

Distance is Always Relative

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Abstract For all of American Jewry's obsession with demography, the field remains murky and imprecise. There is disagreement over how many Jews there are and, whatever the number, what they believe and how they act. The distancing debate reflects this situation. Inevitably, intermarriage takes a toll in commitment to Israel, as well as in all other areas that constitute Jewish identity. At the end of the day, the issue of how American Jews relate to Israel is entwined in the powerful impact of advanced assimilation.

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Even persons who are fond of quantitative analysis should be astounded by both the volume of American Jewish demographic research and by its inexactitude. Since the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey we have been treated to an endless parade of statistics or, perhaps more accurately, numbers games. We who are no more than two percent of all Americans seem to have been surveyed more than all other ethnic and nationality groups combined. We are, at least in this respect, truly the chosen people. We have been chosen to be polled, chi squared and factor analyzed. If this isn't pathological ethnocentricity, what is?

For all the statistical research we have been subjected to and the presumption that numbers do not lie, the counters come up with widely divergent estimates as to how many of us there are in this land of blessing and freedom, including the freedom to change identity and to be no more than faces in the vast American crowd. There may be five million of us or perhaps just four million, with the number being fewer

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each day when the sun goes down than it was when the sun came up. Or, as other demographers claim, the figure may be somewhere between six and ten million.

The disparity ought to tell us something about reliability. The problem is not that our demographers aren't endowed with sufficient integrity. The rub is in defining who is a Jew and the collateral issue of how to count after the definition has been selected. For all of its missteps, the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey demonstrated conclusively that reaching by telephone a requisite number of respondents who would self-identify as Jewish requires an enormous effort at an enormous cost. Yet, at the end of the day, it is not possible to vouch for the reliability of the data.

At the end of the day, also, our population statistics are extrapolations, meaning that the research is based on pre-estimates and assumptions as to who the Jews are and where they live. Although demographers may deny this, the methodology inevitably means that the results produced by the research largely confirm what the researchers expected to find in the first place. Is it too much to suggest that Jewish population estimates be accompanied by an asterisk conveying the message that what is being reported may just not be so?

To make the point even more strongly, I do not trust extrapolations or the confidence of American Jewish demographers in the reliability of the statistical reports that they produce. In the decennial census mandated by the Constitution, the U.S. Census Bureau endeavors to count every American. This has become an increasingly impossible task, and so there is a modest measure of extrapolation which has in turn generated questions about the accuracy of the data, as well as litigation.

In whatever quantitative research I have conducted, my goal has been to arrive at real numbers by relying only on what can be directly counted. This is true of my study of the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit which included data on how judges voted, and also of the censuses of Jewish day school enrollment on behalf of the Avi Chai Foundation (Schick 1970, 2000, 2005, 2009). I am also involved in the Guttman research on the beliefs and practices of Israeli Jews, a project conducted at roughly 10-year intervals. Guttman involves face-to-face interviews with about 2,500 Israelis, selected according to demographic distributions formulated by the Israeli government's Bureau of Statistics. For all of the care put into this research, I have questioned key findings, and I am not alone in this regard.

Clearly, our community is overly addicted to quantitative studies. Yet, this form of population analysis has utility, particularly when it is teamed with objective qualitative analysis that provides deeper understanding of sociological phenomena. When, however numbers are the totality of research, we ought to head in the other direction. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that much survey research on American Jewish life is of an entrepreneurial character, and entrepreneurship and scholarship are often antithetical activities.

Whatever my feelings about the avalanche of statistics dominating the analysis of contemporary American Jewish life, the mountain is there and cannot be ignored, whether the issue is how many Jews there are or what they practice and believe or whether they are distancing themselves from Israel. Steven Cohen, Len Saxe and the other authors are chock full of ability, ideas, statistics and accomplishments. Each, along with their colleagues, has contributed much to this mountain and, likely, they will keep on adding to it.

On distancing, the actual distance between the Cohen-Kelman and Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe positions strikes me as not great, as Sasson and his colleagues acknowledge when they concede that surveys in recent years show an uptick in distancing, and, as Cohen-Kelman acknowledge by pinning much of their argument on the prevalence of intermarriage.

