconciled to transcendence.

The first truth of the five, the metaphor, is expressed tellingly by the historian Louis Bernstein Amir when he describes the Jewish people as an iceberg, compressed by the ages of experience and covenantal thought, and which on reaching the sunshine of freedom would gradually melt and shed its outer layers into the surrounding current. The sense that Jewish identity has been eroding is shared by most Jews when they consider their own Jewishness in comparison to that of their great-grandfathers. This feeling exists not only in the Diaspora but also in Israel, and is reinforced, perhaps, by a Jewish attitude of piety and reverence toward one's ancestors.

Strong as this attitude is, one can also argue that the exact opposite is true: in other words, that the mysterious power of Jewish history has resurfaced, in volcanic fashion, in the energy of Zionism, in this explosion of Jewish self-realization. Moreover, when one looks at some of the Diaspora communities, in America and elsewhere, one sees a stronger sense of Jewish identity among some of the younger generation of today than among their parents. This phenomenon emerges particularly clearly in the resurfacing of Jewish commitment among Russian Jews after seventy years of Bolshevism.

The co-existence of these two competing metaphors suggests that we can no longer rely on just one metaphor, and that besides conflicting realities there may also be other less dramatic processes at work. However, it is not necessarily true that a metaphor of desperate pessimism is incapable of generating positive action. The ideas both of erosion and of rebirth are capable of stimulating action. However that may be, in the case of the demographic problem, neither metaphor is very useful.

The second truth is a historical question: are we still in the age of Emancipation or in one of post-Emancipation? Emancipation itself includes three models. The first is that of identification with a national community (America, France, Britain, etc.) and in the exercise of one's religious freedom, with a religious one (orthodox, conservative, or reform movement) as well. This model, which one might argue was totally destroyed in the heart of Europe in the Holocaust, still retains tremendous hold in the countries mentioned above, as well as in

others. The second model of Emancipation was ethnic emancipation, of the sort advocated by the Soviet Union in the past and presently in its effort to make Soviet Jewry into an ethnic minority with language rights. The third model of Emancipation, auto-Emancipation, still has its impact in everyday life in Israel.

Having documented that we are living in an age of Emancipation, whether in America, the Soviet Union, or in Israel, one can also argue that the exact contrary is true: that the Holocaust signified the end of the dream of Enlightenment and Emancipation, by showing the possibility of totally destroying the model of civil liberty and religious freedom for Jews. The rise of the State of Israel changed the Emancipation picture from one of belief in individual rights and diaspora nationalism to the possibility of Jewish self-fulfillment in a sovereign state. One might argue that the Holocaust and the rise of Israel spelled the end of the Emancipation agenda, if it were not that the issues of Emancipation and the desire to make it work still remain. American Jews still accept as their leaders and spokesmen Jews who are quite universalistic and secular in their personal culture, and Israelis are torn over the issue of whether the Zionist revolution is over, or has yet to be completed.

The third truth about which there is disagreement concerns the question of the centrality of Israel to Jewish identity. A form of this centrality – not exactly the way *Ahad Ha'am* envisaged it, but close – is seen in the fact of Israeli art, theater, literature, being acclaimed abroad. It is also seen in the sense among Diaspora Jews that they must defend Israel's interests and not let Israel down. Israel is central to all segments of Judaism, from Orthodox to Reform Jewry. Nevertheless, one might argue that it is more precisely the polar relationship between American Jewry and Israel, not just the role of Israel alone, which has formed the world Jewish agenda from the founding of the state. A bipolar Jewish world has been the reality for the last forty years. Now, one might argue, a multipolar Jewish world is emerging with the resurgence of many formerly weak communities in, for example, Eastern Europe and Australasia.

This brings us to the fourth of the five points, which like the others, emerges out of the last: the question of whether there is a restoration of multipolarity raises the question of whether we have seen the end of the great waves of Jewish emigration. Thus the history of the State of Israel, and of Jewish life in America, is taught by tracing the succeeding waves of migration. These waves, except for the minor ripples of, for example, Soviet Jewish immigration to the States, are now over, for both American Jewry and for Israel. Thus our resources depend on

building on the base which already exists. This is a realistic framework on which to plan, even though our aspirations may be to the contrary, i.e. we may base our hopes on hypothetical waves of immigration to Israel. In the case of Israel, one must take into account both possibilities, hoping that the 250,000 Soviet Jews who did arrive in the 1960s and 1970s are the harbingers of mass immigration in the Gorbachov era, while recognizing that one must keep in mind the alternative context, that mass emigration belongs to history.

