

What We Can Learn from the Population Study and “Sex and the City”

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Rosh Hashana Day 2 5764/2003

The seven most boring and potentially horrifying words with which to open a sermon are probably, “Results of a recent demographic study reveal....”

So instead, I will try something a bit catchier, and shorter. Its only four words --- “Sex and the City.”

Actually, I will make a deal – I will come back to that, if you bear with me for the beginning.

Ok, so, now I can begin.

Results of a recent controversial demographic study of the Jewish population reveal a great deal about our community. First the good news – attendance at day schools and Jewish camps is on the rise, as is the intensity of the level of participation among committed Jews. So much for the good news.

The national study contains much cause for concern. Its findings are contested, and not everyone agrees with its conclusions. It reveals that the American Jewish community is aging and shrinking. The birthrate is falling, intermarriage continues to be on the rise, though less dramatically than previously, and most Jews do not engage in communal or religious pursuits in their families or homes in an ongoing fashion.

But actually one does not need to read the latest population survey to confirm these conclusions.

A glance at the *New York Times* marriage section gives similar data, only, in anecdotal form.

David Brooks in his book, “Bobos in Paradise” refers to the *Times* marriage page as the “mergers and acquisitions page” because it provides an accurate look at the American ruling class and the changing ingredients of elite status. He writes, “their teeth are a tribute to the magnificence of American orthodonture, and since the *Times* will only print photographs in which the eyebrows of the bride and groom are at the same level, the couples always look so evenly matched....Each week the paper describes a particular wedding in great detail, and the subtext of each is that all this humongous achievement is a mere fluke of chance. These people are actually spunky free spirits who like to have fun... the bride and groom are said to be grounded but berserk, daring yet traditional, high flying yet down to earth, disheveled yet elegant, sensible yet spontaneous. ... A number of them seem to have first met while recovering from marathons or searching for the remnants of Pleistocene man while on archeological digs in Eritrea...Then there was a lonely period apart while one member arranged the largest merger in Wall Street history while the other settled for neurosurgery ...” and so on. You get the picture.

One of the announcements on this page that caught my attention was also noticed by a number of congregants, several of whom made a point of sending the article to me, and asked my reaction. It was about the romance between a woman from a traditional Vietnamese family and, to use the article's words, the "son of a Jewish family with 1830's American roots." We learn that the girl's parents resisted the notion for a year, for they had hoped that their daughter would marry a Vietnamese man. Yet there is no mention of any misgivings on the part of the groom's family. We learn, somewhat matter of factly that the couple had separate Buddhist and Jewish ceremonies.

A notice about a different couple who married this past June says, "She's a strict vegetarian, while nothing makes him happier than a juicy rib-eye steak." Her father is a liberal congressman, and his is a conservative who once campaigned against her father." And then, as if it is on the same level of one being a vegetarian, and one being carnivorous, reminiscent of Brooks' characterization, it says, "She is Jewish. He is Roman Catholic." The Jewish father of the bride is quoted as saying that things were a little touchy when they learned their daughter was dating the son of a party official of the Conservative Party of New York, as if that was what caused him the most agony. Again, we are led to believe that there are no misgivings on the part of the Jewish family over the situation, and the biggest obstacle the parents and couple had to overcome was different political lineages.

As these articles and the population study confirm, intermarriage is an increasingly common phenomenon of our times, and something that we must deal with. It is, however, more than just a phenomenon. If you are concerned about the survival of the Jewish people, it is a problem. It is a problem because statistics indicate that among intermarried couples, that is couples where there is no conversion, and one parent is Jewish and the other is not, only 33% of them raise their children as Jews, compared to a rate of 96 % among Jewish couples. Clearly the Jewish community needs to respond and to do a better job of reaching out to these couples if we want to reverse this alarming trend.

A debate is currently raging on the institutional level among leaders and policy makers in the Jewish community as to how best to respond to the trends noted in the Population Survey, and as revealed in the New York Times marriage section. One option is clearly not an option, and that is to do nothing.

Some advocate greater programs of outreach, to include those who are not born Jewish, and who have married someone who is. While on the other hand there are those who argue that we should allocate our limited community resources and energy to what is called "inreach," and concentrate on strengthening those who actively affiliate with and participate in the Jewish community.

Outreach entails what the name implies. In this view, intermarriage should be viewed not necessarily as something negative, but as a challenge which, with the proper resources, can be met. Supporters of this approach call for greater programs and efforts at

inclusiveness. Their goal is to share, especially with non-practicing Christians who are married to Jews, the beauty of Judaism in the hope that they will decide to join our ranks and become Jews by choice.

Some people are of the mistaken notion that Judaism is an ethnicity, or that it is passed on through the genes. It is not. It is a way of life. It entails ongoing study and commitment. It is values. It is a set of beliefs and religious observance. It is being a part of a people who have a covenant with God, all of which are concepts, traits and actions that can be taught, learned and acquired. The midrash tells us that the Torah was given in the wilderness of Sinai to show that it is available and a gift for all who choose to embrace it and to follow its teachings.

