

It scared me, too!

By Norman “Nourollah” Gabay

English Translation by Payman Akhlaghi

لطفاً نسخه فارسی این مقاله را در فایل همراه ملاحظه کنید.

Pepper is black; so is the beauty mark of the fairest.

Both stir the heart, yet behold the vast difference.

What a vast difference is there between the quality and the quantity...

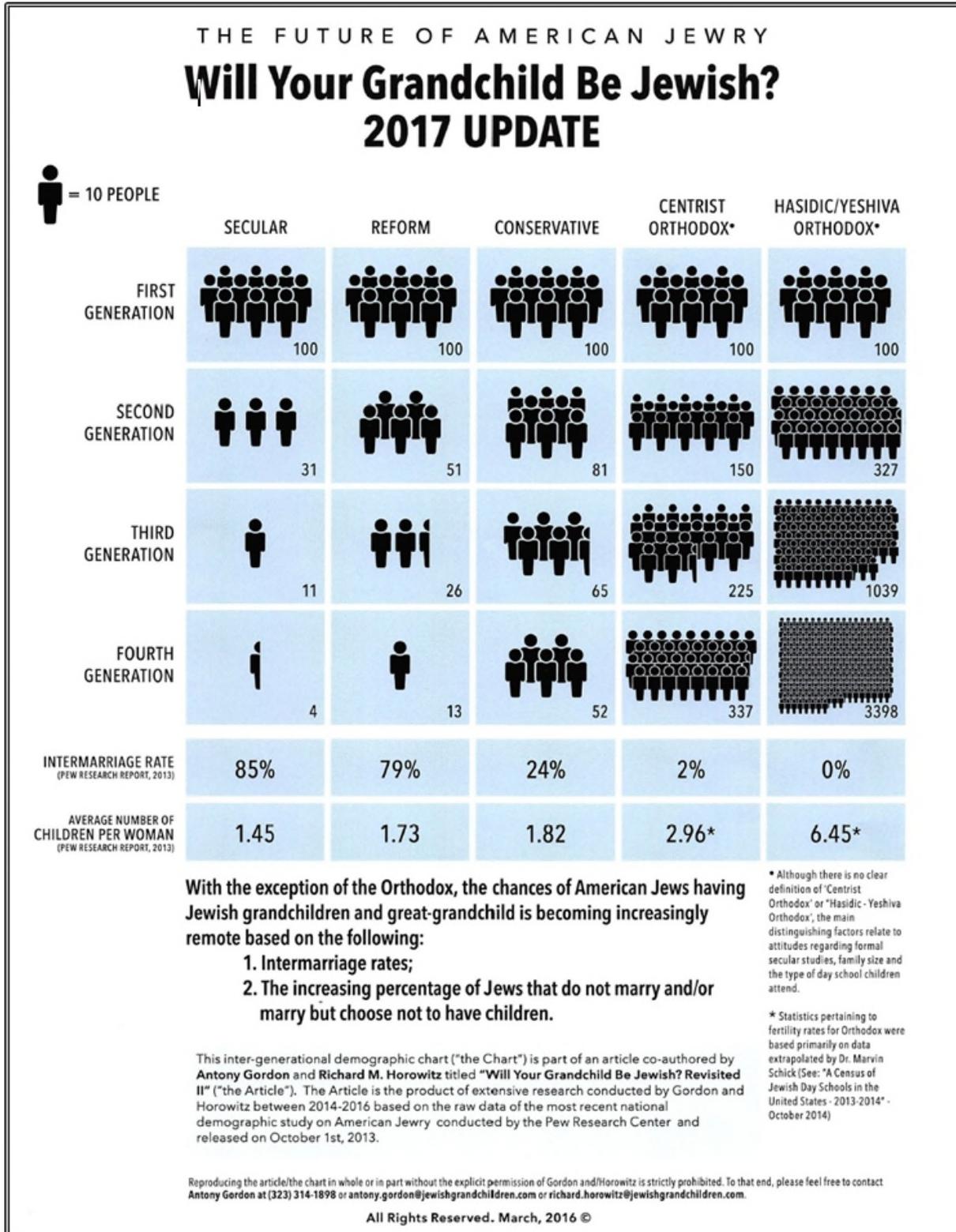
A society writes the script of its own future.

