

CATRIEL'S NOTEBOOK



Orthodoxy Hits the Suburbs, the Unexpected "Repeal of the Laws of Religious Gravity"

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To the amazement of pundits, social observers, and ordinary Jews, by the mid-1960s, Orthodox Judaism in the US had transplanted itself to suburbia. Hundreds of Orthodox synagogues popped up in some of the most affluent areas of the country, and the educated Orthodox Jews who filled them were far removed from the outmoded stereotypes of lower-class, semi-literate, raggedy, Yiddish-speaking immigrants representing a bygone era.

In 1955, Prof. Marshal Sklare of Brandeis, often called "the dean of American-

Jewish sociologists," contemptuously wrote Orthodoxy's obituary. In "Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement," he wrote that Orthodox "adherents" had "succeeded in achieving the goal of institutional perpetuation to only a limited extent."

"The history of their movement in this country can be written in terms of a case study of institutional decay," he wrote.

Harvard sociologist Nathan Glazer agreed, seeing Orthodoxy as an "anthropological survival."

Pushing Outward

But 22 years later, when Prof Sklare produced a second edition of Conservative Judaism, he declared that, what had happened to Orthodoxy meant the "laws of religious sociology have been repealed."

"Unaccountably, Orthodoxy has refused to assume the role of invalid," he wrote. "Rather, it has transformed itself into a growing force in American-Jewish life."

Prof Sklare was astounded that Orthodoxy was "pushing outward" and not satisfying itself "with serving those Jews who continued to reside in decaying central-city neighborhoods." Instead, he said, Orthodox Jews "proceeded to establish congregations in the better residential areas."

This "Orthodox renaissance," he said, "played havoc" with Conservative leaders' "understanding of the balance of power in the American-Jewish community as well as with their prognosis of the American-Jewish future."

Young and Vital

How right he was.

"A few decades ago, we used to think of the Orthodox as old and dying. Today, we find them young and vital, the youngest of all three major denominations," Dr. Steven Cohen, a research professor of Jewish Social Policy at the Reform Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, said recently.

Crunching the numbers provided by the 2001 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) proves his point. While roughly only 23 percent of Jewish adult synagogue members are affiliated with Orthodox congregations, 37 percent of the children of all affiliated Jews are being raised Orthodox.

From Slum to Suburb

The path taken by several Orthodox synagogues in the Boston inner-city neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan as these areas became poverty-stricken minority enclaves, is indicative of the trend noted by Drs. Sklare and Cohen.

"Their Orthodox synagogues refused to die. Rather, they relocated in new neighborhoods," said Dr. Sklare.

One of the synagogues that he and his colleagues had prematurely sentenced

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to death was Chai Odom, which, in the 1960s, was a disintegrating synagogue in decaying Dorchester. With bold leadership, Chai Odom relocated to a stately Victorian structure in Brighton, a solidly upper-middle class neighborhood in the northwest corner of Boston, bordering on posh Brookline.

A review of the simchas recently celebrated by members of the now young and vigorous Chai Odom propels the NJPS study's dry statistics to life. Fully 42 percent of the simchas celebrated the births of children; 7 percent were bar mitzvahs; while 40 percent were engagements and weddings, some of which involved congregants' children and others were congregational singles.

Only 11 percent involved the grandchildren of members.

Academic Achievers

Many serious observers of American-Jewish life have warned against the common misperception that the Orthodox community somehow lagged behind the rest of the Jewish population in terms of secular educational achievement.

"That is emphatically not the case with the Modern Orthodox, and it is less and less the case in the hareidi community," noted Rabbi Jack Wertheimer, former provost of the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary.

Chai Odom, which identifies with the hareidi Agudah movement, is a case in point. It is not surprising that 44 percent of the men have Orthodox rabbinic ordination, but almost 20 percent have either a PhD, an MD, or both. There are several Chai Odom couples in which the husband and wife have doctorates.

Newton

For Dr. Sklare, it was even more shocking when Orthodox synagogues made their way to the upper-class Boston suburb of Newton. He confessed that he and his colleagues had always assumed that Newton "was a Conservative and Reform preserve."

But in the mid-1950s, Congregation Beth El-Atereth Israel, an amalgam of two congregations founded about 100 years earlier in Dorchester, organized the first Orthodox minyan in Newton Centre.