The biggest obstacle to bringing people to Judaism, however, is not so much with the organized Jewish community or due to a lack of effort or programs. More often than not, the problem is the attitude of individual Jews. For some reason we are afraid to suggest it as an option or even raise the issue. With some degree of frequency, people tell me: “how could I ever ask my fiancé to give up her religion, when I would not be willing to give up mine.” To give you just a short synopsis of my response, I try to explain that much more is at stake because of our numbers and demography, when a Jew leaves Judaism. The situation is also not comparable since Christianity is based on Judaism, and is an offshoot of it. There are issues pertaining to history, anti-Semitism and culture, not to mention theology and ideology. Finally, there is a significant difference between the role Judaism and Christianity play in the identity of the individual, even a non-observant one. It stems, in part from the difference between being a part of a people, which is what Judaism is, and being a member of a religion.

The hesitancy and reluctance on our part to be greater advocates for Judaism, reflects our lack of understanding and appreciation of Judaism and its traditions and heritage. It is the result of our lack of commitment to our own faith.

And here is where we get to the juicy part, that popular television series.

First a disclaimer, I do not subscribe to any premium cable services, so all I know about the show, *Sex and the City* is what I hear from others, what I read in the paper, and what my kids tell me.

Apparently, the story line this past summer had to do with one of the main characters, Charlotte, an elegant, sophisticated Episcopalian, falling in love with Harry Goldenblatt, who, with a touch of intended irony, explains the importance of a Jew marrying a Jew while eating pork. She understands, and decides to undergo a course of study to become Jewish.

This is novel and unprecedented, for, ever since the first talking motion picture, “*The Jazz Singer*”, most Hollywood scenarios present the couple as finding true happiness and marital bliss when the Jew is willing to give up his or her identity for the sake of the harmony and unity of the couple. Samuel Freedman, writing in *USA Today* wrote,

“Until the HBO series, no television show had ever presented a conversion with such visual and theological detail,” not to mention, so positively.

Even the funny movie of a few years ago, “Keeping the Faith”, was disturbing because in typical Hollywood fashion, the main character, even though he was a rabbi, was unable to articulate why Judaism has any value and why it is worth preserving and important for his wife to be Jewish. It seemed the only reason this rabbi could offer as to why it is important for him to marry a Jew was that otherwise his mother would be upset with him.

The theme of Charlotte’s conversion was played out this summer. The scene which I read the most about is when Charlotte is excited and comes home to prepare a beautiful Shabbat dinner, replete with kugel and matzah balls. As she donned a lace shawl and starts to recite the blessing over the Shabbas candles, she sees that Harry is paying no attention, and instead, is still watching a baseball game on the television she thought he had muted. Furious, Charlotte blurts out, “I gave up Christ for you, and you can’t give up the Mets!”

She, actually, the writers, hit the nail on the head. The story line proceeds with them temporarily breaking up over the incident and with Charlotte insisting that anyone else she dates must be Jewish.

It reminds me of the joke about the guy who marries a woman who converts to Judaism. The next Saturday, his father calls him at home, and asks why he isn’t by his side, working at the store. He says, “It’s my wife. She says I can’t come in to work on Saturdays anymore. Its Shabbos.” And his father responds, “See, I told you not to marry her.”

In its truest form, the joke uses a different word in the punchline, one which I hope you will forgive me for using, as I now share with you a direct quote from psychologist Wendy Mogel. She recounts the story of Blythe as typical of many of the individuals she encounters. Blythe, who converted to Judaism, complained about her situation, “My husband is against my taking Judaism seriously and trying to make a Jewish home for our children. He sees going to synagogue as another obligation, another place to drive to in our overly busy lives. He complains, ‘I married a beautiful shiksa, and you’re turning into my grandmother.’”

The problem is us. In each instance, the person with the problem with Jewish identity is the Jew. We are not willing to take on any of the responsibilities or obligations that are part of what it means to be a Jew. In so doing, we make Judaism insignificant by trivializing and marginalizing it.

The population study correctly noted, and as I have contended previously that the real problem in the Jewish community is the lack of commitment by all too many. The demographic study concluded that 20 % of American Jews say they attend synagogue once a year, while 22% say they never attend. Only 8 % say they attend every week, compared with 28 % among Catholics, and 30 % among Protestants.

An article in last week's *New York Times* religion section commented on the dismal attendance at Sabbath services. Rabbi Joseph Black of Albuquerque was quoted as saying, "Most rabbis struggle with this issue. Are we doing something wrong, that people aren't coming to services? First we blame ourselves, then we blame our congregants. It's like a tennis match, going back and forth. It's our fault, it's their fault." Another rabbi said, "what do you tell people when you have just a few hours to distill a 3,300 year history into something that might light a fire under them?"

In his seminal study of American religion, Will Herberg observed in a famous remark, a flower will continue to look good for a day or two after it is cut, but eventually, once it has been pulled away from its roots, it will wither and die. So, too, he says this is what happens to a people not nourished by its roots and whose adherents distance themselves from their origin.

What we need to do is to encourage people to participate in the full panoply of a fully engaged and meaningful Jewish life.

