

# The Jewish Week

SERVING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF GREATER NEW YORK

**Living In A Regional Neighborhood** (12/08/2006)

David M. Pollock - Special To The Jewish Week

There once was a time in New York when it was enough to know that "the Bronx is up and the Battery's down" and Comden and Green's sailors' whirlwind tour could get away with ignoring Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island.



While there were Jews in Brooklyn and the other "outer boroughs" and suburbs before World War II, the Jewish populations there mushroomed as the servicemen returned home and started families. Just after World War II an estimated two million Jews lived in New York City itself and fewer than 20,000 resided in Nassau, Suffolk and Westchester.

Today, we live in a regional neighborhood and our communal structure should reflect that reality.

Times changed, the suburbs boomed. The 2002 UJA-Federation Jewish Community Study reported on the new demographics with 972,000 living in New York City and 440,000 in Nassau, Suffolk and Westchester. Close to 200,000 Jews left the five boroughs in the '90s, three-quarters of whom moved outside the eight counties. New York Jewry's demographic stability is but a façade underscoring two other components of the total picture.

First, the 2002 estimate of nearly 1 million Jews here includes the nearly 140,000 Russian-speaking émigrés arriving in the '90s. Without this invigorating influx New York City's Jewish population would have dropped nearly 20 percent. The second major development is the surge in New York's growing Orthodox Jewish population. Together, the Russian-speaking and Orthodox populations now make up the majority of Jews in New York City (17 percent Russian-speaking, 32 percent Orthodox and 2 percent both).

Jewish demographics today are a product of pushmepullyou dynamics — the city is both attractive and expensive. Manhattan and its clones (e.g., Brownstone Brooklyn, Western Queens or Riverdale) continue to be magnets to both the young and empty-nesters selling houses in the suburbs and

moving back to the city. Young professionals come to establish themselves, begin their career and often to start a family. To sustain their lifestyle they will often share apartments and/or get financial help from family. Many households have multiple breadwinners.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein's Herculean efforts to improve the public schools help to keep the middle-class, as does the incredible variety of quality Jewish education. Rising costs require Jewish school leaders to demonstrate amazing feats of fundraising, real estate and financing prowess just to meet growing space demands.

The 5,000 new units of middle-class housing planned for Queens West are great news for the city and the Jewish families that will move in. But the Mitchell-Lama program of the Fifties and Sixties, featured over 400 developments and 150,000 apartments for middle and moderate-income families. Many of those units are now becoming market-rate. Plans just don't keep up with the disappearing rent-controlled and rent-stabilized units and the outbreaks of gentrification in virtually every nook and cranny of NYC. The New York City of the future might be the home for those who can afford it, the lucky few already ensconced in affordable housing or those who just can't afford to leave.

Two, probably temporary, exceptions to the exodus trend need specialized communal infrastructures. The Orthodox infrastructure includes synagogues, schools, markets and mikvehs. Institutional demands and high fertility contribute to the expansion of the borders of Borough Park, Crown Heights, Flatbush and Williamsburg as people seek housing alternatives. Historically, new Orthodox communities planted roots outside of New York City beginning in 1943 (Lakewood) and later sprouted in New Square, Monsey, Kiryas Joel, Clifton-Passaic and the Rockaways. Modern Orthodox centers appeared in Bergen County and Five Towns along with experiments in Waterford and Scranton. All of these offer the advantage of a lower cost of living, and of living Jewishly.

The major influx of refugees from the former Soviet Union in the '90s has slowed to a trickle. Some Russian-speakers need an immigrant infrastructure (e.g., language and social services), but most are successfully chasing the American dream. Like earlier waves of Jewish immigration, their quest is for good housing and good schools, moving from Brighton Beach to Bensonhurst to Bay Ridge and across the Narrows to Staten Island (making up 26 percent of all of the Jews of Staten Island in 2002).

As the newly prominent Orthodox and Russian-speaking communities spread throughout the region it might seem harder to connect to them. However, our communal future will only be enhanced if we involve them in every facet of Jewish communal activity.

Prophecy is a dangerous business but it is possible to identify big trends. New York will continue to experience an influx and an exodus of young Jews. Those with good housing deals will remain where they are. The Orthodox, attracted to and anchored by major religious institutions, will leave New York at a slower rate than others. Barring a major infusion of affordable housing, the Jewish population of New York City and the inner suburbs will age and the percentage of Orthodox will increase.

New York Jews are older. According to Census 2000 the median age of all city residents is 34.2. Asians, blacks and Hispanics are younger. Our median age is 41.0 (reduced by the comparative youth of the Orthodox community: the median age of the chasidic population in Williamsburg is 16.8). One in five Jews in the region is over 65. A side effect of medical innovation is that the number of the 75+ elderly (some frail) will increase, already more than doubling from 5 percent in 1991 to 11 percent in 2002. More communal resources will be devoted to supportive and protective services for seniors.

Poverty in the Jewish community will increase. Impoverished Jewish households don't have resources like a downpayment on a house or a car. Necessary services are not offered in the suburbs. They and their children will be effectively "trapped" in the city. The estimated 244,000 Jews in the eight-county region with incomes below 150 percent of federal poverty guidelines (and growing) will need help dealing with serious or chronic illnesses, finding a job and other interventions.

Don't lament the dropping New York City's Jewish population, start thinking regionally. Outside our parochial world, the 31-county New York-New Jersey-Connecticut region finds ways to work together to improve quality of life and economic competitiveness through research, planning, and advocacy. Can we learn from them?

As a first step, convene a regional "general assembly" of Jewish leaders from the entire region to look at the phenomenal fiscal, leadership and professional resources available and develop a process to mobilize them for the benefit of the entire region – unrestricted by county and state borders.

The "general assembly" could empower functional "breakout groups" addressing key communal challenges.

- One, focused on promoting Jewish identity and Jewish connectiveness should identify "best practices" and ensure that they are applied throughout the region. The idea exchange should not be limited to bringing community centers, synagogues and schools together just to talk. This breakout group should develop the wherewithal to compete, explore resource sharing and cross-affiliations. In our new regional reality students/members will have access to a full menu of services wherever they live. Institutions will share resources when appropriate to economize in an era of rising costs.
- A community relations breakout group should address issues arising from expanding Jewish neighborhoods as they rub against new groups, and the evolving racial, ethnic, religious and cultural makeups of the suburbs as Asians, blacks and Hispanics chase the American dream. Jews are not unique and the macro-trends facing us will affect others.
- Preserving political clout should be another regional agenda item. Jewish turnout remains high enough to pique the interest of politicians but it is no longer as interesting as, for example, the burgeoning Hispanic vote. This breakout group should educate leadership on the importance of being politically active and develop ongoing programs to promote voter registration and voter turnout in the community.
- The planning breakout group should maximize the thousands, if not millions, spent on planning in the Jewish community. Today, we don't know who we are, regionally. What are our demographics and our needs? Studies by UJA-Federation of New York, MetroWest and the Bergen Federation are a start, but we have sketchy, uncoordinated statistical information on the rest of the suburbs. The upcoming 2010 census is an opportunity to collect more information on the entire region and its components giving planners solid information.

The fact that the Jewish population of the Battery's up and the Bronx is down is not so important. Our focus has to be our regional neighborhood with our lives now intertwined beyond rivers and borders and we can best make use of our assets and address important issues regionally. People work one place, live somewhere else, educate their kids in a third and shop in a fourth. They are multi-centered. The regional connections are there. Can we re-tool to take advantage of them?

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