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THE WAY (THEY SAY) WE ARE: Using Quantitative Data to Explore the Parameters of Orthodoxy

I. INTRODUCTION

Notwithstanding classic Jewish ambivalence toward direct headcount, Jews in the United States have been subject to numerous demographic studies. The last two decades, in particular, have witnessed a redoubling of such efforts. In 1970, for example, the first National Jewish Population survey was gathered as a broad attempt to study the Jewish community and draw projections regarding its demographic status and social, economic and religious life.

More recently, a series of community studies appeared in those cities with substantial Jewish populations. These were generally undertaken through the local offices of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies in cooperation with the newly created North American Jewish Data Bank (NAJDB) housed at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. More than half of America's Jews live in or around five large cities: New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami and Philadelphia. It may be possible, therefore, to draw important conclusions based on studies of only a few communities.

In general, these studies focus on the American Jewish community broadly, with aspects of religious behavior, patterns of affiliation and denominational activity reported in this context. Specific surveys of Orthodoxy have been rare, in part due to the more generalist auspices of the work and in part due to biases and suspicions of both researcher and subject.

Recently, individual analysts have turned their attention to quantitative studies of American Orthodoxy. They have drawn samples from synagogue lists, organizational membership, university campuses and personal contact. Though usually of high quality, the enterprise is still very much in its infancy.

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Mrs. Chana Schnall for whom adherence to the parameters of Orthodoxy was a life-long commitment.

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However, the result of extrapolating from general data regarding American Jewry and specifically studying Orthodoxy in the United States may yield provocative inferences which can be tested against existing qualitative research, of which there is much. Such is the intent here: a tentative and preliminary look at what some of the existing quantitative data and researchers have suggested about the current state of Orthodoxy in America.

This introductory paper will explore the parameters of American Orthodoxy and the challenges of such analysis, as understood and compiled by an interested observer and student. It will focus on measures of identification, affiliation and ritual observance. As the first of a series, it is as likely to raise questions as provide answers.

II. IDENTIFICATION

Any demographic assessment of the Jewish community must begin with some basic definition of who is to be included, an issue that has been consistently troublesome. For example, there are about a half million people who were raised as Jews or of Jewish parentage, but report another religious preference. How are they to be counted?

Conversely, there are others who identify themselves as Jewish, but follow sects (Hebrew Christians, Hari Krishna, etc.) which, at least intuitively, would appear to exclude them. Still, there is an irony in deleting them. Many have Jewish affiliations stronger than others who will be included because they believe in and belong to no particular group.

Though the situation is a bit less extreme, there is an analogy to Orthodoxy. A lively and dynamic aspect of much current debate focuses on who to include and who to exclude. By examining some of which assumptions, we run the risk of appearing, in Norman Lamm's terms, "spiritually simple-minded or religiously asinine", much like

ideological geographers or spiritual surveyors who search out the exact point between right and wrong, religious and nonreligious, "mitzva and avera". . . (Lamm, 1989-90:9).

Nevertheless, in any quantitative assessment of the status and quality of Orthodox life in America, exploration of at least its demographic parameters is obligatory.

The simplest and most common approach allows the community to speak for itself. Respondents choose which, if any, of the current denominations of Judaism they prefer; one is Orthodox if he or she so indicates. Aside from the unwillingness to apply objective definitions, the approach implies the value in knowing if respondents "feel" Orthodox, their behavior notwithstanding. The result, a generous count that includes many who

might not be added under more rigorous definitions, will be addressed in a later section. For immediate purposes, the current data will be accepted at face value.

In the following table, the first figures are based on the NAJDB "Nine Cities File" which covers the 60% of American Jews living in the nine cities of largest Jewish population (Kosmin, 1988). For purposes of comparison, they are followed by data gathered in the five largest Jewish communities. Unless otherwise noted these and others cited are based on the community studies listed in the references following this paper.

The data suggest that 9% of America's Jews identify themselves as Orthodox. By contrast, about three times as many consider themselves Reform and almost four times as many call themselves Conservative. Apparently, for the bulk of America's Jews the three major denominations still have salience. It is interesting, however, that a sizable minority are left unmoved. Depending on age, between one-quarter and one-third chose "none of the above".