Our children know the immortal words, "I have a dream." "Ask not what your country can do for you..." "We have nothing to fear, but fear itself." And so on. But do they know, "God was in this place, and I did not know it." From this morning's torah reading, "And the two of them walked together." Do they understand what it means to say "hineni" when summoned by God? Or how about, "I shall fear no harm, for thou art with me."

So which is it? What should we do? How to respond? Outreach or inreach? The question has serious policy implications for the Jewish community. It is not a mere matter of semantics, for it affects how we allocate limited community resources. Where should we put our money?

At the risk of sounding indecisive, I believe the answer is both, and that they are not mutually exclusive. We need to strengthen our community as well as those who wish to adopt Judaism as their religion. We should not neglect the importance of providing opportunities for people who are already firm in their observance. Yet at the same time, we need to make sure that those who seek to affiliate with the Jewish people are welcomed and treated as gerei Tzedek, as righteous proselytes. It is a true mitzvah.

In recent years a number of books have told the story of individuals who have made their way back to Judaism. Paul Cowan's "An Orphan in History" was the first of this genre to chronicle a journey in which a person discovered the power of the rich customs and traditions cast aside by his family. Stephen Dubner wrote "Turbulent Souls" about his return to Judaism, and his discovery of the Jewish family and the beautiful world and heritage his parents had forsaken and turned their backs on. Lee Meyerhoff Hendler wrote, "The Year Mom Got Religion" to tell her story of bringing Jewish practice into her life. In each case, the authors let it be known that their parents did not do them any favors by relegating Judaism to a place of minor importance in their lives.

Elizabeth Ehrlich, the author of *Miriam's Kitchen* writes about her gradual growth in commitment, and how it led to her decision to practice a more observant Jewish lifestyle,

“Someone, many someones must keep the sources alive... We want to pick and choose from the great shopping mall of expedient culture: a certain sandwich to feed a hungry nostalgia, particular communal values when we need them, ritual expertise at times of joy or stress... (but) the old kosher bakery will close without regular shoppers. With no passionate discussant, the valued argumentative traditions of Jewish study will fade away into irrelevance.

Without commitment, the sources will die. The forms we love to have the choice to return to will wither and disappear, or worse yet, become hollow shells, cultural theme parks. Someone, many someones, have kept the forms alive and vital, have kept the choices available to me. They may have been skeptical; they must have had moments when their preferences were elsewhere. It is my turn now.”

That is what each of us, regardless of where we may currently be in terms of our current level of observance must also come to realize. Recognition that “it is my turn now” can lead to adding more ritual, tradition, and ongoing observance in your lives. It can lead to bringing it into your home and becoming more active in your synagogue and community.

Wendy Mogel wrote the best selling parenting book, “*The Blessing of A Skinned Knee*” and subtitled it –“*Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children*” when she started to learn about how much Judaism had to offer her, as a parent and in her work as a psychologist with over-indulgent parents. I strongly recommend every parent read and follow her advice about child-rearing.

But I mention it today not so much because of the wisdom she offers about child-rearing, but because of the author's personal story, a process of growth and transformation from a non-practicing, marginal Jew to one who now actively participates in her synagogue and community, and whose home is now identifiably Jewish. Although her grandfather was a founding member of an Orthodox shul in Brighton Beach, he worried that Judaism would die with him. As an eight year old, she knew all about the difference between Manhattan and New England clam chowder, but almost nothing about torah or her own people. She estimates that at the most, the amount of time spent on Jewish rituals on an annual basis when she was growing up was under five hours total, which consisted of five minutes lighting the candles each night of Chanukah, and a four hour seder at the home of her aunt. When she started to attend synagogue, as a married adult, she couldn't read Hebrew, and did not know the name or shape of an aleph. She did not let these things stop her from exploring and experimenting with bringing Judaism into her life. The following excerpt from her book is especially poignant, for, like Elizabeth Ehrlich's story, it could be the story of any member of our congregation as well.

“Like so many educated, serious Jewish adults, I was close to strolling right past a tradition of great psychological, spiritual, and intellectual riches without even knowing it existed.” In calling for parents to choose a path to avoid getting caught up in the anxiety,

materialism and competition all around us, this brilliant psychologist who at one time knew nothing about her tradition says, “For me Judaism provides a legacy of teaching and ritual that has proven to be both profound and practical.”

As I said, it could be the story of anyone here today, if you just take that step. We are like Harry and Charlotte, and like so many others, tentative and unsure of how to proceed.

Putting it all into perspective, in many respects, the question of outreach vs. inreach is not as important on an individual level, as the point of the population study and this summer’s episodes about Harry and Charlotte, which show the need to be more knowledgeable of our faith and more observant and zealous and rigorous in our observance.

On this Rosh Hashana, let us each, in our own way, resolve to strengthen our commitment to this beautiful heritage. For Rosh Hashana, the new year is the time when we realize that it is our turn to take the steps – steps which lead to a more meaningful life and to the survival and preservation of our people.

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B’nai Tzedek
Potomac, Maryland
September 28, 2003
potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org