Orthodox Attrition and the Wagers of the Organized Jewish Community
The NYU Applied Research Collective for American Jewry convenes scholars and practitioners, in and beyond the Jewish community, to collaboratively develop recommendations in funding and policy for Jewish foundations and organizations.

Recognizing the dramatic societal, economic, and political changes of the 21st century, ARC seeks to generate a responsive body of literature and cohort of thinkers to enhance Jewish communal life for the coming decades.

Yehuda Sarna, Director
Chelsea Garbell, Research Scholar & Program Manager

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the opinions or views of the Applied Research Collective, its members, funders, or Advisory Committee.
APPLIED RESEARCH COLLECTIVE FOR AMERICAN JEWRY

Orthodox Attrition and the Wagers of the Organized Jewish Community

Eliyahu Stern
Yale University
INTRODUCTION

American Jewish philanthropy allocates hundreds of millions of dollars annually to persuading largely secular and highly acculturated millennials to identify with and engage in Jewish activities and organizations. From fully sponsored organized trips to Israel to various outreach initiatives, Jewish philanthropy has focused on developing opportunities for disaffected young Jewish people to spiritually, intellectually, and socially take part in Jewish communal life. It takes on this challenge, all the while largely ignoring the demographic that in the past most benefited from its largess and overtures: the children of Orthodox Jews. Whereas the organized Jewish community focuses on reaching out to mostly wealthy and acculturated Jews, it has curtailed its support for improving the material conditions of and secular educational opportunities for its most religious and impoverished sectors.
Though countless Jewish philanthropies have prioritized stemming the tide of secular Jews leaving the fold, the question remains: Is this a sound venture and does it reflect the kind of progressive values that have guided much of the focus of Jewish philanthropy in the modern period? The answer, at least to this observer, is no.

As impotent as the organized Jewish community has been at preventing intermarriage is how persuasive it has been at helping Jews better integrate into the societies in which they live and develop new kinds of Jewish communities and identities. The success of large-scale twentieth-century Jewish political projects—Zionism, Bundism, and Jewish liberalism—was largely the result of turning young people against, or at the very least away from, Orthodoxy while offering alternative forms of identification and increased opportunities for upward economic mobility. All major nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberal and progressive Jewish political movements were built on the human base of children that were raised in Orthodox homes.

The organized Jewish community’s wager is based on what has become the standard interpretation of contemporary Jewish demographics in the United States. For every 100 Orthodox Jews aged 60-69, demographers note, there are 575 children under 10 years old being raised in Orthodox homes. On the other hand, for every 100 Reform and Conservative Jews in their sixties, there are 56 putative grandchildren (Cohen, Gussow, & Pinker, 2017). Increasingly, demographers have noted the growth of those they term “nones” (those that identify as Jews of no religion), who express less attachment to traditional forms of Jewish identity. In response to these developments, monies have been directed at Jewish continuity projects targeting assimilated liberal Jews. The Orthodox, it is assumed, will continue to be fruitful and multiply, and their children will simply follow in their parents’ footsteps.

All major nineteenth and twentieth century liberal and progressive Jewish political movements were built on the human base of children that were raised in Orthodox homes.
Those who embraced these movements at first glance seem to be Jewish idealists, in comparison to their more practical counterparts, who simply migrated to a country where “the streets were paved with gold.” But these movements’ allure was not simply their lofty ideals; it was the way they addressed the material needs of Orthodox children. Zionism offered land and protection from the threat of anti-Semitism. It turned them into a new kind of Jew, a chalutz (pioneer), who was attached to the physical world. As described by Avraham Shlonsky, the twentieth-century Chabad Hasid turned Zionist poet, the chalutz would be the embodiment of the idea that “a human being is meat/ and he toils here in the sacred/ and the land/ bread” (1927).

Likewise, the socialist Bund, a Jewish national movement based on a shared Jewish language of Yiddish and Jewish labor, promised Jews new work opportunities and fair wages. “Messiah and Jewry are both dead and buried/ Another messiah is come/ The new Jewish worker the banner will carry/ To signal that justice is done,” cried S. An-sky (Shloyme Zanvl Rappoport) (1901). Both the Zionist and the Bundist held out to impoverished children of Orthodox parents the prospect of something they were sorely lacking: bread on the table and forms of Jewish identification rooted in their material best interest.