With its more than 250 families and a beautiful building, it remains Newton's largest Orthodox synagogue, but, today, it is one of six in the community. Congre-

gation Shaarei Tefillah, which identifies as "a centrist-Orthodox synagogue," has 200 family-members.

Palo Alto

In Palo Alto, California, the Orthodox community developed as a result of the efforts of students and faculty members from Stanford University. In 1966, they established an Orthodox Shabbat-morning service in the second-floor auditorium of the school's Old Student Union building.

They borrowed a *Sefer Torah* from a "synagogue in transition" (a nice way of saying "dying") in New York, and acquired a few Birnbaum *Siddurim* and Hertz *Chumashim* from a nearby congregation. They constructed a portable *mehitza*, and opened

the Stanford Hillel Orthodox *Minyan*.

But in June 1970, when a number of key participants graduated or completed their sabbaticals, the *minyan* disintegrated.

During the next five years, sporadic attempts were made to revive the *minyan*, but it took a new group of graduate and undergraduate students who arrived on campus—assisted by some local families—for services to be held once again. Lacking a permanent home, the reactivated *minyan* wandered among members' private homes and sometimes used various rooms on campus.

Growing Up

It is not surprising that a large number
continued on page 23



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Orthodox in the Suburbs continued from page 21

of observant-Jewish families were relocating to Palo Alto at that time. They, like so many other young well-educated academics, were attracted by the growing computer and semiconductor industries, and they succeeded in re-establishing the *minyan* on a permanent basis.

At first, a local bank offered them a community room for the *minyan*, but the members quickly outgrew the bank's facilities. Besides, the bank was not available when holidays fell on weekdays and the *minyan* was forced to meet in members' backyards.

Eventually, the *minyan*, in the words of one of its members, decided "it was time to grow up and become a real shul," which meant finding a permanent location. They settled on an old, but conveniently located Blockbuster store and converted it into a synagogue. When they engaged a rabbi, the community was galvanized into greater efforts, which was how the former Stanford Hillel *Minyan* evolved into the thriving Orthodox synagogue, Emek Beracha.

As might be expected in a congregation located in the heart of super-scientific Silicon Valley, Emek Beracha is "top heavy" with young scientists, physicists, chemists, engineers, and academics.

Elkins Park, PA

In Elkins Park, PA, the Orthodox community sprang up as the response to a challenge. An upscale, older suburb of Philadelphia, Elkins Park was long dominated by two massive Conservative congregations, Beth Shalom, whose major claim to fame is that it is the only Jewish house of worship designed by celebrated architect Frank Lloyd Wright; and Adath Jeshurun (AJ).

Historically, there was no Orthodox presence in Elkins Park, but, in 1980, AJ established a *chavurah minyan*, whose services were decidedly more traditional in orientation than were those in the synagogue's main sanctuary.

One of the key members of the *chavurah minyan* was a *Shomer Shabbat* attorney whose downtown Philadelphia law firm agreed to sponsor weekly classes on Jewish subjects. They engaged Rabbi Abraham Levene, the spiritual leader of the Lower Merion Synagogue, as the instructor.

Popular Leader

The Lower Merion Synagogue, an Orthodox shul in Bala Cynwyd, just over the Philadelphia border, was established in 1956 by a group of Orthodox Jews from the Wynnefield section of Philadelphia. For years, the Lower Merion Synagogue managed to main-

tain a *minyan* only with the help of "borrowed" students from the Philadelphia Yeshiva and Jews who came to the premises in order to collect money for their own sustenance.

Rabbi Levene became the shul's spiritual leader in 1967. It had 50 families. Today, it is the largest Orthodox synagogue in the Delaware Valley.

When the attorney who had spearheaded the *chavurah minyan* told Rabbi Levene about the growing dissatisfaction he and some of his *chavurah* friends experienced at AJ, Rabbi Levene suggested that if they were "leaning towards tradition," as they said, they might consider "going all the way" and organize an Orthodox *minyan* in their neighborhood.

Accepting the Challenge

The lawyer accepted the challenge and together with a few like-minded members of the *chavurah* and some of the more traditional residents in the neighborhood, established the Orthodox *Minyan* of Elkins Park. Rabbi Levene served as the *minyan's* mentor.

