

Sound the Shofar! Dance in the streets of Jerusalem! Or Boston or New York! What we had thought was an American Jewish community in decline is actually a community on the rise!

Is that our reaction to the latest new survey of the US Jewish community by Dr. Leonard Saxe and the Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University?



Rabbi David Lerner

ies at Brandeis University?

Saxe claims: "The Jewish population in the United States is significantly larger than previously estimated." In contrast to previous data indicating declining numbers, Saxe reported that "the Jewish population has grown from about 5.5 million individuals in 1990 to an estimated 6.5 million as of 2010, an increase of nearly 20%."

Playing the numbers game is a tricky business. Has the Jewish population grown? Whom are we counting? Is this growth fueled by immigrants?

Let's start with the big picture. In 1950, there were 5 million Jews among 150 million Americans. In 2010, there were somewhere between 5 and 6.5 million Jews among 310 million Americans. In other words, in 1950, 1 in 30 Americans was Jewish; in 2010, even using the higher figure, 1 in 48 Americans was Jewish, despite the influx of Jewish immigrants.

Anticipated growth from the 5

Playing the numbers game

million would have yielded many more Jews.

Where did they go?

Most of them simply assimilated out of existence. Some of this may be related to intermarriage – although it should be noted that today approximately one-third of intermarried families do raise their children as Jews, and in places like Boston the proportion is substantially higher. It is important to distinguish between intermarriage and assimilation.

While intermarriage poses significant challenges, it can also be an opportunity for Jewish continuity, while assimilation and apathy spell the decline of American Jewry. The losses are not evenly spread across the American Jewish community. Given the birth rates of American Jews – the lowest being among the secular and the Reform, middle numbers among the Conservative and the highest among the Orthodox – the percentage of Orthodox Jews will rise, while the total number of Jews will probably decline.

To my mind, that is a great loss. To reverse this trend, we must continue to create vibrant and dynamic non-Orthodox Jewish communities.

The recent Avi Chai study of Jewish leaders in their 20s and 30s sounded an alarm, as this is a group that is not connected to shuls and other traditional Jewish institutions as much as previous

generations were.

In the past, when Jews moved to a community, they joined the synagogue. They gave to the federation, they joined Hadassah and they participated in the core organizations of the Jewish community. Now, those are not givens.

Young Jews, including Jewish leaders, are much less apt to join the synagogue and to be a part of the Jewish community's formal structures. To their credit, some of them are building new and often vibrant communities of their own, but these groups neither reach large numbers nor have the infrastructure to educate their children fully. If they, and we, are to survive, they will need to join, revamp and transform existing synagogues and Jewish institutions.

Young Jews today are part of a society and a world that is fast-paced and mobile, one in which they connect in new ways, using technology and social networks. The Jewish community will have to respond to that.

Americans in general choose their lifestyles a la carte. They are much less likely to order the prix fixe, and so our synagogues will have to create more diverse options and more entry points.

My synagogue does this with a vibrant pre-school, Tot Shabbat and Simchat Tot program on Saturday and Sunday mornings and, most importantly, havurot (small groups

that meet regularly) that share similar demographics (e.g., young couples without children).

Similarly, our Brotherhood and Sisterhood do a wonderful job of reaching out to new members, offering them many social opportunities, such as a Murder Mystery evening, bike repair and handyman workshops, softball teams and Mom's Afternoon Off (when dads can hang out with their kids and other dads in the shul while engaging in a variety of activities).

Finally, offering synaplex (multiple opportunities on a Shabbat morning) helps our members connect to shul through traditional davening; yoga; meditation; Bibliodrama; study sessions; discussion groups; guest speakers, singing and niggunim sessions; and learners, family and youth services.

The American Jewish community must view its current financial straits as an opportunity to reshape its institutional structures. We need to look beyond our own fiefs to broader planning, considering mergers and strategic consolidation.

Vibrant synagogues must take the lead in reaching out to those that are not thriving. Larger synagogues should engage with the burgeoning minyan movement, looking for ways to tap its vitality and energy.

Dynamic and progressive synagogues exist within all the movements of American Jewry. Despite problems of contraction in many non-Orthodox communities, many

people continue to join these synagogues, seeking to build a richer, more traditional Jewish life.

As we look a few generations down the road, the numbers do not seem pretty, no matter what blips and quirks one particular study may show. The Jewish community in America will require Herculean efforts from parents, grandparents and those who can set aside funds to create endowments to sustain the future of our communities here in America.

Today, we need to take our message to the largest audiences: a message of the unity of G-d's presence in the universe; a message of interconnectedness; a message of holiness, of meaning, morality and ethics.

Let's present a lifestyle where mitzvot guide our daily actions, elevating our experience of the world and infusing it with meaning. These are our core teachings – ones we should share with the world.

And if these ideas, messages and approaches are stimulated by the numbers game, then I am happy to play along.

Then, numbers aside, we shall truly become a mamlechet kohanim vegoy kadosh – a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

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