



The Orthodox Baby Boom

By Viva Hammer

The most startling finding of the 2001 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) was not the intermarriage rate—which has remained stable in the last decade—but the low Jewish birthrate. With Jewish women having 1.86 children on average, American Jews are reproducing at well below replacement level, considered to be 2.1 children. In dramatic contrast to the dire statistics of the general Jewish population are those of the Orthodox community. Modern Orthodox families average 3.3 children, “Litvish Yeshivish” families average 6.6, while the Chassidic average is 7.9.¹ Moreover, while Jewish families in general have shrunk in size over the last thirty years, over the same period, Orthodox families have been growing larger.²

There is a veritable conspiracy of silence over the matter of fertility in the Jewish world: who is having children, who is not and what all this

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means for the future of the Jewish people. Those on either end of the religious spectrum do not appear to be focusing on this issue. For example, the United Jewish Communities recently released a report (as part of the NJPS) devoted entirely to Orthodox Jews; among the multitude of graphs and figures there is *not a single reference* to Orthodox fertility. Similarly, a symposium at the 2003 Agudath Israel Convention entitled “Demographic Dilemmas: Meeting the Challenge of Contemporary Jewish Population Trends” focused on the disappearing non-*frum* Jew. Not one speaker asked what the ramifications of the vigorous pace of childbearing in the Agudath Israel community might be.

Why are so many Orthodox couples today having more children than their parents did? What effect will this trend have on Jewish life? What will the future hold for the children born of this wave of fertility? To find answers to these questions, I interviewed over fifty people of various Orthodox affiliations in the United States, Canada, England, Australia and Israel. The voices I recorded are

not usually heard in Jewish population surveys; in the words of one demographer, most traditional Jews are “intractably indifferent to surveys.”³ However, with a researcher who is clearly Orthodox, the interviewees expressed their views passionately. Their thoughts and impressions shed light on an unexplored dimension of Orthodox life.

Background

In the middle of the twentieth century, Orthodoxy was in eclipse. Devastated by the Holocaust and reviled by secular Zionists in Israel, Orthodoxy was dismissed as a relic by Diaspora Jews who assumed it would disappear. In America, Orthodox synagogues and their members defected in droves to the Conservative movement. Those who stayed within the fold were, on average, older and poorer than their non-Orthodox counterparts.⁴

Fifty years ago, there were fewer large families among American Orthodox Jews. In fact, there is evidence that at that time, at least in one significant community, Orthodox fam-

ilies were smaller than non-Orthodox ones.⁵ This could, in part, be attributed to the fact that many Orthodox Jews were Holocaust survivors who were “mentally, physically [and] emotionally weakened from their war experiences,” recalls Leah, a Chassidic woman who grew up in a community founded by survivors. For survivors, “everything weighed heavier; the costs and risks of childbearing loomed much larger,” explains a woman from the same community. Even those who were not survivors had suffered through the Depression and immigrant privations. Large numbers of children would have meant poverty for most families, a specter many could still remember and would not countenance again.

This group of Orthodox survivors, however, was a hardy one. Whittled down to believers who stuck to their faith despite Auschwitz and the lure of secularism in America, they established schools, *yeshivot* and the infrastructure of religious life. And with the post-War economic prosperity, they emerged from the insecurity of persecution and uprootedness, and over time, were able to express their religiousness more fully.

The sixties was a time of transition for American Jewry. The Six Day War in Israel unleashed a torrent of Jewish pride and the beginnings of the *ba'al teshuvah* movement. Jews had more freedom and resources to express themselves. “In the *frum* community one of the things valued highly is family. If *frum* people feel secure, they have more kids,” explains one interviewee. The couples who began having more children in this early period were influential in drawing others into the fold. One mother of eleven describes being inspired to have a big family by visiting homes where “there was peace and serenity and joy even though there was a large clan.”

In the seventies, Orthodoxy grew, but other denominations lost ground. The new American ethic of pluralism, combined with increasing Jewish wealth, enabled Jews to rise in social status, intermarry and leave the fold.