In the beginning, having scarcely more than the requisite ten men for their *minyan*, they used a room in the now-defunct Beth Jacob Day School for Shabbat services.

But in December 1985, they hired Rav Dov Brisman,

of Ner Israel in Baltimore, the Mirrer Yeshiva in Jerusalem, and Beth Medrosh Gevoha in Lakewood. Under his guidance, the new congregation organized a wide variety of *shiurim* (some in conjunction with the Lakewood Yeshiva), lectures, and social activities.

Young Israel

In 1988, the *minyan* affiliated with the National Council of Young Israel to become the Young Israel of Elkins Park (YIEP). In 1993, it acquired its present spacious building, a former warehouse.

Its membership has grown not only from new Orthodox families who have relocated to the community, but also from the ranks of the existing Conservative synagogues.

"Every time Adath Jeshurun or Beth Shalom lurch a little more to the left, a few more families leave them and join us," said a longtime YIEP member, a pathologist who teaches in one of Philadelphia's leading medical schools.

Although AJ has many more members on its roster than does YIEP (there are now a little over 70 families), many observers have noted that, unless there is one of the increasingly rare bar mitzvahs at AJ, there are more Jews in shul at YIEP on any given Shabbat morning.

continued on page 24

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Orthodox in the Suburbs continued from page 23

Getting Younger

According to the pathologist, there has been a recent demographic shift at YIEP. Many of the middle-aged and older people, including the original founders of the shul, are retiring and relocating to areas such as Florida. They are being replaced by "YU-type families with tons of kids."

Like Chai Odom, the YIEP boasts a large percentage of professionals, doctors, lawyers, and academics.

According to Rav Brisman, while there are exceptions, "virtually all members of the shul are *ba'alei teshuva*."

It is fair to say that the warm and caring community in Elkins Park is one of the best-kept secrets in American Orthodoxy.

Great Neck

The Elkins Park scenario was an echo of what took place almost three decades earlier in affluent Great Neck, New York, where, in 1951, a dozen young families banded together to form the first Orthodox synagogue in that community. Today, there are at least ten others.

Most of the participants in the first group, including Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Herman Wouk, were culled from the membership of Great Neck's Conservative Temple

Israel.

In 1952, the fledgling congregation purchased a house which turned into the Orthodox Great Neck Synagogue. Even the founders were surprised when, within 17 months, the *minyan* grew to more than 100 families.

Today, it has more than 500 member-families, and is still growing.

Many Jewish Flavors

Many of the numerous other Orthodox synagogues in Great Neck today are Sephardic. Great Neck and Beverly Hills, CA, are the two major centers in the US for Iranian Jews.

The community boasts the Babylonian Jewish Center for Iraqi Jews; Sharrei Zion for Jews of the Syrian community; and the Mashadi Jewish Center of Great Neck, which services the almost 500 families who come from the holy Muslim city of Mashad in Iran.

There is also a Young Israel, and, of course, the nearly ubiquitous Chabad House, which, in Great Neck, also runs a day school "where children are taught with an open mind and an open heart."

Affluent Orthodox

Perhaps nowhere is the Orthodox renaissance more visible than in the northern NJ communities of Bergen

County and the Five Towns in Long Island.

In these bastions of affluence, young Orthodox communities have grown exponentially, bringing with them *eruvim*, mikvehs, and a plethora of businesses that cater to their every need, from kosher food to appropriately modest, but high-priced fashions.

The Orthodox families who live in the expensive homes in these communities are, for the most part, well-educated, affluent, and child-oriented, eager to provide their offspring with the best of the Jewish and secular worlds. The yeshivas and day schools in these communities are expensive, elaborate, and competitive.

The two largest hospitals in Bergen County, Holy Name Hospital in Teaneck and Hackensack University Medical Center, have daily *mincha* services. In September, Englewood Hospital will offer a symposium on Jewish genetic disorders.

Englewood

In 1960, Rabbi Isaac Swift was invited by Congregation Ahavath Torah of Englewood, then located in the relatively modest 4th Ward of the city, to serve as their spiritual leader. At the time, there was virtually no Orthodox life in Bergen

County. The only other Orthodox synagogue, Congregation Bnai Yeshurun in Teaneck, was literally dwarfed by the massive then-Conservative Jewish Center of Teaneck.

