

Sermon on the Jewish Future
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Numbers 1 The LORD spoke to Moses in the Tent of Meeting in the Desert of Sinai on the first day of the second month of the second year after the Israelites came out of Egypt. He said: 2 "Take a census of the whole Israelite community by their clans and families, listing every man by name, one by one. 3 You and Aaron are to number by their divisions all the men in Israel twenty years old or more who are able to serve in the army.

THE WORLD'S JEWISH POPULATION was estimated at 13.3 million at the beginning of 2002—an increase of about 40,000 over the previous year's revised estimate (1). Geographical mobility and the increased fragmentation of the global system of nations notwithstanding, over 80 percent of world Jewry live in two countries, the United States and Israel, and 95 percent are concentrated in ten countries. 51% live in SIX metropolitan areas and one third live in TWO of them.

Metropolitan Tel Aviv, with 2.5 million Jews, is the world's largest Jewish city. It is followed by New York, with 1.9 million, Haifa 655,000, Los Angeles 621,000, Jerusalem 570,000, and southeast Florida 514,000.

A major problem in Jewish population estimates periodically circulated by individual scholars or Jewish organizations is a lack of coherence and uniformity in the definition criteria followed—when the issue of defining the Jewish population is addressed at all. We cannot, as a community, take a census identifying a Jew as anyone in our midst who is twenty years old. Because of interfaith marriage, patrilineal descent, and differences in conversion processes, different types of Jews do not agree on who is to be considered a Jew.

For the purposes of the guesstimate done by the World Jewish Population Study, a Jew was anyone who identified themselves as a Jew or was identified as a Jew by a family member, and anyone who was born to a Jewish mother who had not converted to another religion. The latter category includes those who might identify themselves as "Jews" but are not, namely Jews for Jesus and Messianic Jews, who are defined as Christians.

The size of world Jewry at the beginning of 2002 was assessed at 13,296,100. World Jewry constituted about 2.19 per 1,000 of the world's total population. 331 were Christians and of them, 158 were Catholic. 180 of every thousand were Muslims. There were roughly 160 times as many Christians and almost 90 times as many Muslims as there were Jews in the world. Only one in about 457 people in the world was a Jew in 2002.

But what we lack in quantity, we have in quality. At least 173 Jews and persons of half-Jewish ancestry have been awarded the Nobel Prize, accounting for 23% of all individual recipients worldwide between 1901 and 2006, and constituting 37% of all US recipients during the same period. In the scientific research fields of Chemistry, Economics, Medicine, and Physics, the corresponding world and US percentages are 27% and 39%, respectively.

As far as Jewish denominations go, the Diaspora is moving closer in line with the thought process in Israel in which there are really two main kinds of Judaism, Halakhic, meaning Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox, and non-Halakhic, meaning everyone else. Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal and any other Jewish group that does not follow the entirety of the Halakhah as handed down through the Talmud and later rabbinic works, particularly the Shulchan Aruch, the foundation of Orthodox Judaism, are all simply non-Halakhic. I prefer the alternative term, "Progressive."

In this mindset, there is no little real difference between someone who keeps none of the laws, never attending services, and someone who keeps Kosher and attends minyan every day but drives on Shabbat to get there. Once you delve into a form of Judaism in which you have the ability to choose which Halakhot to observe and which not to observe, you in essence cease to be Halakhic.

Reform Judaism has strongly embraced this idea, essentially expanding the realm of acceptable observance and practice to the point that one may, as a Reform Jew, *practice* Judaism as an Orthodox Jew would. The only difference is that as a Reform Jew, they would be doing so by choice, whereas an Orthodox Jew, by obligation. Thus the same Jew, doing the same level of observances, could be on the one hand, Halakhic, and on the other non-Halakhic.

I just love the implication of that on statistical studies of Jews!!!

World Jewry, according to the guesstimate of the World Jewish Population Study continues to have close to "zero population growth" with an increase in Israel (1.5 percent) slightly overcoming the decline in the Diaspora (-0.3 percent). There are roughly four million fewer Jews in the world today than there were in the 1930s.

When our children grow up and become B'nai Mitzvah, we congratulate them on becoming a part of the community, taking their role as Jewish adults in preserving our heritage and teaching others of our traditions. Judaism is a religion of philosophy and reason best understood by those over thirteen and thus best learned in precisely those years of young adulthood in which liberal Jews tend to make themselves absent from Jewish life. Yes, many commit to attending religious school through Confirmation class in 10th grade, but often do not do so with regularity and neither

attend services regularly nor participate in youth groups, both of which are vital in making what was learned in religious school meaningful and relevant in their lives and thereby undermining its value.

If Judaism is going to be an important or even a significant part of our children's adult lives, it must be a part of their young adult lives. They cannot become B'nai Mitzvah at 13 or Confirmants at 16 not to return until they do so briefly to be married or increasingly when their own children enter the religious school. With liberal Jews often not having children until their late 30's or even early 40's, they will have spent in many cases as much as three times or more as long away from organized Jewish life (Age 14- Age 35 = 21 years) as they did within it (Age 6- Age 13 = 7 years)!!!

Youth programs, youth groups, Hillels for college students, summer camps, trips to Israel and other ways in which parents may encourage Jewish involvement for their children are absolutely vital in preserving Judaism for the generations to come.

We have to put all Three E's in the lives of our children if we are going to expect them to grow into well functioning members of the Jewish community: Education, Experience, and Enjoyment. The first one does not end with Confirmation or B'nai Mitzvah and the latter two cannot be solely comprised of life cycle events at which presents are given and received.

Jewish Experience and Enjoyment must include living Jewishly: celebrating the holidays or at least knowing what holidays are occurring, attending Shabbat worship services on a regular basis (even if "regular" is only a few more times a year than "very irregular" would be), seeking out opportunities to do Jewish things – youth group, Jewish camps, social action and Jewish community events, and it

must include the sad and troubling as well as the happy and comforting.

Judaism teaches that mourning for loss is a good thing, that introspection in which you think about and atone for wrongs that may be terribly painful to face is essential, and that understanding that the world is broken and in need of fixing is the lens through which we examine our world. It commands us to be thankful for whatever we have in life, to cherish our families, and to live in the present, even as we continually remember the past and long for a better future for all of humanity.

In the words of the prophet Joel, "The old shall dream dreams and the youth shall see visions." May we strive not simply to dream, to envision, and to imagine a better Jewish future, but labor to make that future a reality. Let us inspire our children and instill in them a love of Judaism.

Hag Shavuot Sameach and Shabbat Shalom.