



## **Rabbi Weiner's February 2007 Bulletin Article**

How many Jews are there in the United States of America? What percentage of the American population does the Jewish community comprise? This is a very important question. The obvious place would be to consult the data provided by the U.S. Census, conducted in our nation every 10 years. But you won't find the answer there, because although questions regarding race, ethnicity, national origins and the like are part of the census, there is no question regarding religious affiliation. So the question remains: How many Jews live in the United States of America?

This unanswered question has been a great concern to Jewish communal leaders. Thus every so often, one Jewish organization or another has sought to provide an answer through a variety of demographic and sociological studies of American Jewish communities. Last month, a new estimate of the current Jewish population in America was published in the annual American Jewish Yearbook. It's conclusions call for reflection. But to fully understand it, we need to go back a little....all the way back to 1990.

The National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), commissioned by the Council of Jewish Federations in 1990 was a true watershed in American Jewish history. It was probably the most controversial and scrutinized study of the American Jewish community ever published. Without going into all of its conclusions, it seemed to confirm two dangerous trends. The first was that the Jewish population in America had decreased from the well established figure of approximately 6 million to 5.2 million Jews. The second was a confirmation of a great deal of research conducted throughout the 1980's of an intermarriage rate well over 50%. Lumped together it was a sobering (dare I say depressing) assessment of American Judaism, and it's results called for somber reflection.

The only good thing to come of the NJPS was that it did encourage real soul searching and creative responses to a perceived malaise in American Jewish life. Instead of a beleaguered Israel, or anti-Semitism, or the desire to perpetuate the memory of the Holocaust, our synagogues, our organizations, and some of our greatest thinkers began to imagine anew what being Jewish was all about, and how to articulate a compelling and persuasive vision of Judaism in this great nation where truth be told, the greatest threat to Judaism has been secularism, not hostility. For 2000 years a person born Jewish had virtually no option but to remain Jewish in some fashion. In America Judaism, whether we like it or not,

whether we admit it or not, Judaism is an active choice. To this day, seventeen years later, sociologists and demographers are still arguing over the information and statistics provided by the NJPS. I always believed that it's numbers were too low. But the concern-- even panic --that the 5.2 million figure caused led to some important initiatives. In the almost 20 years since the NJPS we have seen significant advancement in the training and education of Rabbis, Cantors and especially of future educators. We have seen marked growth in the opportunities for significant Jewish learning and leadership for our lay community. Hillel and other programming for college students, woefully under funded throughout the 1970's and 80's has greatly improved in the last two decades. The Birthright Israel program has sent thousands of young adults to Israel. Each of these innovations and so many others like them can be traced to the rethinking of our priorities encouraged by the scary statistics of the NJPS.

So it with great interest that I read of the new results of the study commissioned by the American Jewish Congress for their annual American Jewish Yearbook. This study projects an American Jewish community at approximately 6.4 million individuals. And another study commissioned by Brandeis University that will be published later this year will project a similar if not slightly higher number as well. That's welcome news.

But even if the newer numbers are correct, as I believe they are, we can't take much comfort in them. There is still so much work to be done. And in this struggle, the voice of every member of the Jewish community must be heard.



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