Susan Rosenbluth, editor of *The Jewish Voice and Opinion*, described the English-born and educated Rabbi Swift as "a visionary who could see what the possibilities in Englewood were better than the locals."

Immediately upon arriving in Englewood, he set about convincing the shul's leadership to move the synagogue to the more prestigious, virtually *judenrein* 2nd Ward, where homes were more beautiful and spacious.

Yeshivas

Rabbi Swift was also instrumental in founding the Moriah School of Englewood, a Modern-Orthodox day school which today educates nearly 1,000 students from preschool through eighth grade, and the Frisch Yeshiva High School, named for the Ahavath Torah family that sponsored it. Frisch, which now has an enrollment of 650 students in grades 9-12, recently relocated to a new magnificent, multi-acre campus in Paramus.

Today, in Bergen County, there are close to a dozen other Orthodox day schools and yeshivot, ranging from Modern

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Orthodox institutions to those more identified with Agudah, and all gradations in between. There are co-ed schools as well as single-sex institutions. While most are Ashkenazic in orientation, Yeshivat Ben Porat Yosef is a Sephardic yeshiva which sees itself, eventually, educating students from preschool through 12th grade.

The steady growth of Orthodox educational institutions of every stripe in Northern NJ contrasts sharply with the sudden closure of the Conservative Metropolitan Schechter High School in Teaneck in the fall of 2007, just days before the school year. Its abrupt closing, without warning, left students without a school to attend and teachers and administrators without jobs.

Dozens of Shuls

Today, Bergen County boasts Orthodox communities in Fort Lee, Cliffside Park, Englewood, Tenafly, Teaneck, Bergenfield, New Milford, Fair Lawn, and Paramus. Most of these communities have at least two Orthodox shuls, and some have many more. The largest is Teaneck, which has at least a dozen shuls and *minyanim* of various sizes, with new ones constantly added.

In Englewood, while Ahavath Torah

is still the town's largest Orthodox synagogue (with a membership of more than 750 families and a new construction project that, some say, will cost \$30 million by the time it's completed), there are now three other Orthodox synagogues in the city as well as a Chabad House in neighboring Tenafly.

Conservative Temple Emanuel, which was led by the late Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg and once dominated the Englewood Jewish community, has since relocated to a much smaller, less affluent suburb. Englewood no longer has either a Conservative or Reform synagogue.

New Hashkafa

Not only have American-Orthodox communities grown in number and size, but many have them have increased in intensity, a phenomenon that has been called in less appreciative circles "the move to the right."

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, the former president of Yeshiva University, recalled that, years ago, during Sukkoth celebrations, "very few people had a lulav or an etrog."

"Now everyone is here waiving them. You have a traffic-control problem," he said.

West Orange

In 1997, Seton Hall Prof of History Edward S. Shapiro chronicled this process in his own West Orange, NJ, synagogue, Congregation Ahawas Achim B'nai Jacob and David (AABJ&D) in a monograph entitled "Modern Orthodoxy in Crisis: A Test Case."

Founded in 1967 as the merger of four Orthodox synagogues in riot-torn Newark, AABJ&D grew rapidly in West Orange, one of the affluent, pleasant Newark suburbs. Its members consisted of Jews who fled from the Newark race riots and those who were looking for suburbs with a relatively easy commute to New York.

In 1969, when Dr. Shapiro joined the shul, most of AABJ&D's members, he said, were "only nominally Orthodox." For them, he said, "Orthodoxy was a matter of preference, not of practice."

Mixed Dancing and ArtScroll

For example, he said, in the 1970s, AABJ&D sponsored square dances for men and women and concerts featuring female singers. The annual shul dinner had mixed dancing. The synagogue used the traditional Orthodox Birnbaum *Siddur* and the Hertz *Chumash* with their aca-

continued on page 26

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Orthodox in the Suburbs continued from page 25

demic footnotes and erudite explanations.

By the 1980s, the mixed dancing and female singers were gone from the synagogue's social calendar, and the *siddur* and *chumash* used by AABJ&D were produced by ArtScroll, an imprint of translations, books, and commentaries from a devoutly Orthodox-Jewish perspective, published by the Brooklyn-based Mesorah Publications.

