

How Strong is Orthodox Judaism -- Really? The Demographics of Jewish Religious Identification

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This is a time of great controversy over the imposition of Jewish religious norms on the population of Israel, ignited by sensitive issues such as the definition of "Who is a Jew?" and the debate over the allocation of public funds to Jewish religious institutions. When evaluating these issues, comparing the relative demographic strengths of religious and non-religious Jews and that of Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews becomes a matter of great importance. Indeed, for Israel and the Jewish people, as for other states and communities in a democratic age, demographic issues have gained supreme political importance. In an egalitarian age, political power and the distribution of public benefits have come to depend heavily upon relative demographic strength.

Both the Jewish people at large and the state of Israel are slowly coming to understand that we are no less affected by demographics than any other people or polity. Claims for Jewish Agency, World Zionist Organization and Israeli government funding preferment are increasingly based on decimal percentages of either the world or the Israeli Jewish population. This method is most likely used when determining the amount of support granted to Jewish religious institutions and concerns.

Religious and Non-Religious

How many of today's Jews consider themselves religious? By "religious." I accept a subjective definition of Jews who see themselves as being religious - Orthodox or non-Orthodox - and who actualize their self-perception in some positive way: usually through membership or participation in a synagogue, minyan or other religious institution and through some kind of personal religious observance. Since we have no exact figures, the best possible estimates and projections based upon the data available will follow.

It is not unfair to estimate that between 60 and 75 percent of the estimated 13.5 to 14.5 million Jews in the world consider themselves religious in this sense.* Let us examine this estimate in detail. Israel has somewhat over 3.5 million Jews. According to the best available studies, up to 25 percent, or 850,000, consider themselves Orthodox while an equal number consider themselves secular. That leaves 50 percent who consider themselves traditional. The latter is a declining number, consisting principally of people

from the immigrant generation who came from traditional religious environments, retaining religious beliefs and varying degrees of religious observance while not being ideologically Orthodox. Therefore, let us assume that only 40 percent of this group, or approximately 1,360,000 Jews, are today traditional in any meaningful way. Thus, at a minimum, some two-thirds of the Jews of Israel or over 2.3 million, fit our definition of religious, while approximately one-third or 1.2 million do not.

The largest concentration of Jews in the world is in the United States. Current Jewish population estimates suggest a Jewish population of 5.82 million. Recent Jewish population studies have tended to revise Jewish population figures upward and this writer believes that there are approximately six million Jews in the United States. Still, let us use the official figure.

The National Jewish Population Study of 1970 revealed 47 percent of American Jews claimed synagogue membership. More recent localized demographic studies showed figures ranging from 26 percent in Los Angeles to 84 percent in St. Paul. Taking an average by population size, it gives us approximately the same figure as the NJPS.

Other studies have shown that another 25 percent consider themselves religious although they are not members of a synagogue. They may indeed be young people whose parents may be synagogue members but who have not yet joined themselves, or senior citizens, who are known for dropping synagogue memberships because of the cost. This squares well with the percentage of people claiming to maintain at least three Jewish observances: Passover Seder, Hanuka candle lighting and High Holy Day synagogue attendance. This means 4.35 million American Jews can be considered religious as against 1.45 million who are not.

Eleven percent of American Jews defined themselves as Orthodox in the 1970 study, or approximately 600,000 people. That figure has remained relatively consistent. The Conservative movement claims 1,250,000 and the Reform slightly more. Taking those figures together would give us approximately 3.1 million religiously affiliated Jews, which comes closer to the estimates of synagogue membership. The other 1.25 million may include approximately 250,000 who are members of Reconstructionist, traditional and other small movement or nonmovement affiliated congregations and many who consider themselves religious without really identifying with any one of the Jewish religious streams.

The last Soviet census claimed that there were 1,630,000 Jews in the U.S.S.R. Again, this is probably a low figure since it only includes those who directly claim Jewish identity. Undoubtedly there are many others who have chosen to officially claim other identities, particularly Russian, but who identify themselves as Jews, leading to the general assumption that there are still over two million or more Jews in the Soviet Union. Since religious observance is very difficult and fraught with dangers in the Soviet Union, and there is no tradition of non-Orthodox religion among Soviet Jews, let us assume that between 5 and 10 percent of Soviet Jewry is religious. This squares with insiders' estimates and the 7 percent of respondents who identified themselves as religious in the

internal survey of Soviet Jewry undertaken by Benjamin Fain and his associates in 1976 (Fain and Verbit, 1984). Thus an estimate of 100,000 is appropriate.

