

Editor's Introduction

Samuel Heilman

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I am pleased to present this newest issue of *Contemporary Jewry* which offers another rich serving of ideas and research. Our lead article by Nissim Leon of Bar-Ilan University presents a long-needed account and sociological analysis of the “*teshuvah* cassettes” and the culture they have spawned in Israel, particularly in connection with electoral politics among non-Ashkenazic Jewry (those most commonly associated with the Shas Torah Guardians Party). The intersection of ethnic resentment, religious fervor and mass media in the form of distributed tape cassettes with prerecorded religious messages has created a new and powerful movement in the Jewish state. The ethnographic research Leon offers shows in important detail how interest groups can undermine and shift the political discourse by bypassing the mainstream media and majorities through innovative new approaches—like the cassette—to the public. And it also traces the changing nature of religious and ethnic politics in Israel. Leon tells a riveting story about how resentment and revenge rode the wave of religious renewal and used it for acquiring political power. This is a startling echo (albeit in Jewish terms and an Israeli format) of something that in neighboring Iran helped lead to the rise of the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic revolution.

In our second article, Rachel Werczberger of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and Naama Azulay of Bar-Ilan University provide a thoughtful and eye-opening account of the little-known Jewish Renewal phenomenon among secular Israelis. This revivalist movement, most often associated with North America, has according to the authors altered the conception of secular Jewish identity in Israel. They note that pluralistic learning communities, social justice projects based on Jewish values, and even quests for new ways of celebrating Jewish ceremonies and holidays have found a growing place in Israeli society. To be sure, some of this was once a part of the non-religious kibbutz movements and has always been part of Israeli civil

S. Heilman (✉)
Department of Sociology, CUNY Graduate Center, New York, NY, USA
e-mail: scheilman@gmail.com

religion, but the renewal that Werczberger and Azulay have examined seem to be more affected by North American parallels, representing something new if not completely unprecedented. Placing the phenomenon within the social theory of social movements, the authors provide a helpful way to make sense out of what they have examined.

Paul Burstein of the University of Washington has compiled a much needed overview of Jewish organizations. As anyone teaching courses on American Jewish life knows, the quest for a solid account of these organizations and their role has long been a major desideratum. Yet most of what is available is quite dated; there has been little if any up-to-date research available—until now. Burstein's paper draws on a surprising source never previously used—the U.S. Internal Revenue Service's database on nonprofit charitable organizations—to gather information on many of these groups. Since fundraising for Jewish causes is so frequently the manifest function of associations whose latent function is bringing together Jews with common interests and affiliations, this approach turns out to be an especially clever way to gather comprehensive information. The resulting survey which tells us what the organizations are, where they are located, as well as a host of other details now gives us a strong basis for further consideration of and exploration of this essential element of American Jewish life. This article will surely become an essential staple on the syllabus of all courses on American Jewish life.

Finally, Leonard Saxe, Benjamin Phillips, Theodore Sasson, Shahr Hecht, Michelle Shain, Graham Wright and Charles Kadushin—all from the Cohen Center at Brandeis University share some of the extraordinary wealth of data that is being generated by and collected from the Birthright Israel/Taglit program. This program, that sends thousands of Jewish young people during their college and immediate post-college years on a free (or highly subsidized) trip to Israel and then follows them in its aftermath, has provided an extraordinary data base about a generation of young Jews from all over the world. As time passes, we are not only learning about the impact of that trip upon various cohorts of them and their Jewish life but also about what happens to them in the ensuing years. As researchers (including those responsible for this paper) continue to monitor and study these Birthright/Taglit alumni, the information collected about them will offer us an invaluable measure and developing portrait of Jewish life in the twenty-first century. This paper on intermarriage among these Birthright/Taglit alumni is one of the first fruits of this growing tree of knowledge. The question of whether the trip lowers the likelihood of intermarriage or whether those who choose to take such trips are less likely to intermarry will of course be debated endlessly. Nevertheless, this research that draws on several surveys of Taglit applicants, including participants and control groups of applicants who did not participate, seeks to isolate Birthright/Taglit's impact and compares its influence to other educational interventions and background characteristics. It argues that the trip does indeed have a substantial impact on intermarriage, increasing the odds that a participant (who is not Orthodox) will be 200% more likely to marry a Jew than one who did not attend. Indeed, the authors conclude that "Jewish demographic vitality" is enhanced by these trips. Readers will judge for themselves if the data as presented is persuasive.

But what we all can agree upon is that we shall be studying and learning from the growing amount of data that these trips and the participants are generating.

As I hope you will agree, with this issue *Contemporary Jewry* continues to provide a unique and important source for understanding Jewish life. No other journal offers this combination of ethnographic, survey, demographic, political, and social scientific analysis of the contemporary Jewish scene and phenomena. In our next issue in just a few months, we plan to offer a special consideration of Canadian Jewry that will prove eye-opening. Stay tuned.

In the meantime, please spread the word. We want new subscribers, both institutional and individual. If you have found the journal enlightening, let your friends, colleagues, and those interested in contemporary Jewish life know, and encourage them to subscribe.