And so for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jewish liberal organizations in Europe saw it as their task to integrate the children of the Orthodox into larger secular and non-confessional social and economic arenas. The late nineteenth-century enlightener Judah Leib Gordon’s instruction to “be a man on the street and a Jew in the home” was predicated on traditional Jews entering the workforce and becoming productive and acculturated citizens. Liberal Jewish leaders fought hard not only to remove anti-Semitic political, social, and economic barriers standing in front of religious Jews, but also helped them to access and navigate a new set of secular institutions from the French Alliance Israelite Universelle to the Society for the Promotion of Culture. Among the Jews of Russia, those like Gordon prepared those from traditional backgrounds to enter the civil service and pass entry exams for university admission.

Both the Zionist and the Bundist held out to impoverished children of Orthodox parents the prospect of something they were sorely lacking: bread on the table and forms of Jewish identification rooted in their material best interest.
In the United States, initiatives like Education Alliance focused on “Americanizing” newly arrived traditional Eastern European immigrants. “Those who attended its programs,” writes Elissa Sampson, “gained the needed vocational and educational skills to mitigate the many risks associated with deep immigrant poverty, miserable lodging and work conditions and rapid cultural displacement” (Sampson, 2018). There was nothing neutral about this endeavor. “Their programs were controversial,” Sampson explains, “since their stress on Americanization was seen as encouraging children (and often adults) to move away from a Jewish identity, and particularly away from more traditional and familial cultural and religious understandings.”

The most successful Jewish reform projects in the modern period were not those focused on enlightening the Jewish soul, but rather those directed at filling Jewish stomachs.

Understandably, Orthodox leaders saw all of these projects and the respective entities that promoted them as grave threats. Zionism and Bundism were heretical movements, they demurred, precisely because of their material promises. Leading Orthodox rabbis outright dismissed physical well-being and economic opportunity as core Jewish values. They doubled down on the spiritual aspects of Judaism and made material deprivation into a central theological axiom. Coping with immiseration, mesirat nefesh, became a defining existential mantra of traditional Jewish life. The late nineteenth-century rabbinic leader Israel Meir Kagen warned European Jews not to be tempted by the material imaginary of the United States of America and remain put in Eastern Europe. The material opportunities made available to immigrants in the United States were but a gateway to atheism and heresy. Kagen’s student Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman railed against Bundist, Zionist, and Jewish liberals, warning his flock to “be careful to avoid taking initiative regarding material matters...As for material matters,” he explained, “they are in God’s hands alone, and spiritual matters are in the hands of man” (1983).

The most successful Jewish reform projects in the modern period were not those focused on enlightening the Jewish soul but rather those directed at filling Jewish stomachs.
Over the course of the twentieth century, the organized Jewish community continued to gain in strength while Orthodoxy continued to wane. A steady stream of the formerly Orthodox gravitated toward liberal denominations. This development was not simply a function of these denominations’ commitments to egalitarian values and religious reform; it was also due to the way they reflected forms of “religious identity” that reinforced certain mid-century American middle- and upper-class sensibilities and conformed to American Jews’ newly acquired socioeconomic status.

The ascendency of Conservative Judaism in the ’60s and ‘70s came on the heels of new professional opportunities and Jews’ arrival in suburban America. The liberal denominations offered a certain style of Judaism, one that embraced the automobile (even on Sabbath), tony public-school districts, and religious practices that in no way conflicted with the demands of the workplace. As the children of the Orthodox joined Conservative synagogues, their median incomes rose. Meanwhile, those who remained Orthodox continued to be identified with what the sociologist Marshall Sclare famously described at the time as “a case study of institutional decay.” Orthodoxy’s attrition rates were the highest of all denominations and its congregants’ per capita income the lowest.

To be sure, to identify as Orthodox in the 1970s usually meant to be economically less well off than the rest of American Jewry. In the NJPS survey conducted in 1971, only 16 percent of those identified as Orthodox Jews in the United States earned more than $20,000 (Massarik, Lazerwitz, Axelrod, & Chenkin, 1971).