TABLE I
AMERICAN JEWISH DENOMINATIONAL PREFERENCES

SOURCE	ORTHO- DOX (%)	CONSER- VATIVE (%)	REFORM (%)	OTHER/NO PREFERENCE (%)
NAJDB	9	35	30	27
NAJDB (Age 25-34)	7.5	29	32.5	31
NEW YORK	13	36	28	23
LOS ANGELES	6	30	34	30
CHICAGO	6	35	39	20
MIAMI	11	35	24	30
PHILADELPHIA	5	41	25	29

A look at the individual cities is also edifying. The data imply that the assumption of 9% Orthodox preference nationally is subject to wide variation locally, a point well-known to community leaders. For example, the proportion of those identifying with Orthodoxy in New York and Miami in the early eighties is well above the national average and about twice that in Los Angeles, Chicago or Philadelphia.

Other Jewish communities, though smaller than those listed, have also shown a marked Orthodox presence. For example, a study of Baltimore Jewry indicates that 20% of respondents identify themselves as Orthodox. The figures for Seattle, Pittsburgh and Rochester are 16%, 13% and 12%, respectively. Of course, New York remains home for the largest Orthodox community, as well as the largest Jewish community in the country. Still, the

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numbers may suggest that Orthodoxy, as a Northeastern, big-city phenomenon, is slowly changing, a point "out-of-towners" have been arguing for years. By contrast, New York data suggest that Brooklyn and the Bronx remain the bastions of New York Orthodoxy and one need not travel far to see the figures dwindle. Thus in suburban Westchester, Nassau and Suffolk counties, the proportion of Jews calling themselves Orthodox falls to 5%, 3% and 2%, respectively. Admittedly, the most recent study of New York Jews dates to 1981 and much has happened in the last ten years. The new survey of the New York region may well reflect important changes.

However, a study of Metrowest in central and northern New Jersey sheds more recent light on New York suburban Orthodoxy. Gathered in 1985, the data indicate that only 6% of its Jewish residents identify themselves as Orthodox. The small turnout confirms what is well-known to locals: the size and strength of New York's Orthodox community varies with only small change of venue.

III. AFFILIATION

Thus far we have focused on Jews who state a preference for Orthodoxy, without considering what that identification may mean to them. We have found that under a broad umbrella, the Orthodox are a tiny proportion of America's Jews. We will now test these findings against the most basic form of religious affiliation: synagogue membership.

Numerous studies have found that American Jews are less likely to belong to a house of prayer or attend religious services regularly than are their Gentile neighbors. Though larger proportions of Jews make a denominational preference, only about half the Jews in the United States belong to a synagogue (Wertheimer, 1989:83).

In addition, previous studies have suggested that synagogue membership is dynamic, related to such variables as age, marital status and family size. For example, intact families with young children are most likely to belong. In addition, members tend to allow their affiliation to lapse with changes in their demographic status. Consequently, membership carries important social as well as religious implications (see, e.g., Friedman and Zober, 1987, and Huberman, 1984).

Data regarding membership also reflect the efficacy of the Orthodox synagogue as an institution. Its ability to maximize its potential, to attract members who already state a basic preference for its tenets and who are its primary clientele, indicates its vitality. Table II presents the data:

TABLE II
PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES WITH SYNAGOGUE MEMBERSHIP BY
DENOMINATIONAL IDENTIFICATION

SOURCE	ORTHO- DOX (%)	CONSER- VATIVE (%)	REFORM (%)	ALL JEWS (%)
NAJDB	73	53	37	40
NAJDB (Age 25-34)	68	37	21	25
NEW YORK	82	52	35	42
LOS ANGELES	42	45	24	26
CHICAGO	50	68	59	50
MIAMI	63	48	44	38
PHILADELPHIA	54	56	39	41

The entry regarding overall membership is immediately noteworthy. According to NAJDB data from the nine cities of largest Jewish population, synagogue membership seems to have hit a low of only 40%. Among those aged 25-34 the figure falls to 25%. A cursory glance at the corresponding findings among the cities listed corroborates this pattern. Overall the data suggest that the American synagogue is rapidly losing its influence. Jewish leaders who have recently called for proselytism among the "unchurched in America," might well begin their evangelical activities among the ranks of coreligionists who are well-represented there.