Another landmark of the synagogue's move to the right was the shul's Hebrew school, which had been maintained until the 1980s for the children of members who did not attend Orthodox Hebrew day schools or yeshivas.

By the early 1980s, most of the nominally Orthodox families had either left the congregation or their children had grown up. New families moving in all sent their children to day schools. Thus, the Hebrew school closed.

AABJ&D had officially changed, in Dr. Shapiro's words, from "fellow-traveling" Orthodox to "card-carrying" Orthodox, and Dr. Shapiro decried the changes that made AABJ&D "a different congregation than what it had been 30 years ago."

And that was ten years ago.

Happening All Over

AABJ&D's experience is not unique; it is happening in Orthodox synagogues throughout the country. According to Rabbi Dale Polakoff, spiritual leader of the Great Neck Synagogue and a former president of the Rabbinical Council of America, the move to the right "has really come predominantly from the inside."

"There's been almost a spiritual revival, with people being more and more committed to observance," he said.

This change, he said, is not the result of more religious Jews moving to Modern-Orthodox communities, but, rather, he said, "from people within the community becoming more observant."

This intra-shift, he said, provides "a more attractive environment" for more right-wing Jews to move to those communities.

Passaic

In at least one Orthodox community, the shift to increased observance seems almost to have been pre-planned. Passaic, NJ, like many other New Jersey cities during the tumultuous 1960s, suffered a serious loss of its Jewish population to the urban upheavals and ensuing rising crime rate.

The leaders of the Jewish community who remained in Passaic, tried to stem the flow, with a conspicuous lack of suc-

cess. A few modern-Orthodox synagogues remained in the neighborhood called Passaic Park, but magnificent shuls in downtown Passaic were abandoned, leaving only the Jewish names on shuttered storefronts as a reminder of what once was a substantial Jewish community.

In the early 1970s, the community was saved by a few Agudah-affiliated Jews from Brooklyn who were looking to establish a yeshiva that they envisioned as similar to Beth Medrosh Gevoha in Lake-wood. Looking for a site with depressed real estate values, they found it in Passaic.

Planned Community

In 1973, the Yeshiva Gedola of Passaic was founded by the late Rav Gershon Weisenfeld and Rav Chaim Davis. When Rabbi Weisenfeld's precarious health forced him to leave Passaic in 1975, he was replaced by Rabbi Meir Stern, a former rosh yeshiva at the Yeshiva Gedola of Woodbridge, NY. As the undisputed leader of the community, Rabbi Stern oversaw construction of an *eruv* that would encompass a large swath of Passaic Park and neighboring Clifton, and a modern mikveh.

At the same time, several other Orthodox communities in NJ were building mikvehs, usually with the help of the local Jewish Federation. The compromise for most of them was that the Federation would contribute funds, but the Orthodox Jews who spearheaded the project had to agree to allow non-Orthodox rabbis to use the facilities for conversions.

In Passaic, Rabbi Stern and his colleagues refused. While non-Orthodox Jews were welcome to use the mikveh for traditional purposes, there would be no non-Orthodox conver-

sions performed there. The Federation rescinded its offer to help build the mikveh, and, under Rabbi Stern's auspices, the Yeshiva Gedola of Passaic did it on its own.

Rabbi Stern saw the mikveh and *eruv* as amenities that were crucial to the community's development. In addition, Passaic Park was blessed with lovely housing that the riots in the city had made very affordable. With the yeshiva as the "engine," it was not long before young couples began moving to Passaic.

Passaic Torah Institute

While the community and the Yeshiva Gedola were growing, another Passaic institution developed simultaneously. Rabbi Shlomo Singer, a Torah scholar who had studied under the close supervision of HaRav Moshe Feinstein, HaRav Aharon Kotler, and HaRav Yaakov Kamenetzky, was serving as the cantor and NCSY advisor at Congregation Adath Israel, a Modern Orthodox synagogue that had withstood the urban storms of the 1960s and remained a major force in the Passaic Jewish community.

At night, on his own, Rabbi Singer undertook to teach *ba'alei teshuva* the fundamentals of Judaism in his own living room. Almost before he realized what had happened, the number of students flocking around him took over every room in the house, including the basement and garage.