My recent essay entitled *Fate or Foresight?* submitted to the Persian weekly *Payam Magazine* was not published by its respected editor, on the grounds that, “Sadly, one can’t argue rationally with irrational people.” But I believe in what the poet said, “The mirror reflects your true image. / Not to your liking? Then shatter yourself, not the mirror.” Today, all praises and rejections, truths and lies, are spread across the world without censor and through the internet — including the BabaNouri.com website — and they may stay there for an eternity. By coincidence, I received a call from Mr. M.F., the father of an authentic and dear American family, and a relative of mine, with whom I share in our grandchildren. He had read the English version of the said essay, and he was asking to meet me at my office at 11 AM along with a friend of his.

The two men arrived at my office with a file which contained several photos, charts and letters. The researching gentleman had spent much effort to prepare the English and Persian charts. He told me that according to those documents, as of the next generation, the non-Orthodox American Jewish population was on the decline, while the growing generation of the Orthodox Jews were there to stay and protect Judaism. The title of the charts suggested that **the said statistics had frightened the American Jewry.** (Please refer to **Page 2** of this essay to examine the English version of the chart.)

The English version of the chart presented to the author.

Norman Gabay was frightened, too, and he wrote...



The information scared me, too, but for a very different reason. I offered my sympathies, agreed with their concern, and thanked them for their sincere efforts in finding a solution, even as I reiterated my long-held views on the matter. I explained, and I paraphrase, “Dear gentlemen, regressing to the past won’t do us any good. The only way to fight a wrong philosophy or culture is to present and spread a better culture. To that end, and to preserve the religion, it would defeat the purpose to resort to spreading some nonsense from the past, and to do that according to some commentaries which have long expired. Such a generation, even if it lasts as it is, they’ll be insignificant and of no use to themselves or the society, because much of their beliefs and textbooks don’t agree with modern science.”

It’s true that the fruitful non-Orthodox population is on a decline, a group to which many of glorious heroes have belonged — including 22% of the Nobel laureates, those who’ve financially supported the state of Israel, especially in its early days of independence, and so forth. I dare ask whether the Orthodox community and their philosophy, even with the hundreds of thousands of students attending the *yeshivot* or Jewish Seminaries, could replace as few as one such heroes? You and I both long for the survival of Judaism; and on that very ground, but from a different perspective, **I too was frightened.**

I am proud of the Jewish heroes of the past 200 years. You cannot fight the modern science and civilization by teaching some nonsense. I asked my grandchild, who against my wishes was studying at a *yeshiva* instead of a university, about his day at school. “What did you study?” I asked. “The law,” he said. I asked about their book, their teacher, and the discussion. He answered, “We discussed what if a cow charged at the neighbor’s cow by the horn and punctured her belly or broke her leg, and what the punishment would be!” I’m not saying that everything taught at the seminaries are similar to this. But as I continue to say, what use do such lessons have for the modern civilization and the world today? Which court, attorney or judge would pay any attention to such writings? How long do you wish to swim against the flow of life and waste the youngsters’ time, hundreds of thousands in numbers, in the name of advocating the religion? Does he not know, who teaches such things, that these are a waste of our youngsters’ time? Or to the contrary, he knows, but he’s merely concerned with his job and livelihood?

Indeed, I was terribly frightened, because according to your accurate estimates, should the current trend continue, the decline of our educated class will be but certain — that sector of our

society which could have remained useful for themselves and for the next generation. The problem is that today, we and the reasonable Orthodox class stand indifferent, while the extremists are hard at work; and thus, though we may advance hundreds of miles in terms of religion, we'll regress thousands in regards to modern knowledge and sciences. If things continue as they do, the majority of the surviving generations of Jews will be some needy people constantly begging *ha-shem* or God for help — a branded group, who'll cage themselves in their self-made *ghettos* with such insignificant knowledge that the world will think nothing of them. **This vision frightens me**, because on that day, the majority of the next generation of the very steadfast religious people whom we see today, will be fleeing the religion altogether, and there'll be no more signs of the proverbial grapevine nor the gardener, the advocate or the student, one sect or another! As they say, at the end, who swims against the river-flow will drown.

