

# THE VANISHING AMERICAN JEW

By Berel Wein

**T**he recent population study of American Jewry by The Graduate Center of The City University of New York, published in 2001 (and republished in 2003 by The Center For Cultural Judaism), reveals one glaring fact behind all of the graphs, technical language and statistical weights—American Jewry is shrinking, and at a rapid and seemingly irreversible rate.

In 1990 there were, according to this census report, 3,365,000 people living in the United States who were

born to Jewish parents and claimed Judaism as their religion. By 2001 that number had shrunk to 2,760,000. In 1990 there were 813,000 people born to Jewish parents but claimed no religion as their own. In 2001 that number had risen to 1,120,000. The study also shows that there are approximately 2,300,000 people who somehow consider themselves Jewish or were either born to Jewish parents and/or had a Jewish upbringing, yet currently adhere to or practice a faith other than Judaism. This is almost the same number as what the study calls “core Jews”—people born to Jewish parents who profess Judaism as their faith.

The report blandly states that the reason so many Jews are practicing a faith other than Judaism is “due mainly to the high rate of intermarriage that

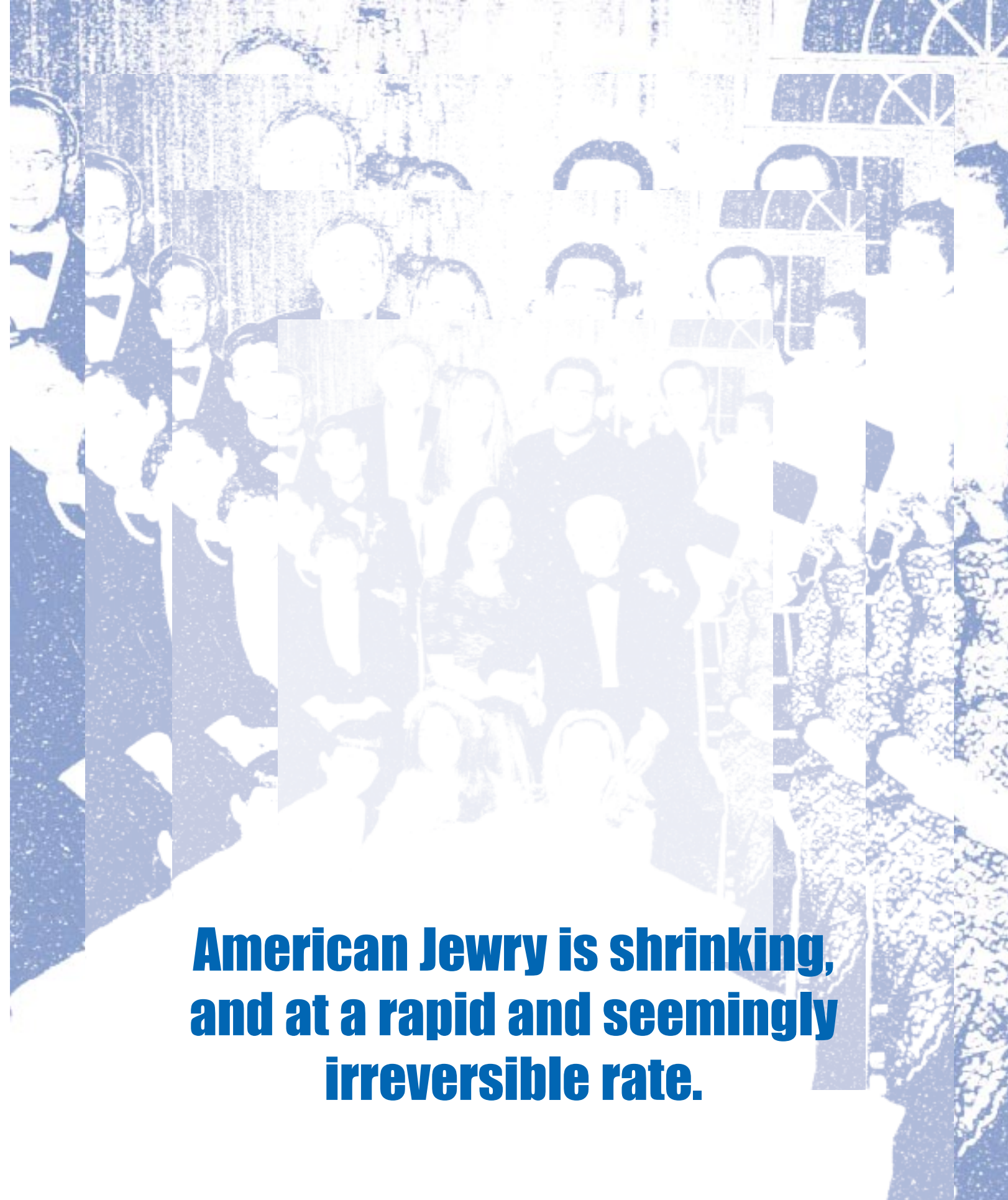
has been a feature of American Jewry since 1970.” The children of such marriages are in the main being raised outside of Judaism—in any of its forms.

