



Is There a Jewish Continuity Crisis?

Dr. Michal Raucher

Michal Raucher is a JTS Fellow and assistant professor of Jewish Studies at Rutgers University. Her research lies at the intersection of Israel studies, Jewish ethics, and the anthropology of women in Judaism. She has also published on sexuality and gender in Judaism, religion and bioethics, abortion legislation in Israel, and female religious advisors on the Internet. As a Fulbright Fellow, Dr. Raucher conducted ethnographic research on reproductive ethics of Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jewish women in Israel. Her first book, *Conceiving Agency: Reproductive Authority among Haredi Women in Jerusalem* (Indiana University Press, 2020), draws on this research. Her second book project is entitled *Tapping on the Stained Glass Ceiling: the Ordination of Orthodox Jewish Women in Israel and America*. Dr. Raucher has been an assistant professor of Israel and Modern Jewish Thought in the Department of Judaic Studies at the University of Cincinnati, and a visiting scholar at the Hastings Center and Yale University's Center for Bioethics. She has consulted for the United Nations Population Fund, where she worked with colleagues from around the world on improving reproductive and sexual rights and health for women and children. Dr. Raucher earned her PhD in Religious Studies from Northwestern University and her MA in Bioethics from the University of Pennsylvania. She graduated from JTS's Joint Program with Columbia University, earning a BA in Hebrew Bible and a BA in Religion.

Selected News Articles Related to Jewish Continuity:

The Jewish Week

Facing the Jewish Continuity Crisis

by Jewish Week Editors, October 1, 2015

Moment

**Opinion // What Do We Mean
By Jewish Continuity?**

by Letty Cottin Pogrebin, November 3, 2015

Jewish Telegraphic Agency

**Fewer Marriages and Fewer Children
Means Fewer Jews Doing Jewish**

by Steven M. Cohen and Sylvia Barack Fishman, June 20, 2017

I. Thinking about Jewish demographics is problematic

1. Pew, Portrait of Jewish Americans, 2013

Fertility

*Average number of children ever
born per adult age 40-59*

NET Jewish	1.9
Jews by religion	2.1
Jews of no religion	1.5
Orthodox	4.1
Conservative	1.8
Reform	1.7
No denomination	1.4
Married	2.3
Spouse Jewish	2.8
Spouse not Jewish	1.8
Never married	0.2
U.S. general public	2.2
Christian	2.3
Protestant	2.2
White evang.	2.1
White mainline	2.1
Black Prot.	2.6
Catholic	2.4
White, non-Hisp.	2.1
Hispanic	3.1
Unaffiliated	1.9

Source: Pew Research Center 2013
Survey of U.S. Jews, Feb. 20-June 13,
2013. FERT. U.S. general public data
from March 21-April 8, 2013, Pew
Research Center survey.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

2. Jewish People Policy Institute (JPPI), 2017

“The absence of children – particularly children being raised in the Jewish religion – represents yet one more missing incentive to Jewish communal engagement. Since religious childrearing has been a major stimulus for religious engagement in general and for Jewish engagement as well, major portions of the adult Jewish population not only postpone such experiences, but – not coincidentally – pass through their adult lives without experiencing a familial-based need to affiliate with synagogues or other Jewish institutions. Clearly, it is critical to understand the factors making it more likely that younger American Jews will marry, create unambiguously Jewish homes, and raise Jewish children.”

3. Sheila Katz, CEO of the National Council of Jewish Women on Facebook

<http://nextjewishfuture.org/statement-on-jewish-vitality>

"In response to this [statement on Jewish vitality]: I dislike being referred to as a challenge. How horrific it must be for Jewish continuity that I'm an unmarried Jewish woman without kids(!). The agenda outlined is smart, but we need people to feel welcome in order to participate. Let's start by referring to single people and those in intermarried relationships and marriages as people of value in our community. We are not a challenging context, rather, we are an incredibly beautiful and vibrant part of the Jewish community at large. If only people started treating us that way."

4. Stosh Cotler, Bend the Arc, Discontinuing Jewish Continuity, 2014

<http://jdov.org/talk/discontinuing-jewish-continuity/>

So this is what I learned about Jewish continuity:

- Will she marry a Jew?
- Will he raise his children Jewish?
- Will they join a synagogue so the grandkids can get a good Jewish education?
- Will my great-grandchildren identify as Jewish when called by the 2060 National Jewish Population Survey?

And then it dawned on me, I am the poster child for Jewish continuity. That this is me, this community wants me, and they want people like me and so as this poster child of so called Jewish continuity crisis, I want to say loud and clear that the reason why I believe so many younger Jews are staying away from Jewish institutional life and I'll throw in some older ones too, is because when they think of Jewish institutional life they think of one thing but yearn for another and I would contend that we are not having a crisis of Jewish continuity but rather we are having a profound crisis of Jewish communal purpose. So the American Jewish community is one of the most affluent, educated, integrated and safe diaspora communities our people have ever known and at the very same moment we are at risk of losing our core identity as empathizers and prophetic actors and this is so painful and ironic because if we were to act as empathizers and prophetic actors we now have more power in American society than if we leveraged that power for the common good, it would make a real difference and so this leaves many of us feeling like we are living a contradiction. It's very confusing, if we are not leveraging our communities tremendous resources for the common good, who are we? What do we stand for? What has our history taught us? And among all of the identities one can choose to be in the

