



Charedi, steady, go!

The global face of the Jewish people is changing, but it's not being addressed.

A HUGE, tremendous demographic change is occurring in the Jewish communities of the US, Israel, Britain and pretty much everywhere and there is relatively little talk about it. The good news for those worried about Jewish continuity is you can finally put your worries to rest. The number of Jews in all of these communities, some of which were in decline for a long time, is rising. The future is secure. The "bad news", if it is indeed bad, and that would depend greatly on one's point of view, is that that future might not be what one thought it would be. In a way, the future is the past: the fastest growing demographic by far is Orthodox Jews, or more specifically, the ultra-Orthodox or Charedis.

Malcolm Hoenlein, the head of the Conference of Presidents, a Jewish-American advocacy group, and a sage observer of the Jewish world, asked me at the Israeli Presidential Conference last week why this was news at all. He rightly said everybody knows Charedis have more babies than any other of their brethren. The answer is because now we have some new facts and the hitherto "fringe" ultra-Orthodox are not far from becoming "mainstream".

Two weeks ago, the UJA-Federation of New York released the first large study on the Jewish community of the Big Apple since 2002. The data, compiled by respected sociologist Steven M Cohen, was perfectly predictable for anyone who has ever walked through the borough of Brooklyn with its large pockets of fervently religious Jewish neighbourhoods: the ultra-Orthodox population is exploding. Four out of 10 Jewish kids in New York are now Charedi. The number of Jews living in the parts of city

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included in the survey (which did not include large swathes of the metropolitan area in New Jersey or Connecticut) rose from 1.4 to 1.54 million in 10 years. On the whole, New York Jews are now poorer; 20 per cent live below the poverty line. They are also less liberal and less attached to Israel. Much of the growth occurs in fervently anti-Zionist communities like the Satmar Chassidic dynasty based in Williamsburg, whose members hold vigils outside the UN headquarters protesting against Israel.

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Meanwhile, the rise of the Orthodox contingent has caused a proportionate decrease in the number of non-Orthodox and secular Jews in New York. In just 20 years, the proportion of Jews in that area affiliated with the Reform Movement as part of the overall community plummeted from 36 to 23 per cent, while the Conservative or Masorti Movement saw a similarly precipitous drop from 34 to 18 per cent. At the same time, intermarriage and assimilation rates remain high.

These trends are not unique to New York. At least 10 per cent of Israeli society – almost 800,000 people – is Charedi and rising. This has had a profound effect on army enlistment, the allocation of national resources and gender segregation in public spaces. Even in Britain, where the Jewish population was in steady decline for decades, Charedi growth in places like London's Stamford Hill in 2008 was a key factor in reversing the longstanding decline in the number of British Jews.

You might well ask why this is all a problem. Indeed, one must be very careful not to stigmatise the Charedi community. Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the head of the Reform Movement, called ultra-Orthodoxy "an authentic and beautiful form of Judaism" in a speech he gave last week. But he went on to say that so was his own stream of Judaism, which Charedis consider to be *chillul Hashem*, a desecration of God. Indeed, there are some fundamental disagreements between the different streams of Judaism that are probably not going to be resolved, but avoiding talking about something because it might lead to antagonising and infighting won't make it go away.

Take the recent Israeli Presidential Conference held last week in Jerusalem. During the three-day conference, there were two panels touching on the future of the Jewish people, but neither featured a single ultra-Orthodox panelist and the steady increase in the number of ultra-Orthodox Jews around the world was mentioned in passing once or twice. Burying one's head in the sand cannot be beneficial for anyone.

When Jews left their shtetls in the 19th and 20th centuries and went to faraway places like America, Israel and Australia, or even to much closer cities like Vienna or Paris, many also left their religious identities behind. Thus, the secular Jew was born and flourished until, through a mix of tragedy and the lure of modernity, he became the majority. Now the pendulum seems to be swinging the other way. But before Charedi Judaism is declared triumphant, a word of warning: the notion that demography is destiny is often mistaken, sometimes even dangerous. Precisely for that reason it's time to have a discussion about what the demographic rise of Charedi Judaism means for the Jewish world and the sooner the better.