In general, this is not so among those who state a preference for Orthodoxy. NAJDB data suggest that the vast majority are synagogue members, a finding that holds up well when younger respondents are isolated in the analysis. The data also imply that in this regard Orthodoxy is doing far better than its Conservative and Reform cohorts, a much smaller percentage of whom actualize their preferences with formal synagogue affiliation.

However, we can cast the point differently. We may infer that those calling themselves Orthodox are likely to actualize that identity through synagogue membership. Nevertheless it appears that over 25%, of their sum and about one-third of their youth have not made that most basic commitment.

An examination of the data regarding the individual communities listed confirms the point. Once again, those preferring Orthodoxy are more likely to hold synagogue membership than that city's Jewish population generally. However, the proportions are far from impressive. In Los Angeles, for example, less than half of those who call themselves Orthodox belong to a synagogue. In Chicago, only half belong and in Philadelphia the proportion is slightly more than half.

That these fall short of the broader NAJDB findings may support conventional wisdom about the greater tendency for Jews in somewhat smaller

communities to affiliate with synagogues. For example, the percentage of those identifying themselves as Orthodox and holding synagogue membership in Cleveland, Pittsburgh and Baltimore is 86%, 77% and 71%, respectively. In much smaller communities, the tendency to belong is also quite high but residents may not have the same array of options available to them or may belong to more than one local institution as a social courtesy. The important exception to this observation is New York where, at least among the Orthodox, synagogue affiliation is notably high.

It is also interesting to note that those who claim a preference for Orthodoxy in the communities listed above are not always more likely to belong to a synagogue than those whose allegiances lie elsewhere. In Chicago, for example, both Conservative and Reform outpace Orthodox membership. Clearly, then, when a minimal test of affiliation is imposed important variations emerge. While overall, those who identify themselves as Orthodox are likely to opt for synagogue membership, substantial numbers do not. In given localities this may comprise as much as half the community. The next step then, will apply some minimal level of religious practice as a further test of Orthodox identification.

IV. RITUAL OBSERVANCE

Analysis of ritual observance is the most stringent and demanding of all parameters. It requires that individuals act upon their identifications in ways that may inconvenience them, demand important behavioral accommodations and clearly set them apart from "the crowd." In addition, recent studies suggest social dimensions to such observance.

As with synagogue membership and a host of other facets of affiliation, ritual observance may depend on age, marital status and family size. For example, those married with children tend to observe more rituals more frequently while, excluding inter-married couples, singles record the lowest figures. Furthermore, as with membership, families and individuals revise their ritual observance with changes in their demographic status., (see, e.g., Cohen, 1989).

Parenthetically, the converse may hold. Perhaps those who are more fastidious in the observance of religious ritual are more likely to marry early, have children and stay married. Sorting out the reciprocity between ritual observance and family practices extends beyond our limits here, though future presentations will give fuller expression to the attempt.

At present, we limit ourselves to variations in ritual observance among those considering themselves Orthodox. Four basic observances have been chosen as a minimalist ritual bedrock: attending a Pesah Seder, fasting on Yom Kippur, lighting Shabbat candles, and maintaining separate sets of dishes for dairy and meat meals.

Before proceeding, one comment is in order. Data regarding ritual observance are not alike from one community study to the next. Certain questions are omitted in one or asked differently in another. The cities listed below were chosen because, aside from their substantive value, they were reported in many large-city studies.

The data are intriguing. Clearly, observance of those four rituals is consistently high among those identifying themselves as Orthodox in all the communities listed. Though not shown here, in almost all cases observance is much higher than that reported for Jews with non-Orthodox identification in corresponding cities. This is corroborated by more comprehensive studies of Jewish ritual observance in other samples (e.g., Harrison and Lazerwitz, 1982 and Verbit, 1985).