By the end of the century, however, the per capita income of Orthodox Jews had increased, while their attrition rates had decreased. Looking back at the transformation from the 1950s, the authors of the 2013 Pew Poll noted that, whereas among those born into Orthodox homes in the 1950s, barely over 20 percent remained Orthodox, among those born into Orthodox homes in the 1980s, over 80 percent were still Orthodox Jews. While the report emphasized that 28 percent of Orthodox Jews earn over $150,000 per annum, it failed to highlight that 43 percent of Haredi households (the fastest growing sector of Orthodoxy) still earn under $50,000 per annum (Pew, 2015).
However, there are numerous factors that suggest that Orthodoxy’s current retention rate and its economic standing will begin to diminish. Rising birthrates, increasing costs of real estate in urban areas where many reside, large-scale growth among its most impoverished sectors, and the cultivation of consumerist appetites delivered through the private medium of the smart phone all pose serious threats.

Examining the shifting conditions of the ultra-Orthodox in Israel, journalist Anshell Pfeffer has argued that organized Jewish communal life is unprepared for the inevitable exodus of Haredi Jews. “What was possible for a brief blip in history—through a combination of fundraising in the Diaspora and, since 1977 when the ultra-Orthodox parties became a regular fixture in Likud coalitions, through government subsidies and benefits for yeshiva students—is swiftly becoming impossible,” claims Pfeffer. “Young Haredi men and women,” he continues, “are increasingly reluctant to live in self-inflicted penury, especially while they can no longer close their eyes to the drastically rising living standards of others in Israel” (2018).

According to a 2018 study released by the Taub Center for Social Policy in Israel, “The share of [Haredi children] leaving the State-religious education stream was about 20 percent of girls and 25 percent of boys. Most of these students transferred to the State education system, and only a few completed the research period in Haredi schools.” The long-term implication of this development is that the prognostics of Haredi ascendancy in Israel have been overstated. Research conducted only a couple of years ago that predicted that for every 100 non-Haredi Jews in 2059 there will be about 50 Haredim has already been modified to 35 Haredim.

Pfeffer’s analysis, while focused on Israel, correctly identifies the economic incentives that are leading to an exodus from ultra-Orthodoxy in America as well. However, he seems misguided in his claim that Haredi attrition could become new fuel for the exhausted liberal denominations, at least in the United States. Other small sample sets gathered respectively by Zalman Newfield and
Irrespective of locale, education has been the primary means toward Jewish upward mobility. For good reason, Haredi rabbinical authorities have worked hard to block local governments, most notably the New York State Assembly, from overseeing curricula and enforcing statewide tests in their yeshivot and hedarim. Preventing their children from gaining proficiency in English not only means more time for them to study Talmud, but also ensures that they will be intellectually crippled in American educational institutions. While it is debatable if the organized Jewish community should support Jewish groups that lobby for greater government oversight in religious schooling, it should earmark funds for those wanting to break with rabbinic leaders and seeking assistance to be admitted to college. Resources should be provided to those raised in Haredi households who wish to study English and take exams necessary to enter university. Such a project would not involve promoting reformed versions of Judaism or paying for tuition in pluralistic or modern Orthodox day schools, but rather focus strictly on providing them with basic proficiency in English and opportunities to attend non-sectarian higher education institutions.

The American Jewish community should focus on developing three areas of support for those looking to leave ultra-Orthodoxy: education, jobs, and housing.
Housing

The issue of shelter is the most immediate and pressing obstacle standing before anyone wishing to leave the ultra-Orthodox community. This point is highlighted in the interviews recorded by the sociologist Lynn Davidmann in her book *Becoming Un-orthodox: Stories of Ex-Hasidic Jews*. Her subjects repeatedly explain the fears that prevented them from breaking with their parents: “I had nowhere to go” (2015, p. 128). This issue is especially acute for women leaving arranged marriages. The Haredi community’s ability to provide its adherents affordable and safe housing is probably the most materially compelling reason why so many physically remain in its ranks long after they have intellectually left. Conversely, the fact that the organized Jewish community does not offer tangible resources to those who are in the process of leaving makes said community largely irrelevant in their future lives. The challenge before the organized American Jewish community is to be able to provide assistance where it is needed the most: halfway houses for those in the process of transitioning to new jobs and gaining fluency in American culture. These homes would provide their residents with opportunities for social contact with others exiting the Haredi community.