The recent major study of the Jewish population in France (Bensimon and Della Pergola, 1984) indicates that there are 535,000 Jews in that country, approximately half residing in the Paris region and half in the provinces. Separate studies have been done of Jewish attitudes in the Paris region and beyond. In the studies of Jewish self-definition and observance in Paris and the major provincial cities, it turns out that just over half of French Jews define themselves as Jewish by religion, with nearly 58 percent declaring themselves religious in the provincial cities and only 34 percent in Paris. This difference is reflected in religious observances. While some 70 percent of Parisian Jews claim to go to synagogue at least on Yom Kippur, the figure rises to over 80 percent in the provincial cities. Again, the pattern seems to be similar to that of the United States: some 50 percent claim some Shabbat observance - 37 percent in Paris and 57.5 percent in the provincial cities - some 65 percent claim to eat only matzot on Pesach and some 75 percent claim to fast on Yom Kippur. In short, as in the United States, some 75 percent of the Jewish population of France, or 401,000, are religious in some significant way, and some 50 percent are religiously affiliated.

Religious commitment and observance is much weaker in Latin America; it is reasonable to estimate that only 20 percent consider themselves religious in any form. On the other hand, in English-speaking countries other than the United States, the figures break down similarly to those in the U.S. and France, except that the percentage of at least nominally Orthodox is probably much higher. It is possible to estimate that 50 percent of the remainder of European Jews consider themselves religious and about 80 percent of the Jews in both the older and younger communities of Africa, Asia and Oceania.

All told, this gives us at least eight million Jews in the world who would define themselves as religious in some way, or approximately 60 percent. Since the communities in which 75 percent or more of the Jews identify themselves with Jewish religious beliefs or observances in some way constitute an estimated 11 million Jews, the total number of religiously identified Jews may be as high as 9.5 out of 13.5 million, or approximately 70 percent of the total.

Orthodox and Non-Orthodox

What percentage of that 8 to 9.5 million are Orthodox? Here we will use three divisions: (1) fully Orthodox in belief and practice; (2) Jews who identify with Orthodoxy but do not live up to Orthodox standards in their practice; and (3) Jews committed to non-Orthodox religion.

Since most of the last group are in the United States, a generous estimate would be 4 million committed to non-Orthodox Judaism worldwide, divided as follows:

2.5 million synagogue members in the United States.
1.25 million sympathizers in the United States.
250,000 in the rest of the world.

This is a generous and probably a maximum estimate. It means that if there are only eight million Jews who identify themselves as religious, there is an approximately equal division between self-defined non-Orthodox and self-defined Orthodox. However, if there are as many as 9.5 million religiously identifiable Jews, 5.5 million of these identify with Orthodoxy whatever their level of personal observance, giving the latter a 40 percent margin. Many in both groups are nominal in their commitment. Indeed, when nominal observance is factored out, the strength of Orthodoxy is even greater.

The Contrast between the Conservative and Reform Movements

Take the Conservative movement, until recently recognized as the largest of the non-Orthodox movements in the United States, and, as a result, probably in the world. Charles Liebman and I have calculated that there are no more than forty to fifty thousand Conservative Jews in the world who live up to the standards of observance set by the Conservative movement. This means that when the Conservative mass is left out, the movement is only the equivalent of a fair sized Hassidic sect. It may be hard to believe, but it is important to note that at the late 1984 wedding of two scions of the Satmar dynasty, the number of Jews packed into a single Long Island stadium for the nuptials equalled the whole body of authentic Conservative Jews. There are seriously committed Conservative Jews who do not live up to those standards, but who are seriously religious in some way. It is hard to estimate how many, but a generous figure would be 36 percent of the movement's membership. Thus, at most there are 400,000 Conservative Jews in the world.

The situation is even harder to estimate with regard to Reform Jews, where standards of observance are low and less binding, but figures similar to those of the Conservative movement are probably in order. Moreover, recent studies of American Jewry show that both movements are in trouble, as increasing numbers of American Jews tend to identify with neither. According to the studies, first generation American Jews tend to identify with Orthodoxy; second and third generation Jews with Conservatism, and, beginning with the fourth generation, with Reform or nothing. This accounts for the decline in Conservative movement membership noted in the recent population studies and the increase in the Reform membership, but the non-identified category in the fourth generation and beyond is around 40 percent.

