ARE UNITED STATES JEWS A DIASPORA POPULATION?

ABSTRACT

The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 created major demographic changes in the population of the world Jewry and the notion of what constitutes a diaspora community. A little more than 80 percent of the world's Jewry lives in either Israel or the United States. The high level of acceptance and participation of Jews in American society challenges the idea that a diaspora consciousness exists among the U.S. Jewry. Most Jews feel very much at home in America. Religiously committed Jews however are more likely to perceive themselves as part of a diaspora community.

Marshall McLuhan and Bruce Powers (1989) use the term 'global village' to express the ease with which people all over the world move and communicate with one another. The term globalization likewise expresses the growing interaction of people, markets, economies, and cultures without regard to national borders. At the same time, there is a growing awareness of what are termed 'diaspora communities', persons displaced from their homeland who perceive themselves as living in exile. This latter emphasis on ethnicity and the importance of place contrasts with the spread of a global culture.

According to Safran "…through the ages, *the Diaspora* had a very specific meaning: the exile of Jews from their historic homeland and their dispersion throughout many lands, signifying as well the oppression and moral degradation implied by that dispersion" (Safran 1991:83). To counter the negative effects of this dispersion, Jewish theology promises that Jews will return to their historic homeland of Israel as part of the Redemption process that includes the coming of the Messiah and the ingathering of Jews from all over the world. This ethno-religious framework regarding the Land of Israel led many Jews and others to view the establishment of the State of Israel as the start of the promised Messianic era: Others rejected its religious significance.

In any case, since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 there have been major demographic changes in the population of world Jewry and thus, in what is called the *Diaspora* community. Jews living in Moslem lands were forced to flee their homes immediately following the establishment of the State. During its first three years, until 1951, the population of Israel doubled with approximately 680,000 Jews immigrating from over one hundred countries. Homeless Jews from Europe and concentration camp survivors arrived first followed by Jews from Asia and later from Africa. Entire Jewish communities were uprooted in countries such as Iraq, Yemen, Bulgaria, and Libya so that "By the end of 1951 hardly any Jews were left in the Arabic-speaking countries of Asia" (Rebhun 2004:11).

Various forces led Jews from other parts of the world to leave their countries and immigrate to Israel in the second half of the twentieth century. The dramatic rearrangement of World Jewry that resulted from the establishment of the State of Israel meant that by 2004, 39.8 percent of world Jewry lived in Israel and another 40.7 percent lived in the United States. Of the 60.2 percent of Jews living outside of Israel, percent reside in the Americas with 43.6 per cent in North America. This means that only 14.2 percent of Jews currently live outside the Land of Israel and the Americas. Israel and the United States together account for 80.5 percent of world Jewry. When Jews living in Canada, France, and the United Kingdom are factored in the total comes to 89.5 percent of world Jewry (DellaPergola 2004:489-521). Demographically, the *Diaspora* appears to be shrinking with United States Jewry constituting its primary population. However, this demographic aspect is only one dimension of the Jewish *Diaspora.*

Jews scattered across the world generally live as subcultures in their countries. Their lack of acceptance and integration into a larger culture is thought to result in a sense of alienation that finds comfort in the promised redemption and return to the Land of Israel. Historically, this understanding of Jewish life found support in the constant upheavals experienced by Jews who were forced to leave their homes and travel to unknown lands. Although there is no direct social science evidence of a *Diaspora* consciousness, its presence in Jewish liturgy and folklore suggests that a longing for the

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redemption and the coming of the messiah played a role in the lives of Jews throughout the centuries.[1] Countering this perspective however, is the very human attachment to one's home and desire to stay rooted in the land of one's birth.

The high level of acceptance and participation of Jews in American society challenges the idea that a *Diaspora* consciousness exists among United States Jewry. Acceptance of Jews is perhaps best symbolized by the nomination of Joseph Lieberman, a religiously observant Jew, as the Democratic candidate for the vice-presidency in the 2000 election. His nomination signaled that Jews can participate in and benefit from the American bounty and still retain distinctly Jewish beliefs and behaviors. Historically, this represents a new level of Jewish integration in a larger society, so significant in fact that the historian Paul Johnson finds "the growth of U.S. Jewry was an accession of power of an altogether different order, which gave Jews an important, legitimate and permanent part in shaping the policies of the greatest state on earth" (Johnson 1987:566). He then makes the amazing statement that: "The expansion and consolidation of United States Jewry in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries was as important in Jewish history as the creation of Israel itself; in some ways more important" (ibid.).

> *"It was necessary to coin a new word to define their condition, for American Jews came to form, along with the Jews of Israel and the Jews of the diaspora proper, the third leg of a new Jewish tripod, on which the safety and future of the whole people equally depended. There was the diaspora Jew, there was the ingathered Jew and, in America, there was the possessing Jew"* (ibid. 568).

Because of their great power in other words, Johnson does not regard American Jews as a Diaspora population. For reasons relating to their definition of a Diaspora consciousness, Rebhun and Levy reach a similar conclusion. Based on their examination of Jewish identification in America and Israel they find that for the population as a whole,

> *"Americans lack a self-image of people on the move. They do not feel displaced nor do they see themselves as being a Diaspora. Using Vertovec's theoretical notion (1997), American Jews do not have a Diaspora consciousness which involves an awareness of more than one locality that stimulates connections with others with whom they share the same roots. In no way, is this a trans-national community. Thus, Diasporism does not constitute a component of their group identity"* (ibid. 3).

