

# **The Negative Numbers are not Surprising**

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**Steven Hoffman**

Mr. President, Mr. Sharansky, Mr. Meridor, Prof. DellaPergola, friends.

I was not really surprised by the negative numbers that we saw on the chart presented by Professor DellaPergola. The numbers that caught my attention were those that related to intermarriage and the impact it is having on the Jewish people. It reminded me that throughout history this issue has been dealt with in different ways.

According to the Ezra tradition, we were instructed to put away our foreign wives – which I think is a rather drastic approach to Jewish identity – in contrast with the tradition of Ruth and Naomi where we took foreign wives, thereby embracing the stranger, which added to the quality of our people.

The issue of intermarriage in terms of numbers is a growing issue for us in the United States. I personally expect that the 2000 National Jewish population poll in the US will show a growing trend in intermarriage.

So it is a growing challenge to understand our communities, and it affects the language that we use in conducting our work with the communities. Historically, it was not uncommon in community meetings to deliberately refer to *goyim* – meaning ‘the others’ and ‘the outsiders’ – because Jewish communities built a very high wall to separate these outsiders from us. If somebody chose to become a Jew, they were still frequently an outsider and if they did not choose to become a Jew, they were definitely an outsider; and

it was very clear that we were not interested in the outsiders.

Today it is offensive to refer to *goyim* in public meetings. It is offensive even to say: ‘You know, the biggest problem we have is intermarriage,’ in a Jewish community federation meeting, because it makes half the audience nervous as they think about their children or their grandchildren and the implication that we are giving up hope for their grandchildren. So instead we now talk in terms of outreach and we talk a language of inclusiveness, and I believe that this is what Rabbi Alex Schindler, in his leadership of the Reform movement, recognized – simply fundamental recognition of the changing nature of North American Jewish life.

This, of course, led to the potential for growing distant from Israel, because even though we have different fundamental organizations in our communities, we actually face the same challenge? The issue of who is a Jew, which became very divisive in relationships between the Jews of the United States and the Jews of Israel as it became a political issue here in Israel.

I believe the issue of halachic conversions here in Israel and the governance of this issue by the traditional rabbinate, continues to be a challenge for this society. You will be addressing what already is a very significant number of olim from the former Soviet Union who are not halachically Jewish and are going to find it impossible to identify Jewishly if the State continues to administer the conversion issue as it has up to now.

So we are committed to outreach. I believe the State should be committed to outreach and it won’t be enough to train people in Russia in conversion classes. We are going to have to follow through here with some different understanding of how people can join the Jewish People.

In the United States we are committed to sharing our traditions,

engaging with the people who come into our meetings, welcoming them to our community, and making those who choose to join us feel very welcome, rather than the cold shoulder pattern of the previous generation. And I believe that we can win.

In 1999, Sallai Meridor told us, there were as few as three to four million Jews by halachic standards and that in general, by normal standards, we were in the five to six million range. However, if an anti-Semite stood on a street corner and railed against us? Ten million would start running. So there is room here for larger identification with the Jewish community.

I also think that what we do with the olim from the former Soviet Union who are not considered Jewish by the State, ultimately helps undermine the Jewish democratic nature of the State. I believe that the State must confront this issue head on. Don't we ultimately want them to identify with the core national Jewish values that we express in the State, as well as feel concern about the fate of the Jewish people and the larger fate of the Jewish world? But how can they if we tell them: 'You are outsiders in the Jewish State.' We don't really give them much alternative, and I believe that just as we worry about what is going to happen in the United States, we ought to worry a little about the fate of olim in Israel.

I am sure that the government has other ways of helping us confront these issues.

I believe that you can help us by welcoming people who are 'searching' to our mission programs, special education efforts and trips for young people — supported by a partnership between the government, the Jewish Agency and private philanthropy in our federation. It is very important that we work together to bring people into the Jewish People as it can make a difference if we

awaken the interest of people who are searching but who are not necessarily halachically Jewish.

The moderator, Dr. Eliav, tonight spoke about the role of Jewish education. We could not agree more and Israel has major assets to train our teachers, help us develop curricula, and, frankly, help us with technology, as the brains and the interest are here. Sallai Meridor spoke about the cost of having Jewish children in the Jewish State and made some suggestions. We have a similar issue — the cost of sending a Jewish child to a Jewish day school, a Jewish camp, belonging to the synagogue, and pursuing other aspects of Jewish life.

Finally, as Professor DellaPergola indicated, we do need to study policy implications, and the Jewish Agency is helping to do this through its new demographic initiative and, we are pleased to say, the development of a policy planning institute which will help us turn theory into action.

So at the end of the day, as I think I indicated at the beginning, I want to choose the path of Ruth. First of all it is my mother's name and second, I always gave David considerable credit for having descended from Ruth. Third, it is simply the right decision.