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The travesty that's Amnesty

For all its worthy aims, serious shortcomings become apparent when Amnesty International turns its attention to Israel.



Viewpoint

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WHEN a terror squad crossed the Israeli border from Sinai in June with enough weapons and explosives for a mass attack, and then dozens of rockets were launched from Gaza against Israeli civilian targets, Amnesty International's moral compass was disconnected.

The self-proclaimed guardians of human rights published no reports with condemnations, held no press conferences, and issued no "Urgent Actions" to almost three million members around the world calling for the perpetrators of these war crimes to be brought to justice.

In contrast, during the same month, the officials who run this powerful organisation found the time and resources to publish a lengthy "report" repeating unverified Palestinian "testimony" alleging Israeli infractions through administrative detention of terrorist suspects. The publication was an integral part of a political campaign focusing on a hunger strike by Palestinian prisoners, including those tried, convicted and serving sentences for involvement in mass terror attacks. The recommendations repeat many of those found in Amnesty's previous publications that seek to justify international action to restrict and then remove Israeli independence and sovereignty.

Amnesty does not publish the names of the authors of its report (in violation of human rights reporting guidelines), but the latest attacks on Israel include contact information for Deborah Hyams and Saleh Hijazi, who are described as "researchers". Both have backgrounds that reflect flagrant anti-Israel bias.

In 2001, Hyams went to Beit Jala (near Bethlehem) as a "human shield" to deter Israeli responses to Palestinian assaults against the residents of the Gilo neighbourhood of Jerusalem. In 2008, she signed a public letter referring to Israel as "a state founded on terrorism, massacres and the dispossession of another people from their land". In 2002, *The Washington Jewish Week* reported that Hyams said "that while she does not condone suicide bombings, she personally believes they 'are in response to the occupation'".

The other Amnesty "researcher" for Israel, Saleh Hijazi, is a Palestinian born in Jerusalem and raised in Ramallah, and has worked as a public relations officer for the Palestinian Authority. In 2007, he was listed as contact for the NGO Another Voice – under the group's signature "Resist! Boycott! We Are Intifada!". This organisation used threats to force the cancellation of a peace concert, and then proudly crowed about its achievement.

Amnesty's assignment of biased individuals to work on Israel-related issues is yet another demonstration of the depths to which this organisation has sunk in exploiting the facade of human rights.

And this is not its only example of moral failure. In December 2009, long-time secretary-general Irene Kahn and her deputy Kate Gilmore suddenly left Amnesty, and received what were later found to be "excessive payments", "above what was legally and contractually necessary". In an independent inquiry, these were shown to be due to "systemic failures in management and governance" that "had accumulated in previous years".

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Prior to this scandal, there was a concerted effort by some in the organisation to silence Gita Sahgal, the head of the gender equality section, who criticised Amnesty's cooperation with Moazzam Begg, who she termed "Britain's most famous supporter of the Taliban". And for years, while obsessively attacking Israel's open society, officials all but ignored the brutal regimes in Syria, Libya, Egypt and the rest of the Arab world. As a result, they have no credibility in the countries where human rights continue to be trampled.

Thus, Amnesty's contribution to the frontal assault on the right of the Jewish people to national independence and sovereign equality is another dimension of extensive ethical collapse. For over a decade, Amnesty has promoted the "Durban strategy" through false claims of "war crimes" and "violations of international law".

The members and funders of these organisations, including Australians, have the responsibility, as well as the power, to act strongly and consistently to repair this broken moral compass. Instead of receiving "Urgent Actions", the membership should be sending all Amnesty officials a message demanding their resignation and the restoration of the core principles of human rights to include Israelis and Jews.

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