

The Jewish Future is Bright, and We Can Make It Brighter

Rosh Hashanah 5782

Rabbi Barry H. Block

The forecast was dire. A guest speaker at a late-1970s youth group event portrayed a grim future. By the year 2000, fewer than 1,000,000 Americans would identify as Jews.

Even as a teenager, though I was alarmed by the professor's prophesy, I thought he was exaggerating. 2000 was only about twenty years away, and eighty percent of American Jews were not going to disappear in less than a generation.

2000 came and went, of course, and American Jewry was still here, in more or less stable numbers. Still, the fearful forecasts continued. Every few years, a National Jewish Population Study would predict calamity. Jews who married people who were not Jewish were considered to have abandoned Judaism; the chance of their children being Jewish, remote. Our birth rates were low. Our numbers would diminish geometrically. Demographers seemed to affirm the words of historian Simon Rawidowicz, who called us "the ever-dying people."ⁱ

Every few years, rabbis would ascend High Holy Day pulpits with sermons that amounted to a harsh *oy vey*, demanding that congregants marry Jews and have more babies...or else.

Last year, Pew Research conducted its newest research on American Jews. This 2020 population study was conducted with impressively rigorous methodology by an organization with no agenda other than to provide accurate data.ⁱⁱ And the news is encouraging.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, former president of the Union for Reform Judaism, once noted that a 1964 cover story of *Look* magazine was, "The Vanishing American Jew." Yoffie then observed that *Look* is out of business, but we American Jews are still here. We are not, after all, "the ever-dying people." We are some 7.5 million strong, up about 800,000 since 2013.ⁱⁱⁱ

Encouragingly, the study demonstrates that Jewish young adults participate in Jewish life, whether religious or cultural activities, at rates equivalent to those of older Jews. Whether measured by synagogue attendance, marking Shabbat, or even enjoying traditional Jewish foods, the study found no decline in Jewish living.^{iv} The Millennial Generation, known for skepticism toward institutions and the obligations that come with them, is embracing Jewish life no less than Jews of their grandparents' generation.

Except, I hasten to add, many of the grandparents of those Millennial Jews are not Jewish. We see that in our own Religious School. Some of our youngsters are converts, having joined the Jewish People with their parents. Many more have one Jewish parent, not two. Still others have two Jewish parents, one of whom did not grow up Jewish. The result is that the substantial majority of our Religious School students have at least one grandparent who is not Jewish.

In the days of “the ever-dying people,” such facts were considered catastrophic, the claim being that most of the children I have just described would not become Jewish adults. Perhaps the most important finding of the 2020 Jewish population study is that this conventional wisdom was faulty. Alan Cooperman, Director of the Pew Research Center, which conducted the study, interprets its results, saying that “intermarriage” may now lead to a net **increase** in the number of Jewish adults, a source of gain rather than a harbinger of certain demise for the American Jewish community.^v

One more characteristic of our Religious School students: Quite a few are people of color. That reality is consistent with the 2020 Study of the American Jewish Community, which found: “Younger Jewish adults are more racially and ethnically diverse than older Jews.” Among Jews ages 18-29, fully fifteen percent are non-white, compared to only three percent of Jews ages 65-plus. Still more young Jewish adults live in a household with a person of color.^{vi} The study tells us that the American Jewish future is bright, and also that it is multi-hued.

All that brings me to this morning’s Torah reading about the birth of Isaac and the expulsion of Ishmael. Why was this particular portion assigned for Rosh Hashanah? Let us ponder that question.

Jews did not start worrying about continuity in the twentieth century. That anxiety about Jewish survival has troubled our people for thousands of years, stretching back to the time of Abraham and Sarah. Sarah, childless at an advanced age, devises a creative plan to assure that the Jewish people would live long after her death and Abraham’s. She suggests that Abraham consort with her handmaid, Hagar, and the child would count as Sarah’s.^{vii}

Sarah, though, never accepts the child. I wonder if that’s because Ishmael’s mother, Hagar, is Egyptian,^{viii} not of Mesopotamian stock, like Abraham and Sarah. Twice, Sarah demands that Abraham expel Hagar and Ishmael, the child whom she planned as the heir to the tradition.^{ix} Of course, that part of the story is not the primary reason we read Genesis 21 on Rosh Hashanah. Isaac’s birth is the key. He, not Ishmael, is to carry on his parents’ unique bond with God.

Another reason this portion was chosen for this morning is that Rosh Hashanah is known as *Yom HaZikaron*, the Day of Remembrance. We ask God to **remember** the righteousness of our ancestors and forgive us on their account. We read this portion this morning because, according to the Talmud, God **remembered** Sarah on Rosh Hashanah,^x and she became pregnant all those years ago today.

I suspect that the **real** reason we read this selection today, though, is the timeless Jewish obsession with continuity. Were Isaac not born, the story goes, our tradition would have died in its infancy. As we gather to mark the New Year, we celebrate the beginning of *l'dor vador*, transmitting our heritage from one generation to the next.

There's only one problem with that narrative: With the earlier birth of Ishmael, Sarah and Abraham **already have** a child to perpetuate their unique bond with God. Had Abraham and Sarah embraced Hagar and Ishmael, instead of expelling them, perhaps they would have multiplied the number of their heirs to the Covenant.

The 2020 Study of the American Jewish Community was not conducted to critique our founding mother and father. Still, in addition to repudiating the prediction that American Jews are disappearing, the study's findings also suggest that Sarah and Abraham made a terrible mistake that we dare not repeat.

Imagine, if you will, Isaac and Ishmael growing up side by side, as brothers, not only because they share a father, but also because they share a bond with God and with the generations that will come after them. In that case, Ishmael need not be the progenitor of a separate people. Instead, his name and those of his mother, spouse, and ethnically diverse children might be venerated among the matriarchs and patriarchs of our much more numerous people.

We don't have to stretch our imaginations too far. We need only look to our own congregation—particularly the young adults among us, and even more, the next generation in our Religious School. This Jewish future is cause for celebration as we greet the New Year.

Let 5782 be a year in which we wipe away negative appraisals of marriages between a Jew and a person who is not Jewish, at least not yet: Now we know that, more than likely, they are the parents of a vibrant Jewish future.

Let 5782 be a year in which we wipe away old notions of who is a Jew and what a Jew looks like, celebrating the diversity in our midst, including those who

have not officially joined the Jewish people but are eager to support and embrace us.

Let 5782 be a year in which we recommit ourselves to celebrating every person who seeks to be part of our community.

Amen.

ⁱ Simon Rawidowicz, *State of Israel, Diaspora, and Jewish Continuity: Essays on the 'Ever-Dying People,'* Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry, 1998.

ⁱⁱ Sarah Bunim Benor, Alan Cooperman, and Bruce Phillips, "HUC Connect Presents, Pew 2020 Study of the American Jewish Community: What's Next?" May 19, 2021. Recording available at [HUC Connect Presents: Pew 2020 Study of the American Jewish Community: What's Next? on Vimeo](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ Becka A. Alper and Michael Cooperman, "10 key findings about Jewish Americans," Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021.

^{iv} Benor, Cooperman, and Phillips.

^v Benor, Cooperman, and Phillips.

^{vi} Benor, Cooperman, and Phillips.

^{vii} Genesis 16:1-3.

^{viii} Genesis 16:1.

^{ix} Genesis 16:4-6., 21:9-14.

^x B.T. Rosh Hashanah 11a.