The rates for intermarriage were reported at 52 percent in 2001, no real change from 51 percent in 1990. What this demographic disaster may yet mean in terms of Jewish political influence and philanthropic support of Jewish causes and institutions is truly frightening to contemplate.

**A**ll of this is sad enough. And still more frightening is the fact that there are many who have attacked the study as being biased—in favor of prettying up the picture (!)—and that the true figures are even more

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*Rabbi Wein is director of Destiny Foundation, a media outreach organization. He is also a Talmud lecturer at Yeshivat Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem and a columnist for The Jerusalem Post. His latest book is Pirkei Avos: Teachings for our Times (New York, 2003).*



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appallingly dismal. In any event, the study reveals an aging, shrinking and alienated Jewish America. Jews marry later, if at all, have fewer children and attend religious services less regularly than members of any of the other organized religious groups in America. Jews are the most secular religious group in America; compared to any of the other major faiths, we have the lowest percentage of people who believe in a personal God, immortality and miracles.

The correlation of this almost militant secularism to the disappearance of the American Jew is obvious from all of the graphs and statistics of the study. Yet, with true secular objectivity, which many times gets the facts right but misses the entire point, the study, in a concluding essay, states:

*Whatever its functions, secularism in Jewish life must be appreciated and supported [my emphasis] as a potent source of identification and motivation. As such, it must be utilized by the organized Jewish community for all the positive opportunities it affords. A secular Judaism needs to reclaim its patrimony and learn to take charge of the levers of communal education so as to secure the creative engagement of future generations of modern American Jews.*

**B**ut the report clearly shows that secular Jews do not produce “future generations of modern American Jews.” They are a lost tribe, married to secular and politically correct values with no real knowledge of or adherence to Judaism. It is wishful thinking in the

extreme to believe that “secular Judaism needs to reclaim its patrimony and learn to take charge of the levers of communal [Jewish] education.” The very definition of the secular faith is that it is not at all interested in Jewish education, nor does it wish to be involved in any way with operating the levers of the Jewish community. Secularism, instead of being supported, should be defeated if there is to be a meaningful change in Jewish demographics in the future of American society.

The report also judges the relationship between philanthropy, family size, identification with Israel and Jewish education. Though the parameters of Jewish education in this study are very broad, it is still obvious that those with the more intensive Jewish education are more likely to contribute to Jewish causes, visit and support Israel, marry Jewish spouses and raise a larger number of children than those who have no or a very limited Jewish education. The report notes a dramatic rise in the number of children attending day schools and *yeshivot* over the past decade. This is mainly due to the high birthrate amongst Orthodox Jews and their determination to send their children to schools that provide more intensive Jewish education. The report also notes a significant decrease in attendance at afternoon Hebrew schools or Sunday schools. The primacy of Jewish education in preserving a Jewish community is stressed throughout the report, if not by actual words, at least by the numbers, charts and statistics presented.

