

JEWISH FERTILITY

All of you have heard about someone saying: "I'm not going to bring any children into this terrible world."

What magnificent arrogance! What self-imposed divinity! Imagine, making the decision for others that they will not be subjected to the cruelties of the future world because you are electing for them not to exist.

It is all the more remarkable a humane gesture because the person making that decision is usually enjoying a fair number of moments in life: a warm relationship with someone else, a job well done, an exhilarating trip to the mountains, a good play, a good meal...Whatever the list, it is more extensive than the list headed "non-existence."

Indeed, it is an ironic fact of child-bearing that people who are somewhat better-off tend to have fewer children than those who are worse-off. The most effective form of birth control in world history has been the rise of family income. Seeing the possibility of a good life, many people apparently decide to have only the number of children for whom they can afford to provide that good life -- a reasonable idea, perhaps, within limits.

But there are also many people who decide to limit their children to the number, if any, which will not interfere with the good life that they -- the possible parents -- are enjoying. One would hope that those so motivated would not justify themselves on grounds that they are sparing those they are not procreating from the terrible world.

Whatever the reasons, Jews are producing fewer people than any other group in America. Since the end of the 19th century, Jews have had lower fertility than the American population as a whole or other ethnic groups. The average family size of those Jews marrying before 1910 was 3.5 children. That average number of children in the American Jewish family dropped to 2 for those marrying between 1925 and 1944. It takes an average number of 2.1 children to insure

population replacement from one generation to another. For the Jews, that figure rose to around 2.3 in the postwar period, but has dropped again below the level which will insure replacement.

It is not just a matter of Jews belonging to that prosperous section of the American middle class which has a low fertility rate. The Jews have a lower fertility rate than Protestants or Catholics who are of the same economic standing. Furthermore, during recent years at least three different studies have found that religious identity or religiosity have little relationship to Jewish fertility. Low Jewish fertility remains something of a mystery, at least to the social scientists.

But that low fertility rate may have more to do with the future of American Jewish population than intermarriage. The intermarriage rate in the U.S. is roughly running around 25 per cent, which is lower than the intermarriage rate for Jews in most of Europe, such as France, Belgium and Italy -- but is still a high rate which will probably get higher. However, some surveys show a considerable and increasing proportion of conversions to Judaism among Christian women marrying Jews in America. Some observers have even suggested that the proportion of conversions in intermarriage results in demographic gains for the Jewish population. That may not hold up for the children of such families -- but in any case, for the moment, the main danger to Jewish population size in America may be the very low fertility rate.

What can be done about it? Well, it's not a problem which yields to direct attack. Educational posters and sermonizing will not help. Countries like France and Czechoslovakia have tried that and more, and have failed. If people severely limit the number of their children because they are afraid of subtracting from their own worldly pleasures, then a very basic problem is involved.

In that case very low fertility is revealed to be a symptom of very high

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materialism. A very low fertility rate indicates that Jews and Judaism are again engaged in a basic struggle with the Golden Calf. If we're interested in Jewish survival, it's not just the loss of numbers which should concern us.