You focus on the quantity, the number of those who will stay, and it scares you; I look at the quality, the knowledge and understanding of the majority of them, and that scares me, too. “We look at the inside and the state of being, / Never at the outside and the hubbub.” A single soldier awake can defend thousands of soldiers asleep, whereas thousands of soldiers asleep can't protect themselves, let alone the others. In the meantime, **our precious educated, intellectual and well-balanced Orthodox sector** can and should bring the extremist majority of the Orthodoxy to moderation. Because the latter group don't ever listen to the likes of this author, but a friendly voice can be heard and acted upon. An ignorant bigot looks at who speaks instead of what's being said; and he imagines that anyone not on his side must be his enemy. Only the reasonable Orthodox sector can make those who've exploited the religion for their own goals understand that, as history has witnessed, the survival of Judaism has always depended on acquiring modern knowledge and sciences, and not on teaching repeatedly some ancient writings.

A large number of our valuable youngsters are being wasted in the religious seminaries of no fault of their own, for some of the parents, teachers and textbooks don't agree with the modern times. Indeed, in all religions and not only Judaism, the extremists have tormented the knowledgeable members of various sectors, and many innocent and informed people have been directly hurt because of them. An evident case in point are our dear Iranian friends today, who without no fault of their own, are affected by the anti-terrorism laws; and who are sadly punished

unjustly and unfairly, even though they oppose the extremists more than the others do. As the saying goes, the snakes commit the crime, but it's the ants that suffer the consequences.

The low Jewish population hasn't and won't ever depend on the number of this people. Our voice will be heard and our worth will be appreciated as long as we contribute our share to modern sciences and time's progress, and not when we're stranded in the self-made cage of religion. Life begins at birth, grows through the evolution, persists by acquiring knowledge, and ends by stillness. To keep future generations in the unchanging cocoon of religion is to count down to their oblivion toward the present and future state of their homes and society, and to their withdrawal from the world. If the religious commands are not brought up to date to meet the modern world, they'll invalidate themselves. What matters are not a person's belief, but their understanding and knowledge. As the *Talmud* said, "*chavruta o mituta*", that is, "mingle or die." To bond with the others is to be with the modern world and to learn from it. An isolated class can't win glories. Open up the gates, dress up like the world, and speak in the language of the world. Be with the world so that the world will be with us.

To keep citing the case of the German Jewry before the World War is to commit sophistry. Evolution and modernity have nothing to do with the religion. The society will last as long as it keeps step with the world on the road of enlightenment, not when it's shut itself inside the cocoon and in the name of religion. According to your studies, the decline of our population results in part from those people who escape the nonsense, superstitions, baseless prohibitions and arbitrary conditionalities. Above all things, human beings want freedom. An order without freedom and freedom without the order, neither will be stable; and that order will last which is balanced and reasonable. Humankind has no need or desire for the pointless fear of the religion and the false alarm of hellfires, such as when they tell your grandson and mine, in the revered name of the religion, "Each time that to shake hands with a woman, 20 years will be deducted from your life!"

On a busy street, a kind policeman found a two or three-year old child lost and crying. The kind officer hugged the kid and kissed her, only to see her cry a 100 times worse. Cookies and toys didn't help her crying, either. In the meantime, a mother who was passing by, took the child from the officer and embraced her in her arms. Suddenly, the child stopped crying. The stranger

mother told the officer, “I saw how kind you were to this child. But you should have realized that she was afraid of yourself!”

The intellectual people fear and flee not from the religion, but from the words of the religious advocates and their baseless commands and prohibitions. For the most part of the past 2600 years, we the Iranian Jews maintained our Jewishness evenly and united, and without the *yeshivot*, in an atmosphere within our community that stayed absolutely far from discrimination and sectarianism. To us, a Jew was a Jew. It was the religious advocates that followed the *ghetto* culture who narrowed down the already small circle of our community, so far as today, our children have trouble marrying this or that sect. Whereas the precious reasonable commands of the *Holy Torah* are too worthy for the words and deeds of many such advocates. I’m scared of what they say and do. Throughout the long ages behind us, we had remained well-balanced. It’s wrong to blame all problems on the religion and the seminaries. For an informed society, we need informed and balanced teachers. No tie was untied by the present teachers and through spreading fear. As **Zakaria Razi** said, “Faced with a problem, consult your intellect.”