The fifth point is a symbolic one, that all the above issues indicate a recognition of the consolidation of the Jewish population around the world. The contrary to this is the perception of impending assimilation and fragmentation.

All the points represent in part an adjustment to modernity on the part of the Jewish community. In the post-Enlightenment world, the Jews strive not to distinguish themselves as the Chosen People but for normalcy, through a new kind of Jewish religious consciousness. One aspect of this search has been the Zionist striving for normalcy through the creation of a small, secular, socialist state in the Middle East. However, "it's never normal to wish to be normal." Despite the fact that demography deals with the stuff of normalcy – families and children – and all of the Jewish ideological struggles have been over which is the better path to normalcy, Jewish history in the modern period has refused to allow the Jews to chose normalcy. Jews are still singled out as the Chosen People, by the Nazis, in Roman Catholic dogma which now recognizes the special suffering of the Jewish people in the Holocaust, or by the resurgence of anti-Semitism in the United Nations, which seeks to delegitimize the Jewish state. The challenge which faces now Israel – to stand before the world as a witness to the Holocaust, and to represent the right to individual freedom, particularly the right to emigrate – is one of the most exciting tasks which the Jewish people has ever faced. And yet part of the problem of Jewish demography is that Jewish institutional life is not exciting enough to attract the loyalty of the next generation.

## **Reflections on Prospects for the Continuity of the Jewish People**

**Rabbi Rene Shmuel Sirat**

I shall first discuss contemporary events, then try to reflect on the future of the Jewish people, in particular the demographic problem

facing us as we approach the twenty-first century.

Despite the strong natural desire among women to transmit life, evidenced by the eagerness of infertile women to try any method discovered by science to conceive and bear children, statistics show that in developed countries the birthrate is disturbingly low.

There are several converging reasons for this dangerous decline. First, over the last thirty years, women have through the availability of contraceptives gained control over their reproductive function, and have the right to decide whether and when they will bear children. They are making important contributions in many fields, and the scourge of abortion has been practically eliminated.

However, mastery over one's freedom in regard to ethical principles is definitely more difficult than mastery over technology. Postponing childbearing until the mid or late thirties leads to many women's frustration at no longer being able to bear children. Civilization has lost its values and sense of hope. Having a child means that one is investing in the future. After experiencing the tragedy of the Holocaust, the Jewish people has not yet found again the strength to encourage a new generation to face the future. Only in Israel has the desire to build a new land given the people an ideal which has expressed itself in a high birthrate. In Europe and the United States, the Jewish community has been satisfied with merely surviving. Another reason for a reluctance to have children in the generation after the Holocaust has been the absence of grandparents to offer to their children as a symbol of the continuity of families.

These are the factors which worry the demographers, who predict a serious trend toward a population decline and are concerned about the future of the Jewish people.

However, the Jewish tradition teaches us that man is always free to change, and can reverse the most pessimistic predictions by becoming aware of the problem and acting on his awareness.

We can understand the situation better, and thus know better how to act, if we consider two contrasting scenarios.

In the more pessimistic vision, due to a declining birthrate and intermarriage, the Jewish people would amount, by the year 2010, to no more than twelve million, as opposed to thirteen million today, of whom seven and three quarter million will live in the diaspora, and four and a quarter million in Israel. In other words, more than a third of the Jewish communities of the U.S.A., the U.S.S.R., and of France would have disappeared.

The Bible itself, resolutely turned towards the future, shows us how the survival of the Jewish people was ensured by the Matriarchs Sarah,

Rebecca, Rachel, and Hannah, all of whom were initially infertile and succeeded in bearing children due to the power of prayer.

Our use of modern scientific breakthroughs in overcoming childlessness must always be tempered by respect for ethical considerations. We learn from the Bible that man's first duty is procreation, and we should remind young couples of that before they reach an age where infertility is likely to occur. Rabbis should do everything they can to prevent divorce, to encourage *Tabarat Hamishpachah* (family purity), and to explain the holiness of marriage. They should encourage education, especially the education of girls for their role in the family as transmitters not only of life but also of spiritual values. It is the families with ideals which are having the most children today.

Before the Messiah can come, say the Rabbis, Israel must achieve a population figure of twenty million, as shown in the phrase *Revevot Alfei Israel*.