Orthodox identification, on the other hand, which had been declining precipitously since the late nineteenth century (before that, high Orthodox birthrates offset defections), has probably bottomed out.

Overall, the percentage of Jews who define themselves as Orthodox has grown only marginally, but there has been a transformation in the nature of this group. Many of the nominally Orthodox have fallen by the wayside, and more of those who define themselves as Orthodox really are committed or want to be. Moreover, the increase in the number of seriously Orthodox is significant, even without taking into consideration the effect of today's high Orthodox birthrate, contrasted with the very low non-Orthodox birthrate.

Today there are approximately 600,000 Orthodox Jews in the United States, plus another 850,000 in Israel, and perhaps another 750,000 committed Orthodox in the rest of the world. This means that there are approximately 2.2 million Orthodox Jews who are indeed Orthodox - that is to say, wholly committed to Orthodoxy. That does not include several million semi-observant Jews who identify with Orthodoxy and will not choose to identify with a non-Orthodox movement, even if they do not intend to become more Orthodox in observance in their own lives.

Moreover, demographics are working for the Orthodox, since their birthrate is almost uniformly high. It has been estimated that in Israel ultra-Orthodox families are producing 5 to 10 children each, while modern Orthodox families are producing 3 to 5 each. It is likely that the same situation prevails in the Diaspora - at a time when non-Orthodox families are producing children at less than replacement level. It is said that the order of the day among ultra-Orthodox is to gain control of the Jewish community through reproduction, which is given added force by the extent of assimilation among the non-Orthodox.

Who is Affiliated?

Let us be exact as possible. Worldwide, one finds approximately 2.5 million affiliated Conservative and Reform Jews; another 1.5 million who identify with non-Orthodox Judaism but do little or nothing in an active way to express that identity; another million-plus traditional Jews who are actively connected with Orthodox congregations but not with any movement; plus two million or more who are consciously affiliated with Orthodox institutions. Thus, there are as many affiliated Orthodox as there are movement affiliated non-Orthodox, while at least half of the group in between have not really broken with Orthodoxy, but simply do not particularly identify with it as a movement.

The significance of this cannot be overestimated. The primary assumption of most non-Orthodox is that the situation in the United States, where Orthodoxy is at most 11 percent of American Jewry and the vast majority of American Jews are non-Orthodox, is typical. But the American scene cannot be extracted from the world scene today, since most of the crucial decisions about religious life have worldwide impact, especially "Who is a Jew?" legislation in the Israeli Knesset, patrilineal descent decisions in the Reform movement, and other similar constitutional issues. The power of the Orthodox, then, is

not the only power of a determined minority; it is the power that flows from real numerical strength vis-a-vis the other movements.

Even in the United States there has been a radical shift in the situation. In raw demographics, the Orthodox may represent a mere 10 percent, more or less, of the American Jewish community. The fact remains, however, that no more than 50 percent of American Jews are affiliated at any given time with any of the institutions of Jewish life, while the Orthodox are affiliated all the time. Therefore, at the very least they represent 20 percent of the affiliated. If one goes beyond affiliation to activism, it becomes clear that Orthodox Jews represent about a third of the total of Jewish activists within the American Jewish community, a community in which they are demographically the weakest.

Implications

These figures suggest that, as opposed to the popular image of a tiny embattled minority seeking to impose its will on the vast majority of world Jewry (the usual figures given are 15 percent versus 85 percent), Orthodox Judaism commands the allegiance of between 33 to 45 percent of all the Jews in the world and 50 to 70 percent of those who identify as religious in some way. Conversely, the non-Orthodox religious movements account for no more than one third of world Jewry and possibly as little as 25 percent. Hence, if Orthodox claims are strong, it is not only because they control all of the religious establishment outside of the United States by law or weight of tradition, but because they have the numerical strength to retain that control. It is no wonder, then, that Orthodoxy remains the dominant voice on the "Who is a Jew?" and other such issues and claims the lion's share of Jewish public money devoted to religious purposes.

Note

* For an explanation of the discrepancy, see my article, "Self-Destruction - Jewish Style," *The Jerusalem Post*, 24 June 1986, p. 5.