To overcome the darkness of the night, we need to think of a light earlier in the day. To solve the problem of our population decline, we need to get help from the light of thought, before it’s too late, for we’ll find not lights in the darkness of superstitions. **What I fear is the darkness**, not the decline of the population. Nobody will choose darkness if the room is lit. Further narrowing the small circle of our community won’t add to our useful numbers, but it’ll only leave a bunch of insignificant people to stay. **And that’s what I’m afraid of.**

I don’t mean to say that we should follow one sect or another. I’m inviting us to be informed Jews so that Judaism will stay; otherwise, the presence or the absence of the ignorant people won’t help the growth of our useful population. It’s wrong to blame one or another group: *We* are to blame, for we haven’t yet stopped misplaced interfering and a variety of divisive of group formations.

The family is the best and most trusted environment to teach the religious issues and to protect and preserve the religion. **No teacher knows the best interests of the child better than his or her parents.** Thus, the parents should adjust themselves to the times so that their children will maintain balance, and when older, won’t be taken captives by the advocates of superstitions to whom the religion is but an instrument.

Let's be realistic. The student of the *yeshiva* doesn't have the facilities of a proper university so that he could win glories for himself and his society, and provide a better life for himself and his family. I'm aware that long ago, before the Renaissance, when Jews were not allowed in the European universities, it was the seminary system, which underneath the heavy boots of oppression, preserved Judaism and the Jewish culture, and even influenced the European culture at large. But today, we can be useful for ourselves and the others only when the *yeshiva* has turned into a university, its teachers have mastered modern sciences, and the centuries-old commentaries used as textbooks, along with the old-minded teachers of other religious schools, are brought up to date and keep step with times.

Considering the reasonable commands of the *Holy Torah*, Judaism is a pregnant faith, a gift of the humanity, and a fruitful, thriving and flexible moral system, and not an ossified phenomenon. Repeating some old social or hygienic lessons in the religious seminaries does not agree with the standards and the latest discoveries of the modern world, and as such, who continues to teach them should not expect the culture to survive. The world didn't stop when the scriptures arrived and the great religious figures emerged. "Every moment brings in a fair figure from this garden, / Each fresher than the one before." People were not born for the religion, but the religion was born for them. An American proverb says, "If you can't beat it, join it." No power is above the power of Time. So let's keep step with science and today's civilization, so that we'll survive, a survival that is useful and worthwhile, for its quantity as well as quality. A society writes its own path to the future and decides its own destiny. We no more ask a local shopkeeper or gas station clerk for directions; instead, we consult our G.P.S. navigators. It's an example of putting modern science to good use.

Let's not be afraid.

Let's decide the road ahead of us by the guidance of the intellect, and let's have our own share in writing our life's scripts and the future of the society.

I cry out aloud and alone: Our **enemies** have good reason to like the backward sectors of our society, those who oppose the realization of a dream, the Jewish people's 2000-year old dream of the renewed independence of the state of Israel. Our enemies invite these groups all the time, and support them. Because the enemy wants us not informed but fallen behind. The enemy

prefers us to be a group of regressive religious people, defenseless, deprived of modern knowledge, branded and withdrawn; a group of consumers forever imploring at the court of *ha-shem* or God; and forgetful residents of the self-made *ghettos*. This group have forgotten that if until recently, we were forced by the enemies to live as the branded captives of the *ghettos*, today they are doing the same to themselves, voluntarily and in the guise of promoting the religion.

As the Jewish religion says, “*kol ma’aseh be-machshavah techila*”, that is, “Every act begins in a thought and decision.” The basic theories of the kind of nonsense attributed to the religion, including those dealing with the dress codes and other sectarian appearances, they were fundamentally wrong. Let’s keep in mind that Nazism in Europe managed to murder millions of people through the spies who penetrated the Jewish society in the guise of rabbis.

Let’s be awake, so that we could sleep soundly.

Let’s keep step with times so that we won’t be lost —

Otherwise, we’ll shrink to so little as we won’t be seen...

*Norman “Nourollah” Gabay
December 2017, Los Angeles*

To receive copies of this essay and other essays and writings of Norman Gabay in English and Persian, including his book *An Invitation to Reason*, his *Glossary of the Millennia-old Dialect of the Jews of Kashan*, and soon, a digital book that will contain his more recent essays, please visit our website at BabaNouri.com

(The End)

Translator’s Website:

www.ComposerPA.com