Interestingly, the report also studies the relationship between observing

“Jewish connections”—*mitzvot* and customs—and family growth and numbers. Again, not surprisingly, those families that at a minimum light candles on Friday night, observe Yom Kippur and have a Pesach Seder, remain far more loyal to Jewish causes and have more children than those who do not. Any unbiased reader of the report must come away with the realization that in America, as everywhere else in our Diaspora history, remaining Jewish requires commitment, education and observance. No fancy slogans or cutting-edge innovations in synagogue services will save us. Only education and the actual observance of a Jewish lifestyle, replete with the practice of *mitzvot*, can build the Jewish home and people. In fact, observance of Jewish rituals and customs is more of an indicator of Jewish continuity than Jewish education. In nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, the masses of Jews had an education far inferior to what is offered now in our day schools and *yeshivot*. It was the practice of Judaism that kept them loyal Jews. Ironically, when the *Haskalah* swept through Eastern European Jewry, the intensity of Jewish education increased, but the discipline of Jewish observance declined. This contributed to the waves of assimilation and defection from Judaism and the Jewish people that characterized that time and place.

**T**he non-Orthodox movements extant today are suffering not only from the poor or non-existent Jewish education amongst their adherents;

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they are suffering more from non-existent Jewish practice. As long as the recognition of same-sex marriages is the agenda of the liberal Jew, how can one expect to produce Jewish families in great numbers in the future? Improving this situation and returning to a norm of Jewish practice and traditional values is the core problem that now faces American Jewry. The rabbis of the *mishnah* in *Avot* had it right when they said that “it is not the learning per se that is the foundation of Jewish life; it is the behavioral practice that counts most.”

**I**n a long and heartfelt article published in *The Jerusalem Post* on November 26, 2003, Michael Steinhardt, a leading Jewish philanthropist and communal leader, reviewed the state of the Diaspora. Steinhardt, not an Orthodox Jew himself, nevertheless clearly sees the picture that the population survey presents. He writes:

*We do not know enough about our religion to take pride in it. . . . Our children know little about their people. They do not know why being Jewish should be important to them. What are we going to do about this? I don't think we are seriously considering this question at all, certainly not in a sustained and challenging manner. When we speak of new leadership, it is important to distinguish between the Orthodox and the majority of Jews. Their insularity has them often living in segregated neighborhoods, and nearly 100 percent of their children attend their own day schools or yeshivot.*

*Their demography is excellent: they marry largely amongst themselves and have high birthrates, and thus experience substantial growth. They do more outreach to the non-Orthodox than anyone else. And we have become two distinct peoples—so much so that, tragically, we non-Orthodox marry far more Christians than we marry Orthodox Jews. The non-Orthodox denominations have lost their rigor. They produce generation after generation of uneducated Jews. Initially these systems of belief were relevant by showing us how to be modern. But today this focus does not successfully transmit a vision of the Jewish future.*

According to the population study, simply by doing the numbers, Orthodox Jews currently comprise almost a third of the “core Jews” in the United States. At the present demographic rate, Orthodox Jews will comprise the majority of “core Jews” within a quarter of a century. This will place an even greater burden of responsibilities upon us. We will have to be the ones who speak up for Israel, finance the Jewish organizations and produce the leadership for the entire Jewish community. I think that to do so we will have to become less insular, less defensive and more aggressive in bringing Torah to the other camps of Jews. We will have to educate our children that we are truly our brother's keeper. We will have to become more accepting of other Jews and even of their temporary failings in observance and outlook. As all of our outreach work has taught us, these Jews, alienated, ignorant and misled as they may now be, are not yet a lost cause.

Steinhardt proposes a “newborn

fund” to guarantee every Jewish child at least a Jewish pre-school education and environment. I don't know if this is the magic bullet we are all searching for, but in any event neither he nor his ideas should be cavalierly dismissed by us. Having successfully, albeit almost miraculously and certainly unexpectedly, rebuilt American Orthodoxy, Orthodox Jews must now devote their energies, wealth, time and talent to help rebuild the entire Jewish people no matter what label they currently individually espouse. The Jewish house in America is burning down to the ground, and we are apparently the only firemen with a water supply sufficient to douse the flames.

**W**e can also help rebuild the house by example and effort. All of the other alternatives advanced to save American Jewry that avoided intensive Jewish education and disciplined observance of Torah commandments, have failed miserably. The current population study only confirms what we ourselves know from simply living here. There is no future for a Jewish community that is ignorant of Torah and Jewish history and is completely non-observant of *mitzvot* and the Jewish lifestyle. The return to Jewish living in the United States may be slow and painful, but it is possible. We must facilitate, encourage and guide it by being gracious, accepting, non-judgmental and forthcoming to all Jews. We may then perhaps be blessed with better demographic news in the coming decades. **JA**