In a way, the distancing debate is a footnote, albeit an important one, to the paramount issue of the impact of advanced assimilation and a high intermarriage rate on American Jewish identity. Sasson and his colleagues take an expansive or optimistic view, dismissing, at least to an extent, the claimed negative or dire consequences of marrying out. As a result, they arrive at estimates of the U.S. Jewish population that are above the statistics accepted by most researchers, perhaps most notably the U.S. Religious Landmark Survey of 2008 sponsored by the Pew Research Center which estimated that Jews are 1.8% of the U.S. population. In a paper, "Cross-Survey Analysis to Estimate Low Incidence Religious Groups," researchers at Brandeis argued that it is insufficient to focus solely on "the Jewish population in terms of religious identification" because Jews "also identify by ethnicity or culture." They further claimed that their higher estimates "represent a leap in method designed to maximize the utility of the abundance of survey data in the public domain." Accordingly, there are:

...an additional 23% who identify ethnically but not religiously as Jewish. Many of these...would not be considered Jewish by the larger Jewish community because though they may identify with their family heritage of Judaism, they also self-identified with religions considered to be incompatible with being Jewish (e.g. Protestantism). Thus, one might conclude that there is an additional 10% beyond our estimate of 1.86%, or upwards of 2.1% adults in the United States who identify as Jewish (Tighe et al. [in press](#), pp. 20–21).

The distancing data that are at the heart of this debate are from the American Jewish Committee's annual survey of American Jews conducted by Synovase. This survey includes only self-identified Jews by religion. Jewish ancestry alone is insufficient for inclusion. Therefore, persons born Jewish who say that they are no longer Jewish are excluded. Thus, hundreds of thousands of Americans who Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe would count as Jews and who doubtless would in the aggregate be significantly more distant from Israel than self-identified Jews do not contribute to the AJC data.

After contending that the AJC data show little distancing, Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe qualify and, I believe, retreat:

First, our analysis examined surveys of individuals who identify as "Jewish" when asked about their religion. Were one to employ a more expansive definition of "Jewish" to include anyone of Jewish ancestry who does not identify with another religion, then the overall level of Israel attachment would be somewhat lower. Moreover, if the population of "Jews by ancestry" is increasing over time, as some analysis suggests, then including this group would put downward pressure on overall Israel attachment. No data, however, exists to estimate whether and to what extent this population is increasing.

Then there is this remarkable claim: “Moreover, weighing the AJC samples to reflect a growing *intermarriage* population had negligible impact on overall levels of Israel attachments. It is expected that the same would be true for ‘Jews by ancestry’ were we able to estimate their numbers and weigh the samples accordingly.” We are told, in short, in a single paragraph that inclusion of Jews by ancestry would and would not result in greater distancing. I cannot figure this out.

There is much to criticize or question regarding the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey, as well as its 1990 predecessor. What is certain is that these surveys document an explosive increase in the number of Jews by ancestry, as well as in the number of intermarried Jews. Both categories engender a significant lessening of Jewish ties and commitments. In passing, Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe accept that there is distancing among the offspring of Jews who married out. By now, the children of those who intermarried are a major presence in Jewish demography. There are, regrettably, ideological and numbers games being played in our population studies, the result being that miraculously less or fewer becomes more.

A large-scale and expensive effort is underway to utilize Birthright as the primary vehicle to forge ties between the children of intermarried parents and Israel. It isn’t surprising that thousands of college youth with just one Jewish parent accept the offer of a free trip to Israel, and it isn’t surprising that early research points to the efficacy of this investment in the sense that after the trip these youth declare that they have greater concern for the Jewish State. Saxe’s research makes this point (Saxe and Chazan 2008). I would not want to discount the impact of the Birthright experience on distancing. Time will tell how lasting the impact is. I am less optimistic than Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe.

The AJC/Synovate research on attachment to Israel is built around a couple of simplistic questions, the key one being, “Caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew.” Respondents can agree or disagree with the statement. This is the kind of research used by businesses to demonstrate acceptance of their products. People are asked about the brand of toothpaste they use or about the cars they drive, and the data are intrepidly employed to prove the pre-selected preference of the researchers. In a sense, the fix is in, and so it is regarding Israel. The land that is our birthright comes out well in a popularity contest.

This doesn’t mean that the statistics are errant. It does mean that these data are superficial, avoid nuances and a range of circumstances and emotions that inexorably affect the extent and depth of how American Jews view Israel. Two persons, each saying that he/she cares a great deal about Israel, can in fact be located far apart on the continuum that indicates the degree of caring about Israel. The researchers in this debate have conducted more sophisticated research. Here they are arguing about a junior varsity issue.