In 2001, he found himself the dean of a fast-growing *teshuva* yeshiva, the Passaic Torah Institute (PTI), which serves as a synagogue and yeshiva.

Yeshiva for Working Jews

Rabbi Singer said that, from his teachers, he internalized the conviction that "every single Jew belongs in a yeshi-

continued on page 28

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Orthodox in the Suburbs continued from page 26

va." At PTI, no matter what hours a person works, there is always a class available.

"There is always a compatible time to learn at PTI," said Rabbi Singer, explaining that it is a yeshiva for working people and their families.

"Many, if not most, did not have the chance to be nurtured in yeshivos growing up. Single or married, beginner or advanced, all walk through the doors of PTI with the opportunity to acquire valuable skills and dig deep into the details of the Gemara," he said.

For Men and Women

There are separate learning programs for men, women, and children of all ages. Women's classes, he said, are just as important as those for men at PTI.

"We've got to cater to every possible need that will make a Jewish family happy. You can't ignore anybody," he said.

At PTI, Rabbi Singer has assembled a coterie of top-notch rabbis to help him fulfill his dream.

Not surprisingly, Rabbi Singer has received referrals from many other yeshivot in the US and even in Israel.

Settling in Passaic

When PTI students as well as students from the Yeshiva Gedola marry, they often choose to start their own fami-

lies in Passaic and Clifton.

As a result, other Torah institutions have also opened in the area. Aish HaTorah, for example, opened a branch in 2006. A constant stream of Orthodox couples have flooded into Passaic-Clifton, and the community is flourishing, with more than 16 shuls and a plethora of yeshivot, kollels, schools for girls and young women, and a vast number of *shiurim* open to the public on all levels.

While there are still some Modern-Orthodox institutions in Passaic, the flavor of the community and its more than 1500 Shomer Shabbos families is distinctly yeshivish right-wing.

Waterbury, CT

The Passaic experience was duplicated on a more low-key scale in Waterbury, CT. Like other towns in the rusty American northeast, Waterbury has seen better days. At the close of the 20th century, the city's industry had collapsed, its business base had corroded, and property values had fallen through the floor.

Some pundits said Waterbury closed out the century as one of the ten worst places to live in the country.

In this abyss, Rabbi Aharon Kaufman, a Brooklyn-based rosh yeshiva, saw opportunity. With the encouragement and help of local real estate developers and the city's

political leadership, he secured a \$60,000 lease on a former campus of the University of Connecticut in exchange for a promise to bring 100 new families to the city by the summer of 2002.

At the same time, Torah Umesorah purchased the Conservative Beth El Synagogue for use as a day school for the envisioned younger children.

It took Rabbi Kaufman a few months longer than he planned; by 2003, the 100 new families had relocated to Waterbury and more keep coming.

Economic Motivation

While these families are attracted to the new yeshiva Rabbi Kaufman has established, there is no denying that most of them have an economic motive as well. Brooklyn has just about priced itself out of reach for many young Orthodox families.

The value of real estate in Borough Park is the highest in Metropolitan New York outside of Manhattan, and Jewish Flatbush is not far behind. No wonder the prospect of purchasing a large home in Passaic or Waterbury for one-third or, perhaps, one quarter the going price in Brooklyn, can prove irresistible for a struggling yeshivish young couple.

The former University of Connecticut campus, which already houses a yeshiva *ketana*

as well as the Yeshiva Gedola, is scheduled to include a kollel, a *beit medrash*, and residential high school for boys.

The success of Passaic and Waterbury has not gone unnoticed. There are attempts to duplicate their success in yeshivish communities elsewhere.

More Kippoth

The success of the Orthodox resurgence has caused observers from the other streams of Judaism to take notice.

Conservative Rabbi Wertheimer has recognized that not only do the Orthodox suffer many fewer losses from intermarriage, but their fertility rate is far above the Conservative, Reform, or unaffiliated Jewish norm.

"It does not take a prophet to discern the eventual impact of these demographic trends in American Jewry," he said. "If the Orthodox continue to retain the loyalties of their young people as they have mostly done over the last 30 or 40 years, they will become an ever larger, more visible, and better represented part of the total community."

There is every reason to suspect that Rabbi Wertheimer is correct, which means there will be an increasing number of kippoth and black hats visible in suburban America in the coming years. ✪



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