

Leonard Saxe and Charles Kadushin

The Arithmetic of U.S. Jewry

THE NATIONAL JEWISH POPULATION SURVEY 2000 (NJPS) took more than six years to plan and execute, cost \$6 million, and its most cited finding is that there are not 6 million Jews in the United States, as was believed, but rather 5.2 million. Findings were released by the survey's

sponsor, the United Jewish Communities (UJC), in September, generating more than a few perplexed reactions from Jewish leaders and scholars.

The study has been hotly debated ever since planning began, and the discussion has become even more strident since the results were released. At least for some, the political clout of American Jews, as well as decisions about how to educate the next generation of American Jews, are related to the findings of NJPS. For those who care about the future of the Jewish community in the Diaspora, understanding what the survey does and does not tell us is essential.

First, NJPS is not a census; we can only estimate the number of Jews in America imperfectly. The UJC initially placed 1.3 million phone calls to American households — it ultimately obtained useful information from only 4,400 that had a Jewish adult who was willing to answer detailed questions.

Much of the discussion about the report has focused on whether the Jewish population is shrinking or growing. The study concluded that of 5.2 million Jews in the United States, 4.3 million consider themselves Jewish by religion or birth and another 900,000 are “Jewish connected.” These numbers, however, are perhaps the least reliable and, ultimately, the least important findings from NJPS.

For one, the sample obtained may not be representative of the Jewish population. Second, Jewish identity in the United States is increasingly complex. Inter-marriage, assimilation, uneven Jewish education and differing standards across Jewish denominations make it difficult to determine who is a Jew. Where to draw the line — whether by religion, birth, or ethnicity — will likely be debated for some time.

The simple conclusion is that the findings need to be placed in context. One needs to understand the complexity of identity and the difficulty of conducting a survey such as NJPS. The fact, for example, that NJPS surveyors were not able to conduct interviews with many Jewish households, especially households with both Jewish and non-Jewish adults, does not invalidate the data, but is a condition that we need to understand as we use the data.

Thus, the finding that the number of Jews in the United States

appears to be declining, that the Jewish population is older than expected, and that the level of Jewish engagement of its members has increased, are conclusions that probably should be qualified. Major policy decisions regarding the allocation of millions of dollars will be based on our interpretation. For example, the question of just how much to devote to education programs for young adults such as birthright Israel, versus support for the elderly, depends on how we view these data.

Whatever qualifications need to be applied to how many Jews are counted, the survey provides rich data about the characteristics of American Jews in the 21st century. These data could help us answer several important questions, such as: How do feelings about Israel differ between the highly engaged and those who are not? What are the effects of Jewish education on Jewish identity, and how do Jews plan to educate their own children? And how are all of these variables interrelated? We don't yet know the answers, but the survey data is like a mine — exploration will ultimately yield treasures that add to our knowledge and ability to strengthen the Jewish community.

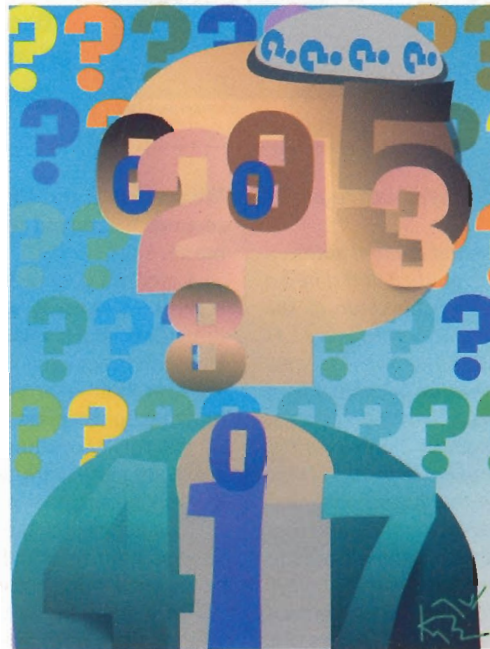
The Holiness Code (Leviticus 19:35) enjoins us not to “falsify measures of length, weight, or capacity.” Our contemporary imperative is to be honest in our assessment of the Jewish people. However important, it may be impossible to know with precision the number of

American Jews. We may need to accept the fact that Jews are too small a group and too well integrated in American society to make them easily distinguishable.

Instead, let us use what we know about those who are willing to talk about their Jewish identity. We may not be able to ascribe a representative number to the level of Jewish observance, but we can learn a great deal about how Jews view their identities and lives. There's much we can learn about how they relate to each other and to the Jewish people.

As we face the contemporary world, it is tempting to rely on ancient views of the strength of numbers. But our strength is in our way of being, not in our numeric presence. The community needs Jews who count more than it needs to count Jews. It's a lesson that the Jewish people — in Israel, as well as the Diaspora — need to heed. ●

Leonard Saxe is professor of social policy at Brandeis University and director of the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies; Charles Kadushin is professor emeritus of sociology (City University of New York) and distinguished scholar at the Cohen Center.



We need Jews who count more than we need to count Jews