As noted, I am not addicted to the quantitative analysis of everything under the Jewish sun. Hopefully, there remains a place in Jewish scholarship that has not been cornered by demographers. Capable and objective observers can contribute to our understanding of the distancing issue without indulging in arithmetic or Bayesian exercises.

Nearly half a century ago, V.O. Key, Jr., then an eminent political scientist at Harvard and now barely remembered, wrote an important work—it received limited attention and was quickly forgotten—that provided an alternate approach to opinion polling in which respondents are asked to give a surface reaction to uni-dimensional questions. In *Public Opinion*, Key focused on intensity and latency as crucial elements in how people look at public issues. Intensity refers to how strongly held their views are, while latency considers whether there are circumstances that might arouse the expression of views that are beneath the surface and dormant (Key 1961).

Intensity is, by and large, a stable factor, as most respondents who say that they are strong or weak Republicans or Democrats or strong or weak liberals or conservatives maintain these identifications over an extended period of time. There can be change over time, of course, but there is generally no quick shift from one position to another. Latency is also a stable factor in that views that are not expressed in survey research may be in remission over an extended period. Changed circumstances can provide a jolt which converts that which is dormant and not expressed into an opinion that is readily expressed.

Applied to the distancing issue, intensity and latency provide insight into how American Jews feel. Not all who say that they are concerned about Israel in the AJC/Synovate poll are at the same level of concern. Moreover, they may be concerned about entirely different aspects of Israeli policy. There are American Jews who have intense feelings about Israel, and this is manifested by strong criticism of Israeli settlement policies or other aspects of Israeli life. There are others who are equally intense, yet who end up with an entirely different point of view on the same issues.

Latency is more difficult to pin down. There are considerable numbers of American Jews who are not too concerned about Israel on a daily basis and therefore may be regarded as distant who would be quite concerned and therefore no longer distant if they felt that Israel was in danger. By the same token, persons who are ordinarily very concerned about Israel may feel distant if Israel undertakes military action that they regard as wrongful.

In a book-length unpublished monograph written for the Avi Chai Foundation nearly 20 years ago, I suggested that American Jews could be placed in four quadrants or categories of perhaps roughly equal size, reflecting their identification and commitment as Jews. Quadrant one would include those who are most intensively Jewish, as Jewish activities and stimuli are constantly present in their lives. These are the people who listen to the morning news or read the newspaper to learn whether there is anything about Israel, people whose senses perk up when the word “Jews” appears. The Orthodox are in this quadrant, as are Jews with a strong Zionist attachment. There is no distancing in this sector, and while intensity is a factor, latency is not.

The fourth quadrant consists of those who have walked out of the door of Jewish life, corresponding to the “Jews by ancestry” grouping discussed by Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe. They do not respond at all to Jewish messages or stimuli, except to the extent that they generally pay attention to public issues. There is obviously no intensity and no more than a scintilla of latency to speak of.

In between are two groupings that vary in intensity and latency, each less intense in commitment than Jews in quadrant one and, yet, more intense than those included in the last quadrant. To an extent, their Jewish sentiments are latent or dormant and they may be awakened by circumstances. Quadrant two Jews are generally interested in things Jewish and somewhat concerned, but this is just one focus—and not necessarily the most important one—in their lives. What is latent may not be evident, of course, but it is also not necessarily deeply embedded under the surface. Anti-Semitism or peril to Israel can quickly arouse sentiments that do not seem to be different from those routinely held by quadrant one Jews.

In the third quadrant are Jews who have been powerfully affected by advanced assimilation and for whom being Jewish is an ethnic status that does not bar intermarriage or other forms of Judaic abandonment. Ordinarily, these Jews are faces in the American crowd. Their Jewish identity is a label that is attached to them but does not penetrate deeply into their lives. Yet, they know they are Jewish and identify as Jewish and this identity can be upgraded into concern about Israel or other Jewish matters under compelling circumstances.

This typology, which I believe is valid, suggests that distancing is no more than an aspect of the larger question of American Jewish identity. As Jewish identity goes, so goes concern about Israel. If we need to know whether American Jews are concerned about Israel, it is sufficient to consider the extent of their Jewish commitment and identity.

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