Hebrew University Professor Sergio DellaPergola writes:

*In the early 1980s, world Jewry was estimated to have reached a level of around zero population growth as a result of low birth rates, population aging, and erosion caused by mixed marriages and assimilation.*⁶

Already in the late seventies, evidence pointing to the stagnation in the Jewish population was mounting, and the communal leadership responded. The Lubavitcher Rebbe started a childbearing campaign in his *sichot* (lectures) of 5740 (1980), reinforcing his message with a media blitz. “I remem-

Women with large families may be forced to work, even though the more children there are at home, the greater the logistical challenge of doing so.

ber the ads encouraging [Jewish] people to have more children,” says Miri, a Lubavitcher in her late thirties, which, she recalls, “coincided with data about zero population growth in the Jewish community.” The advertisements appeared in the secular as well as the Jewish press, as the Rebbe intended to touch both his Chassidim and the Jewish community at large. A non-denominational task force on Jewish population was set up by the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies. In 1978, the task force organized a symposium entitled *Jewish Population: Renaissance or Oblivion*, and fiery speakers conveyed the urgent need to encourage childbearing. Most Jews ignored this call. But the Orthodox responded.

The Data

Behind the discomfiting statistic of the low birthrate among Jewish women is even more disquieting data: The majority of Jewish women remain childless until age thirty-four.⁷ It is well known that after age thirty-five female fertility drops precipitously, and so women who start to bear children in their mid-thirties will most likely not have the number of children they planned. This biological limitation is clearly seen in the data, as Jewish women are relying on completing their families in their forties, and so they never quite catch up to the American average.

Since Orthodox women are included in the 1.86 number, they are carrying a large burden for their secular sisters. Hard as it is to imagine today, there has not always been such a gulf between Orthodox and non-Orthodox fertility. In a 1997 study, Antony Gordon and Richard Horowitz reported that Jewish women aged fifty and over have an average of 2.25 children, and there is no significant difference between the denominations. However, they observed, fertility for women aged 35-44 diverges dramatically. Non-Orthodox women have an average of 1.6 children, while Orthodox women have an average of 4.5 children.⁸

The interviewees in this study corroborated the data on Orthodox fertility. One woman told me that her granddaughter, the oldest of seven, has the *smallest* family in her Bais Yaakov class in Brooklyn, New York. A nurse in Lakewood, New Jersey, employed by local hospitals to collect Jewish childbirth data, estimates that 1,700 babies are born per year to the 5,500 Jewish families in her community. As a benchmark, in 2002, America produced 65 births per one thousand women aged 15-44.⁹ Based on this proportion, we would expect about 358 babies per year for the Lakewood community.

These findings are not limited to the ultra-Orthodox community. Family

size data was collected in a recent study of rabbis affiliated with the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA).¹⁰ In comparing rabbis in each age cohort, the study shows that the younger rabbis have a greater number of children than their older colleagues.

“Growing up I didn’t know anyone with six kids,” says Gail, a Modern Orthodox mother of six living in Silver Spring, Maryland. “The largest [family] I knew in my school [consisted of] five [children]. A large family was three; two was [more] common.”

Why are many Orthodox couples today having more children than their parents? Why are younger RCA rabbis having more children than their older colleagues? How is it that Jews in Lakewood exhibit 4.8 times higher fertility than the general American population?

Religiousness

Overwhelmingly, the people I interviewed associated increased childbearing with a growing religiosity in the Orthodox community over the last fifty years.

“It’s faith,” says Jill, a Modern Orthodox mother of four, born in England and living in Jerusalem. “You want to have a family; there is a certain amount of risk...but there’s inner faith that you’ll have the strength to deal with it.” Some of the *ba’alei teshuvah* I interviewed associate being religious with leaving life decisions “up to God.” One woman contrasted two types of attitudes: “Does one move into one’s childbearing [thinking], ‘Let me plan! How many? Do I want to space [out the births of my children]?’ Or, barring extenuating circumstances, go into marriage assuming you’ll take what God gives you. If you take the latter view, you’ll have, on average, more children.”