## Continuity of the Jewish People

**Haim Avni**

Prof. Katz led us through the paths of the traditional Jewish society of pre-Emancipation Eastern Europe. We learned what the function of the local and regional *shadchan*, the matchmaker, was, and we learned in particular about the function of the concepts and customs in the society and its power to impose these customs on its members. We also followed very small groups of Sephardim, living in the West, and we saw to what extent the environment rather than traditional factors exerted its influence on them in this period.

Later, we were guided by the modern studies of Professor Sidorsky and Rabbi Sirat, studies that constituted a basis for the deliberations in the conference. The conclusions drawn from the past are those which create the framework for the actual deliberations in this convention and perhaps the framework for the resolutions that will be formulated in the days to come.

Among the factors, some known and some not, which affect Jewish demography, the best known to all is modernization. We have heard from Professor Katz that even those who flock together in small islands of Jewish life in order to escape modernization, even those, are now affected by modernization processes. It is a basic fact that the majority of the Jewish people wandered from the backward regions of Europe to

more developed regions and to the new and developed world. Even when they emigrated to Latin America, they did not settle in Bolivia, for instance, but in Argentina. The process is thus characterized less by the infiltration of modernization to the regions where Jews lived in the past than by their migration to the cradles of modernization. This is the process we went through in the last two hundred years.

The Holocaust, which destroyed one-third of our nation, also destroyed those social layers that were in the early stages of modernization. From tradition we were evolving towards a modern world which stresses the freedom and centrality of the individual, both in technology and in its concepts. All this sharply contradicted the sense of "community", the sense of "we ourselves" of the traditional Jewish society. The world to which we came stresses the status of women and in the matter we are dealing with, demography, she has a primary role. Men can be a supporting factor, a factor having equal rights and obligations, everyone according to his views, but one cannot question the fact that women, even if their voices are not heard, are at the center of the act. Their freedom and development is a central question. Groups trying to stop this process will not succeed in doing so, since the great majority of the Jewish people will not be prepared to pay the price.

The second factor is that, while we may be one of the oldest nations in the world, as concerns the constancy of our abode we are one of the youngest. This is evident if each person performs the small mental exercise of reminding him or herself of where he was born, where his father was born, where his grandfather was born, and how far he would have to travel to pray beside the graves of his forebears. Jews in Israel and the world are displaced people: some are displaced from the first generation, some from the second. This fact has great influence on the demography of the Jewish people since the process is continuing. When one goes to Miami and meets his fellow Jews who originate from Colombia, Argentina, Uruguay and Nicaragua, he knows that the process has not stopped; and those who went with the immigration wave of the sixties to France have not settled down yet, and have already started to disperse. The proof that this process is continuing is the case of the Iranian Jews, who leave Iran but do not go to Israel. They fly on their carpets to other lands. This illustrates the Jewish situation better than any other example, and affects, psychologically and demographically, our existence in Israel.

The third factor is the fact that because of modernization and emigration the majority of our people live in the Diaspora, in a world of values and concepts that are not Jewish. Environment deeply

affected even small communities in the pre-modern period. We have evolved from a Jewish-majority society to a Jewish-minority society, insofar as a Jewish individual no longer regards a fellow Jew as a point of departure for moral and social considerations. This is implied in the fact that one has to read the New York Times to learn what Jews think. In Argentina Jews had to read *Yiddishe Zeitung* for all their information; while today this paper no longer exists.

And now to the fourth component: Diaspora Jews in modern times live as a minority by choice – a society that does not have the authority to impose its will on the individual. The Jewish community lost its power over its individual members when it joined the process of emancipation. History teaches us that this is the first thing Jews gave up – voluntarily or for lack of choice. This power was once called autonomy in the Diaspora, but in our days it no longer exists. For two hundred years now, it has been possible to only give counsel to a Jewish community or to try to convince it; one cannot mobilize or influence it.

This enormous gap between the realities of Diaspora Jewry and the realities of Israel is duly illustrated in our convention. For a week we have tried to find all kinds of devices to reach the Jewish individual, to serve him and to convince him. In this House, the Knesset of Israel, decisions are taken and policies designed which have the power to change the existing situation. This is characteristic of a democracy, but this is also the meaning of the huge gap separating the people in Israel and the Jews of the Diaspora, from which we can deduce the definition of Zionism: the transition from a voluntary society to a sovereign-Jewish society. But even in Israel it is only a possibility: the theory that Israel is the only place where a Jew is immune to assimilation is not accurate. It is more accurate to say that Israel is the only place where efficient steps can be taken to prevent assimilation and change demographic trends – if we want to. If we do not, then the fact that Israel is a sovereign state has no significance whatsoever.