Job Training

Many in Haredi enclaves are socially constrained due to limited labor possibilities. While we do not possess precise statistics of Orthodoxy’s labor profile, it is clear that many in these communities lack the skills that would allow them to gain employment in professional settings. A dearth of professional opportunities makes many indebted to social welfare and private charity. To break this cycle of dependency, the organized Jewish community should promote professional mentorship networks. It would offer free counsel for those seeking to gain employment and assist in the job application process, CV development, and job interview guidance. The goal of such an undertaking would be to make new labor avenues accessible to those interested in leaving the Haredi community.

A dearth of professional opportunities makes many [Haredim] indebted to social welfare and private charity.
A new coalition must take shape between the children of the Orthodox and the more acculturated and progressive sectors of Jewry.

These initiatives might sound presumptuous and patronizing to some. True enough, but they are no less presumptuous and patronizing than those projects that seek to prevent young Jews from intermingling with gentiles. Furthermore, all of the initiatives described above have strong and long roots in the modern Jewish political tradition running back two centuries. Haskalah, Zionism, and Bundism all shared at least one promise to the Jews they were trying to win over: an improvement in their material well-being.

For their part, the children of the ultra-Orthodox do not come empty-handed. They possess unrivaled levels of Jewish literacy, deep reservoirs of spiritual and cultural capital. As witnessed in earlier generations, familiarity with classical Jewish texts, languages, folkways, and practices can very well become a springboard to deepen the Jewish-universal forms of expressions that are sacrosanct for most non-Orthodox Jews. However, in order for that to happen, a new coalition must take shape between the children of the Orthodox and the more acculturated and progressive sectors of Jewry. It’s critical that gateways and channels are put in place for such encounters to occur.

Ironically, today the group that is most often identified with providing material and emotional assistance to those leaving traditional homes is an organization that does not even consider itself Jewish. It took a number of years until mainstream Jewish organizations began even donating to Footsteps, an organization that provides support for Haredi Jews looking to leave their communities. This organizational hesitancy to support such initiatives reflects a new relationship to Orthodoxy more generally. Instead of encouraging Orthodox Jews to engage in the larger American public sphere, these organizations now implicitly prioritize funding Orthodox day schools, refrain from holding communal meetings on the Sabbath, and promote kosher only policies in Jewish communal spaces. Whereas at one time the organized Jewish community materially assisted those leaving Orthodox households, it now looks to model Orthodoxy for other Jews, looking to Orthodox social and educational institutions as a bulwark against intermarriage.
Moving forward, Jewish organizations will be forced to reckon with large numbers of young people born into Orthodox homes looking for more open and greener pastures.

This is not a new phenomenon; in many ways, until very recently it has been the primary agenda of the organized Jewish community. It is critical that philanthropies begin to develop strategies to address this new/old group, their needs, and the challenges they face. In so doing, philanthropies would be wise to look back at modern Jewish history to know how best to keep them invested in the drama of Jewish life and culture. Provide these young Jews with the capacity to put bread on their tables, to find shelter for their bodies, and to enter educational institutions for their minds, and once again they will be prepared to rethink with us what Judaism means today.

References


Rapoport, S.Z. (1901). To the Bund: In the salty sea of human tears.


Wasserman, E. (1983). Kovetz He’arot Lemeschet Avot.w
Eliyahu Stern is a professor of Judaic and Religious Studies at Yale University. He received his Ph.D. from University of California, Berkeley in 2008. From 2009-2010 he was Junior William Golding Fellow in the Humanities at Brasenose College and the Oriental Institute, University of Oxford. He researches the transformation and development of traditional and religious worldviews in Western life and thought. In particular, he focuses on modern Eastern European Jewry, Zionism, secularism, and religious radicalism. His first book, *The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism*, was published by Yale University Press in 2012. Currently he is working on a book project on the emergence of Jewish nationalism and the secularization of Eastern European Jewry. He has served as a term member on the Council on Foreign Relations and is currently a Fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute and a consultant to the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, Poland.