An increased sensitivity towards *halachah* also seems to play a role. Talia from Toronto explains: “In the previous generation it never occurred to [women] to ask about birth control; they were traditional, rather than

halachic [and used birth control without asking]. Having children is now considered a halachic question, not a personal decision.”

Sima, an ultra-Orthodox Australian living in Israel, observes that we express our *frumkeit* differently than the way it was expressed in the past. “We have lost the internalization of being *frum* and are now very external.” Sima suggests that in an era when Orthodox Jews want to demonstrate their piety publicly, we would expect to find them having larger families, because the number of children a couple has is an immediately observable yardstick of religiosity.

Economic and Political Environment

The shift towards heightened religiosity may have been the catalyst for larger Orthodox families, but the change could not have taken place without hospitable economic and political environments. Chava describes how her mother-in-law, a survivor of Auschwitz who immigrated to Australia, had to tether her babies to their cribs while she was at work. Under these conditions, two children were all she could manage. Her son, Chava’s husband, is a doctor, and the couple has five children. “We are ready to rebuild our people,” explains Chava, “because we have the luxury.”

“Now there are very few people in [North America] who find feeding the family to be a challenge,” observes Talia. “In previous generations it was a challenge...poverty [is not] a dominant trend in [our] community, and in the post-War world [it was].” Others focus on how lifestyles have changed because of improved conditions. “Times aren’t better now necessarily,” says Yael, an American mother of five living in Jerusalem. “[The difference is that] my parents could always help [me] out, [but they] didn’t have that cushion to fall back on.”

Material comfort has been accompanied by an atmosphere of increasing tolerance in American society; an observant Jew is no longer a pariah. One interviewee suggests that the confluence of these economic and social factors has led to a “sense of confidence that allows [the Orthodox] to pursue what they consider important,” which includes having more children.

Jewish Souls

As mentioned earlier, at the point when Orthodox Jews were becoming financially secure and proud of their identities, the rest of the Jewish community was slipping away in large numbers. In 1980, the Lubavitcher Rebbe urged maximum fertility among his Chassidim, drawing on the mystical concept that the Messiah will not come until all the souls that were preordained for corporeal expression have been coupled with a body.¹¹ The Rebbe’s urging clearly had an impact on his community, and the ripples were felt throughout the Jewish world.

Judy, a non-Chassidic mother of five living in Australia, was nevertheless influenced by the Chabad idea of “populating the world with Jewish children, balancing the scale, making lots of armies of Jewish soldiers.”

Others took a more personal, rather than nationalistic, approach. Jill, a Modern Orthodox woman living in Monsey, New York, who has six children, talked about producing “one more” child than her parents did. “I’ll do a bit more; it’s not that much more difficult,” she says. “If you have more [children], the more *ovdai Hashem* (servants of God) there are on the earth, [and that’s] a good thing.”

Response to the Holocaust

Lena, a Russian-born *ba’alat teshuvah* living in Australia, connects her feelings about childbearing to the Holocaust. “My husband is a child

of survivors; his mother’s whole family was killed in [the] camps, his father was also from a large *frum* family [that was wiped out],” she says. Lena described how having children after the cataclysm is a fundamentally Jewish response. She compares this response to that of the Jewish people on the banks of the Yam Suf who were trapped, with the Egyptians behind them and the Red Sea before them. God commanded them to go into the water, but no one moved. One man jumped into the water. “We chose the name Nachshon for my [son],” Lena says, explaining the parallel between Nachshon, who obeyed the will of God despite its irrationality, and survivors and children of survivors who persisted in having children, despite knowing the evil of the world into which they were bringing them.

Lena’s response echoes a story in the Second Book of Shmuel. During the reign of King David, the Children of Israel were afflicted with a plague. The people entreated (*vayeatar*) Hashem, and the plague was removed.¹² The Pesikta notes that *vayeatar* is the same word used to describe Yitzchak’s prayer when he asked God for children. And just as God responded to Yitzchak by giving him twins, those couples who survived the plague in King David’s time were blessed with twins. The Medresh Shmuel continues on this theme and notes that the Jewish people are compared to sand: When one digs a hole in the sand at night, in the morning one finds the hole filled of its own accord; similarly the population diminished by the plague during King David’s reign was replenished in the time of King Shlomo.