Indeed, while the overall United States Jewish population is a highly assimilated population — the intermarriage rate for first marriages since 1996 is approximately 50 percent — there are sectors with significantly different patterns of assimilation. Rebhun and Levy note that "…American Jews are polarized with a large proportion who observes only Jewish holidays and a small segment which maintains an intensive Jewish life-style" (Rebhun and Levy, forthcoming, p. 15). They suggest that further research focus on these Jewish subpopulations.

Indeed, an examination of existing data for Jews who maintain an "intensive Jewish lifestyle" suggests they are more likely to possess a *Diaspora* consciousness and are more likely to define themselves as a *Diaspora* community than the American Jewish population as a whole. Lacking the direct experience of uprootedness to which Rebhun and Levy refer, a *Diaspora* consciousness in America may be thought of as consisting of two major components: a sense of separateness or difference from the larger American population and secondly, familiarity with Jewish history, religious texts, and traditions, which provide a framework for constructing a *Diaspora* consciousness. This definition incorporates the Jewish religious framework of *Diaspora,* which does not require a direct experience of living in the land from which one feels he or she was exiled.

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The subculture of Jews who maintain an intensive Jewish lifestyle within the larger Jewish population do so by living in largely homogeneous communities, observing religious rituals and customs, and ensuring their children receive intensive Jewish education. All Orthodox sects for example, require full time religious schools for both boys and girls. Among students in Jewish schools from kindergarten to 12th grade, 80 percent are Orthodox with only 20 per cent non-Orthodox (Schick 2005).[2] Access to multiple adult Jewish education opportunities continues to reinforce the central importance of Jewish education to maintaining a Jewish lifestyle.

Currently popular enclave communities among the ultra-Orthodox are even more physically separated from other types of Jews and non-Jews. The separation is regarded as necessary to maintain distinctive patterns of behavior and thought. However, it is also a practical arrangement in that home and neighborhood constitute the base for religious behaviors since traveling in a car, bus or train is prohibited on the Sabbath and holidays. Religious, ethnic, social and neighborhood life are thus all tightly intertwined (Farber 1995).

Jewish intermarriage may be seen an extreme expression of the intertwining of Jewish and American cultures referred

to by Fishman as 'coalescence' (Fishman 1999, 2004). The relative, though not complete absence of intermarriage among the Orthodox suggests a differentiation and separateness that is particularly striking in contemporary America where group boundaries are so fluid.[3] In their analysis of the New York Jewish population survey of 1990, Horowitz and Solomon comment that a Jew who marries a Gentile is not likely to define him/herself as Orthodox (Horowitz and Solomon 1992, footnote 1). For Jewish Orthodox baby boomers, Waxman (2001) likewise finds a statistically insignificant intermarriage rate.

Another measure that can be used to indicate the presence of a *Diaspora* consciousness is the voluntary migration of American Jews to Israel. Although they constitute between only 10-20 percent of American Jews, religiously observant Jews represent over 80 percent of American immigrants to Israel (Shain 2000:195). Indeed a recent article in the *Jerusalem Post Magazine* noted that "The right-wing Orthodox… are far and away the leading source of American *aliya* [immigration to Israel] over the last generation…" (Derfner 2005). In addition, all Orthodox groups without exception regard Israel and Jerusalem in particular as the spiritual center of the world.

Among those who live an intensely religious lifestyle, a small portion of this already small percentage of American Jewry may even be regarded as transnational in that individuals travel back and forth, continuing to work in America while living in Israel. This group is more likely to possess a *Diaspora* consciousness. What proportion this is remains unclear as this sub-population includes groups and individuals who do not recognize the current State of Israel as the one promised in religious texts. In addition, the Orthodox includes sectors who are quite at home in America where they believe they live an authentic Jewish life, perhaps even more so than in Israel which, even though religious law determines personal status issues, because it has a primarily secular government it does raise theological issues around the fulfillment of religiously mandated obligations that apply to a Jewish State.

Among the affiliated, sixty-five percent of American Jews have never been to Israel, have no relatives or friends there and know little of the customs, culture, or politics of the country (NJPS 2000-01). They are unlikely to envision Israel as a homeland just as they are unlikely to regard their life in the United States as a *Diaspora.* Rather, most Jews, like their non-Jewish compatriots feel very much at home in America. Religiously committed American Jews however, are more likely to perceive of themselves as a *Diaspora* community. It is understandable that this community differs from other American Jews in that they maintain greater separateness and sense of difference. In addition, the concept and meaning of *Diaspora* derives from religious texts with which this sector of American Jewry is the most familiar.

Notes

[1] The show and movie, "Fiddler on the Roof" portrays this experience.

[2] Interestingly, the 80-20 ratio is the same in 2004 as it was in 1998-99 indicating that despite the far higher fertility rate of the Orthodox, requiring additional school space, the non-Orthodox have retained their percentage of Jewish Day School seats (Schick 2005).

[3] Coalescence to some degree nevertheless exists for all segments of the American Jewish population. See for example, Fishman's (1995) description of the way in which various feminisms are now accepted by all segments of the American Jewish population.

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