TABLE III
SELECTED RITUAL OBSERVANCE AMONG FAMILIES
IDENTIFYING AS ORTHODOX IN LARGE JEWISH COMMUNITIES

SOURCE	ATTEND SEDER (%)	FAST ON YOM KIPPUR (%)	CANDLES ON SHABBATH (%)	TWO SETS OF DISHES (%)
NAJDB	95	93	80	80
NAJDB (Age 25-34)	98	98	91	91
NEW YORK	98	96	88	90
CHICAGO	93	85	*	64
MIAMI	88	88	77	75
PHILADELPHIA	93	98	65	52
METROWEST NJ	82	77	63	72
BOSTON	95	89	84	83
BALTIMORE	90	90	65	67

*Not available

Evidently, the Pesah Seder remains an enormously popular ritual which, with few exceptions, outpaces others in its number of adherents. In this respect, Orthodoxy fits the model of American Jewry, which generally reports a higher tendency to observe the Seder than other ritual observances—with the possible exception of Hanukkah candles. In large measure, this is because both are heavily imbued with family signifiacance and serendipitously fall at times deemed “the holiday season” by Christian America.

The issue has another dimension. Recent studies of ritual observance differentiate between those that are “hard” or “easy” and public or private. (Heilman and Cohen, 1986; 169-73; 1989: 43-79). Participating in a Seder

or fasting on Yom Kippur are “easy” in that they occur only once each year and do not overly disrupt usual activities. They are also public in that their setting affirms one’s affiliations with the group, the absence from which would be felt. Consequently, it is no surprise to find that these are almost universally observed among those identifying as Orthodox in the communities listed.

Lighting Shabbat candles and maintaining separate meat and dairy dishes, however, are “hard” in that they require regular observance and, in the case of the latter, a substantial outlay of funds. They are also private in that few, if any, outside one’s immediate circle would be aware of a ritual lapse. As a result, there little social consequence or sanction exists.

It is also no surprise to find a fall-out in regard to these two observances, as compared with the Yom Kippur fast and Seder, in every case listed. In most, the differences are dramatic. In the extreme, 30-40% fewer of those who call themselves Orthodox will light Shabbat candles or maintain separate dishes than attend a Seder or fast on Yom Kippur. Though not recorded here, in this tendency they are little different than their non-Orthodox brethren.

The data regarding younger Orthodox respondents are an important exception, however. While a small fall-out here exists as well, observance remains strikingly high throughout. Though not shown here, this stands in bold contrast to similar findings among younger Conservative and Reform affiliates. There the tendency to light Shabbat candles or keep separate dishes falls by as much as 70%.

In part, this reflects the much-touted renewal of classic Orthodoxy among the young throughout the United States. In part, it is also a function of the tendency for Orthodox youth to marry and have children earlier, which is closely associated with higher ritual observance. Future analysis will explore the topic more fully.

Comparing data for New York with other cities also sheds light on the “out-of-town” syndrome. We suggested earlier that large Orthodox identification in cities like Miami, Baltimore, Pittsburgh or Seattle, implies Orthodox growth outside of New York. However, these data denote important qualitative differences in the nature of that Orthodoxy as it is reflected in the observance of these four rituals.

New York Orthodox report almost universal adherence to all four, with Shabbat candle-lighting the lowest at 88%. Such is not quite the case elsewhere. Though levels of adherence are uniformly high, only in Boston is there anything like the consistency that is reported in New York. By contrast, in Philadelphia, Chicago, and Baltimore the variations are much greater despite their large Orthodox communities.

Once again, the case of Metrowest is intriguing. Though its stands in very close proximity to New York, Metrowest reports a striking variation in observance compared to the corresponding consistencies across the Hud-

son. The reasonable assumption that many of its members were raised and educated within Orthodox New York heightens the point. While not listed here, similar data emerge in Nassau, Suffolk and Westchester counties. This finding is not likely to surprise those familiar with New York Jewry.

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No doubt, the Orthodox have been under-represented in quantitative studies of American Jewry. In some measure, this is due to mutual ambivalence between those counting and those being counted. The further one moves toward sectarian and parochial segments of the community, the less representative are the data likely to be. As a result, they must be evaluated tentatively, in light of other research, and in terms of trends and patterns only. In truth, this is probably the most one can ask from any quantitative study.

Yet several important inferences are in order. First, by the most generous definition, the Orthodox appear to constitute only a tiny minority of American Jewry. Early findings based on the 1990 Jewish population study appear to confirm the general assessment. In fact, projections suggest that the fastest growing segments of American Jewry refuse any denominational identification even if it requires no further obligation on their part.

Perhaps this suggests that they or their children, are "on the road out." In fact, there are non-Orthodox leaders who have made similar points about their own membership (Petuchowski, 1986). Therefore, the projections imply an Orthodoxy that will be an increasingly larger proportion of an increasingly shrinking Jewish community.