Rabbi Shabtai Sheftel Weiss, in his commentary *Mishbetzot Zahav* on Shmuel II,¹³ suggests that this is God’s approach to the Jewish people in general—whenever things are diminished during the night (symbolic of a time of judgment and punishment), there is a particular *hashgachah* (providence) to replenish the loss. We can recognize

this phenomenon in our era too. The Orthodox, in particular, lost so many in the Holocaust, and in the second and third generations after the cataclysm we find tremendous growth in this community.

Ovedet Hashem

In a 1997 *Jewish Action* interview,¹⁴ Smadar Rosenzweig, a professor at Touro College, suggested that the challenge for Jewish women today is to formulate what it means to be an *ovedet Hashem*—a servant of God. In previous generations, women didn’t have the luxury to make religious choices; merely surviving absorbed most of their energies. In the last hundred years, technology has revolutionized life by lengthening it, by improving its quality and by creating the possibility for free time. Some women have responded to these changes by acquiring education, others have entered the workforce. But spiritually-minded women are faced with a conundrum: They know that every moment of a man’s life must be filled with Torah, but what could women do with *their* spare moments in service of the Creator? What can a woman do that is as valuable to God as learning Torah is for a man?

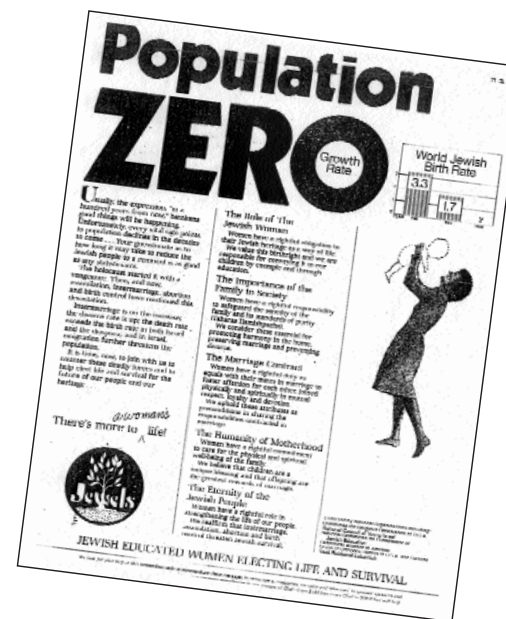
For Judy in Australia the answer is clear. “Women see [having children] as their spiritual work.”

Work

Of all the women with whom I spoke, only one discussed at length the connection between working and bearing a large family. “I think it’s harder to have kids and work,” says Lynn, a mother of four in Silver Spring, Maryland. “Every time you have a baby you have to take [time] off; it’s hard to keep continuity in

your career... the more kids, the more time you need to spend away from your job, even with a full-time nanny... With all the homework, you really need to be there.” She found that in both communities she has lived in recently, working mothers are more likely to have fewer children than non-working mothers.

However, for some, work is a reprieve from the ceaseless demands of a growing family. For example, one woman said she went to work *after* her children were born, and when they ask why, she answers, “The reason Mummy works is because otherwise she’s not much fun to live with.” Another woman started her first serious job when her fourth child was born. “I couldn’t stay home any more,” she says. “I didn’t have the patience for it.” Work also gives women the economic ability to choose to have large families, and their wages are indispensable in an era of increasing tuitions. In many ways, women with large families may be forced to work, even though the more children there are at home, the greater the logistical challenge of doing so.



An advertisement, from the early eighties, encouraging Jewish population growth. The ad, which appeared in major Jewish newspapers, was sponsored by JEWELS, an organization dedicated to strengthening Jewish families.

Geography

In a conversation with renowned sociologist Egon Mayer, shortly before he died, he suggested that geography might be important in family size outcomes as well. The causation goes both ways—living in a particular place influences a couple's decision as to how many children to have, and a couple will choose to live in a place where the family size norm is close to their ideal.

