

ASSIMILATION: A DANGER DUE TO FREEDOM?

by
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Is the Jewish population in the United States decreasing? Many Jews fear that it is, and they believe that in our current, accepting multi-cultural society, it is too easy for Jews to take on so much of the host culture that they cease being Jews.

Paul Golin, Associate Executive Director of the Jewish Outreach Institute (<http://www.joi.org>), presents a brighter perspective. He says, "I actually very much dispute the assumption that there has been a decrease in the American Jewish population. The main source for such a suggestion is the 2001 National Jewish Population Study (NJPS) which - while finding 300,000 less Jews than the same study in 1990 - admitted when it was released that it was very likely an undercount, and instead claimed that the Jewish population was 'holding steady' not declining." Golin offers further substantiation for his surprising opinion: "At least two of the most prominent Jewish communal sociologists, Ira Sheskin and Len Saxe, have recently put out separate studies suggesting today's U.S. Jewish population is over 6 million, not the 5.2 million found by the last NJPS."

To a certain extent, Jews can assimilate and still retain their Jewishness. We speak English, dress like our Gentile neighbors, and fully participate in American society. However, we also learn about Jewish history and culture, as well as maintaining various Jewish practices of our choosing. That level of assimilation is much different from practically forgetting that one is Jewish.

"Assimilation used to mean blended in beyond recognition," Golin says. "The 'melting pot' was going to make us all look the same. That didn't happen. Our society now celebrates diversity and multiculturalism, which allows Jews to continue to be Jewish - and more visibly and proudly than at any other time in American history!"

Even though some anti-Semitism remains,

conditions became much better for Jews after the Second World War. Our society gradually developed respect for multiculturalism, saying good-bye to the melting-pot concept of immigrants leaving behind their old-country language and customs. There is no longer a conflict between being Jewish and being American. Golin says, "I am 100% American, indistinguishable from my non-Jewish peers, and I also consider myself 100% Jewish, and there's no contradiction." Regarding Jews who are leaving Judaism, Golin says, "I find the whole concept of 'assimilation' fairly unhelpful. I think the real issue is about strength-of-connection to Judaism. Many Jews may be moving away from Judaism, but I don't think it's because of the assimilationist pull of an opposing American society, I think it's because Judaism itself is not speaking to them."

Jews have generally thought of intermarriage, which is around 50%, as assimilation. "A growing percentage of the organized Jewish community now recognizes intermarriage as an opportunity for growth," Golin says, "and not the exit that was once presumed." Many intermarried couples raise their children Jewish. Golin says, "When our organization, the Jewish Outreach Institute, began in 1987, we had to spend over a decade advocating that intermarriage does not automatically mean the end of Judaism in that household, and that the community needs to welcome interfaith families." Our movement is helping to stem the tide of assimilation by welcoming intermarried couples, thus providing a comfortable Jewish experience for the children. "I would actually suggest that liberal and secular Jews stop seeking motivation from demographic fears," Golin says, "and instead focus on Jewish meaning and values as the most important step for continuing to grow our community."

In present-day American society, Jews can lose their Jewish identity through assimilation if they wish to. We choose to remain Jewish because we find Jewishness meaningful.