Even if these assumptions hold true, this would be a hollow conquest for Orthodoxy; there is little to celebrate in the loss of Jewish souls. More than any victory, it will also reflect the increasing estrangement of Orthodoxy and its inability to fulfill an important part of its mission. This, along with already noted variances in patterns of observance and affiliation among those calling themselves Orthodox, renders the current flurry of triumphal self-congratulations singularly premature. Maybe things look better than a generation ago and maybe Orthodoxy did not anticipate the growth it has already experienced, but much remains to be done.

The discrepancy between Orthodox affiliation and ritual observance makes the point. It has been noted by others (Heilman and Cohen, 1986, 1989) and in lesser form, appears in even the most parochial sectors of the Orthodox community (e.g., Bunim, 1986; Shaffir, 1986), and it raises important questions about the parameters of American Orthodoxy.

Without tests of affiliation or behavior, many who identify as such are "Orthodox" in the sense of personal attachment without necessarily implying a commitment to patterns of behavior better termed "Orthoprax". They

may not have formalized their membership, and their observances may not fit more demanding standards, though as a group they have beliefs, values and practices that set them apart. These are the parameters of identification that designate Orthodoxy as a community of believers, or better, as a common identity.

Yet Orthodoxy in the United States is more than a loosely defined “*oylam*”. On the one hand, as an institutional entity whose organizational networks cover religious, social and communal life, more what sociologists call a “church” than a “sect,” it is marked by the formality of affiliation—most commonly, synagogue membership. Saying that adherents act more alike than like anyone else is not enough. One must “belong” before he can belong and a substantial proportion of those who call themselves Orthodox do not commit themselves sufficiently.

Of course, that need not mean they avoid prayer services or charitable contributions, that can be fulfilled without a formal membership card. To confuse the issue further, some who call themselves Orthodox belong to a non-Orthodox synagogue and not all who belong to an Orthodox synagogue identify with Orthodoxy. For example, the Philadelphia study indicates that, of Orthodox respondents belonging to a synagogue, 23% are members of a non-Orthodox institution, Conversely, in Baltimore, about 26% of those who belong to an Orthodox synagogue did not identify themselves as Orthodox.

Most stringent of all deliniations are communal parameters based on tests of ritual observance. Surely, the four discussed, fasting on Yom Kippur, participating in a Passover Seder, lighting Shabbat candles, and maintaining two sets of dishes in the home, reflect only minimally a commitment to fulfill ritual obligations. Yet even here—particularly among the older respondent, outside New York—we note substantial variance in levels of adherence among those defining themselves as Orthodox.

The question is very direct. No matter how one “feels” does he have the right to call himself Orthodox and not fulfill some basic core of religious obligations? If communal parameters demand high levels of ritual observance, then we must be prepared to exclude large numbers of current adherents from the category of Orthodox and make difficult judgments about others. Alternatively, are we prepared to differentiate between Orthodoxy, as organizational membership or feelings of belonging, and *Shmirat Mitzvot*, personal observance?

The issue may be illustrated in a telling irony. Consider, for example, *ba’ale teshuva* who must accustom themselves to varying levels of observance among “FFB’s” (*frum from birth*). By similar contrast, there has always remained a small number of non-Orthodox adherents who maintain high levels of ritual observance. Some rank as rabbis and teachers. Others constitute part of an informed laity which separates between observance and affiliation or ideology (Cohen, 1988:100; Heilman and Cohen, 1986:167n).

Setting standards for entry into one's community of believers is an intriguing and confounding enterprise motivated by psycho-social, as well as philosophic or theological, factors. Joining with others of similar values is a compelling aspect of affiliation. The more seriously one takes his faith, and the more stringent its demands, the more strict he is likely to be in deciding who may share his ideological "space." Followers of radical or gnostic sects, rift and schism in the pursuit of purity within their faith, deciding who is "in" and who is out."

Through available data, we have considered some of these boundaries among Orthodox Jews in the United States. Future presentations will look more closely at socioeconomic concerns, political and social values, family patterns, and Jewish education in trying to understand what sets the Orthodox apart from other Jewish identifications and decipher, as well, the nature of consensus and difference within the community.

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