The starkest difference in average family size is found between Israel and the Diaspora. In Israel, Jewish women—including the secular—have an average of 2.7 children. But the difference is manifested most plainly in the Modern Orthodox/Religious Zionist community. In Israel, such families have between 4 and 5 children, and in the Diaspora, they have closer to 3.

Jill, the Modern Orthodox woman living in Jerusalem, attributes this difference to the ambiance in Israel; it's the "feeling of belonging, the Land... Israel's about children; it's there in so many ways." Linda, an American in Israel, is more prosaic. "Having children is not a financial decision here, because you don't pay for school," and so couples are able to have more children. Many others I interviewed agreed that yeshivah

tuition is the most effective form of birth control in the Modern Orthodox community.

But even in the Diaspora, there are large differences in fertility averages. For example, many mentioned "the Teaneck four," that is, the virtual mandatory average in that New Jersey community. Contrasted to this are communities in Westchester, New York, which, although wealthier than Teaneck, tend to average smaller families. Similarly, the Lakewood nurse said that in that town, there was a "tremendous expectancy for large families, even more than in Boro Park or Flatbush." She attributed this to the "yeshivah environment," where most of the fathers are learning in *kollel*, and "having children [is] considered a blessing and... something positive."

Moreover, certain communities provide an infrastructure that makes it possible to have large families. In some areas, for example, grandmothers help out with their grandchildren, older siblings help with younger ones, and neighbors form a tight net of support. In places where mothers feel isolated and unsupported, it becomes much more difficult to prolong childrearing, and so smaller families may be the norm.

The Future: Policy Implications

The generation of Orthodox Jews born after the War was an anomaly in that it was the first such generation after the Enlightenment not to see large numbers of defections to the non-Orthodox camps.¹⁵ "I can't think of anyone I went to school with who isn't Orthodox today," says Shevi, 42, who grew up in Crown Heights, an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood in

Brooklyn. But, she says, this is no longer the case for young people today, many of whom are leaving the fold.

Family size has been falling among developed nations for two centuries now, and Jews were and are forerunners in this trend.¹⁶ Moreover, secularism has been on the rise over the same period, and Jews have been at the forefront of the faithless too. It was the immense idealism of a small group of survivors that kept Orthodoxy alive after the War. The question is whether the "children of the dream" can continue bucking the pressures of the outside world.

Probably the greatest factor to influence Orthodox family size is the economic situation. Orthodox Jews were able to realize their family-size goals over the last thirty years because their incomes were growing. Not only has this growth slowed, but the increase in the cost of educating and housing children in the neighborhoods where Jews live has outpaced income growth. Moreover, today, expectations for the quality of childrearing in the Modern Orthodox world are influenced by middle-class values. "We have very high standards for raising kids," says Gail. "We want [them] to be reading by first grade, and have stimulation all the time." These standards are hard to sustain with a family double the size of the national average. The challenge for the Modern Orthodox world will be to balance the perceived conflict between quality and quantity in childrearing.

The *Chareidi* communities have different concerns. The cost of raising each individual child is lower: Tuition costs less, and there are fewer extra-curricular activities. Nevertheless, there are certain minimums, and it is not clear how these financial obligations are going to be met when most husbands continue to learn in *kollel* for long periods, and wives bear the burdens of childbearing and earning a living.

Furthermore, after the War, children born to *Chareidi* families were imbued with a sense of duty to their parents and their people.

However, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the War generation simply ask, in Shevi's words, "Don't you want me to be happy?" Today even *Chareidi* children imbibe material values from the secular cities in which they are raised; it will be hard for them to reconcile secular values with the sacrifice and idealism required to raise large families.

With the average Jewish woman having 1.86 children, the demographic future of our people lies with those who are choosing to have more than 2.1 children, the number necessary for population replacement. But it is not easy for those carrying that burden. "It's wonderful that you're giving voice to this issue," says Lena, who is pregnant for the third time in three years. "Women out there... they're stepping up to the plate; it looks pretty, but it's hard. When I was pregnant with my first, I dreamed of ten, a minyan. I'd still like to, but between the ideal and the real... You have to have broad shoulders and rings under your eyes."

The entire Jewish community needs to support women like Lena; since we all benefit from the investments she makes in her family, we should all contribute to its quality of life. How can we make life easier for her, and for other women who would like to have more children? This is a question all organizations serious about Jewish continuity need to be asking. I would like to open the discussion with three suggestions: lowering tuition costs, providing communal childcare and strengthening support networks.

Having more children means paying more tuition. With tuition rarely below \$10,000 and sometimes above \$20,000 per child per year, a family with four children has a minimum of \$40,000 post-tax expenditure per year just on schooling. In Seattle, Samis Foundation grants have made it possible for school tuition to stay below \$6,000 per

year. Although it is too early to say whether this has had an impact on childbearing, the size of the Orthodox high school in Seattle has more than doubled since the Foundation began its program. In general, local Jewish federations provide only about 5 percent of the cost of providing a child with a Jewish education;¹⁷ clearly there needs to be a serious shift in the priorities for communal spending.

Organizing childcare in the United States remains a private matter. In contrast, in Israel the municipalities provide nurseries for the very young

A family with four children has a minimum of \$40,000 post-tax expenditure per year just on schooling.

up to kindergarten. This is a role that shuls in the United States, for example, could fulfill. Whether it's full-time care for children of working parents or a drop-in center for children of overwhelmed mothers, childcare programs could make looking after young children significantly easier and more affordable.

Finally, a tighter network needs to be developed to support children and parents. The nurse from Lakewood told me she believes that in her community people will keep having large families. This is partly because Jews in Lakewood use their voting power to harness resources from all levels of the political leadership as well as charitable organizations. In addition, families there provide each other with assistance in the form of *gemachs* (lending centers), post-natal sanitariums and intense post-birth day-to-day cooperation.

In the end, those communities that

provide a hospitable environment in which couples can raise children will shape the future of the Jewish people. They themselves will be blessed and will bring the blessing of Avraham to all the families on earth. **IA**

This article is dedicated to the memory of Chaya Rivka Jessel, who was one of the interviewees. May her children be comforted amongst the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

Notes

1. Marvin Schick, "A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States," Avi Chai Foundation (January 2000): 13.
2. Antony Gordon and Richard Horowitz, "Will Your Grandchildren Be Jews?" Study reported on <http://www.613.org/study.html> (1997): 4.
3. Ronald S. Immerman, "Religion and Fertility," *The Mankind Quarterly* XLIII, no. 4 (summer 2003): 407.
4. Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided* (New York, 1993), 11-14.
5. Calvin Goldscheider, "Ideological Factors in Jewish Fertility," *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 7 (June 1965): 100. The community is Providence, Rhode Island.
6. "Demographic Trends of Latin American Jewry," *The Jewish Presence in Latin America*, eds. Judith L. Elkin and Gilbert W. Merx (Boston, 1987), 87.
7. NJPS 2000-01, United Jewish Communities (2003): 4.
8. See note 2.
9. *The World Almanac* (2004), 73.
10. Moshe Bleich, "Attitudes of Jewish Clergy Toward Adoption Issues" (Ph.D. thesis, Yeshiva University, 2003).
11. See *Masechet Avodah Zarah* 5a.
12. 2 Sam. 24:25.
13. 621.
14. "Juggling Act" (summer 1997): 38.
15. Samuel Heilman and Steven M. Cohen, *Cosmopolitans and Parochials: Modern Orthodox Jews in America* (Chicago, 1989).
16. See, for example, Massimo Livi-Bacci, "Social-Group Forerunners of Fertility Control in Europe," *The Decline of Fertility in Europe*, eds. A. J. Coale and S.C. Watkins (New Jersey, 1986).
17. Jack Wertheimer, "Talking Dollars and Cents About Jewish Education," Avi Chai Foundation (August 2001): 3.



Sample of another JEWELS ad that appeared in the eighties.