world right now why choose to be Jewish in America today? Many Jewish communal institutions may have become out of sync with majority of Jewish Americans. They have become potentially out of sync with our values and our politics. We know that American Jews by and large hold solidly progressive views on the most pressing domestic issues of our time, whether that's our road in democracy, our broken and immoral immigration system. LGBT inclusion, the fact that there is a shameful gap between the richest and the poorest people living in this country. We know that 81% of American Jews favor taxing the highest income earners, which include many of us in this room myself included, because we understand that revenue stream plays a role in supporting and preserving those precious safety net programs that protect the most vulnerable people living in this society. We know that 56% of American Jews say that working for justice and equality is the very essence of what it means to be Jewish. And yet our Jewish communal institutions spend between 1 and 2% in direct advocacy on social justice issues that again the majority of Jews say is the essence of what it means to be Jewish.”

II. Pronatalism isn't everything: Other values that matter

5. Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Ishut 15:2

Men are obligated in procreation (periyya u-reviyya), but not women. When is a man obligated in this mitzva? From the age of seventeen. Once he reaches [the age of] twenty years and has not married, he has transgressed and neglected a positive commandment. However, if he is involved in Torah and engrossed in it, and he fears that if he marries, he will have to busy himself with supporting a wife and thereby come to neglect Torah study, then it is permissible for him to delay [marriage]; for one who is involved in a mitzva is exempt from another mitzva – all the more so regarding Torah study.

6. Bavli Ta'anit 11a

Similarly, Reish Lakish said: It is prohibited for a person to have conjugal relations in years of famine, so that children not be born during these difficult years. As it is stated: “And to Joseph were born two sons before the year of famine came” ([Genesis 41:50](#)). It was taught in a baraita: Nevertheless, those without children may have marital relations in years of famine, as they must strive to fulfill the mitzva to be fruitful and multiply.

7. Rabbinical Assembly statement, May 15, 2019

<https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/statement-reproductive-freedom>

The Rabbinical Assembly is deeply troubled by the enacting of today's abortion law in Alabama and believes it should and will be struck down by federal courts. Reproductive freedom is again under assault in our nation, beginning today in Alabama, where the state has effectively banned abortions at every stage of pregnancy and criminalized the procedure for doctors. It is further under attack in other states' so-called Personhood Acts and Life at Conception Acts, including in Georgia, South Carolina, Kentucky, Mississippi and Ohio. This position is based on our members' understanding of relevant biblical and rabbinic sources as well as teshuvot – modern rabbinic responsa. Jewish tradition cherishes the sanctity of life, including the potential of life which a pregnant woman carries within her, but does not believe that personhood and human rights begin with conception, but rather with birth as indicated by Exodus 21:22-23.

8. American Values Atlas 2018, Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI)

AVA 2018 04b - Religious Tradition among Non-Protestant and Non-Catholic Christians and Non-Christians

Generated on February 20, 2019

AVAQ1. In your view, should government health insurance programs for low-income women, like Medicaid, cover the cost of birth control, or not?

	All Americans	Religious Tradition									
	All Americans A	Jehovah's Witness B	Mormon C	Orthodox Christian D	Jewish E	Muslim F	Buddhist G	Hindu H	Unaffiliated I	New Age religion J	Other religion K
Unweighted Sample Size	40,292	174	712	204	868	253	316	206	9,374	198	189
Yes Column %	77%	78% D	72%	68%	85% BCDFK	77% D	84% CDFK	83% CD	84% BCDFK	88% BCDFK	75%
No Column %	20%	16% J	27% BEFGHIJ	26% BEGHIJ	13%	20% EGIJ	13%	14%	13% J	8%	21% EGIJ
Don't know/Refused Column %	3%	6% CEI	1%	6% CEI	2%	3%	3%	3%	2%	3%	3%

AVAQ2. Do you think abortion should be ...

	All Americans	Religious Tradition									
	All Americans A	Jehovah's Witness B	Mormon C	Orthodox Christian D	Jewish E	Muslim F	Buddhist G	Hindu H	Unaffiliated I	New Age religion J	Other religion K
Unweighted Sample Size	40,292	174	712	204	868	253	316	206	9,374	198	189
Legal in all cases Column %	23%	8%	9%	20% BC	38% BCDFHK	22% BC	35% BCDFH	22% BC	36% BCDFH	44% BCDFGHJK	30% BCDF
Legal in most cases Column %	31%	10%	20% B	34% BC	32% BC	29% BC	34% BC	40% BCEFJ	36% BCEFJ	29% BC	38% BCF
Illegal in most cases Column %	25%	28% EHIJK	54% BDEFGHIJK	27% EHIJK	14%	26% EHIJK	15%	25% EHIJK	15%	13%	15%
Illegal in all cases Column %	15%	40% CDEFGHIJK	12% EHIJK	15% EHIJK	9%	12% HIJK	10%	7%	7%	6%	6%
Don't know/Refused Column %	6%	13% CDEGHI	5%	5%	7%	10% CDI	6%	6%	6%	8%	11% CDI

■ There is a significant difference between this cell and the following BCDEFGHIJK 6

AVAQ4. In your view, should government health insurance programs for low-income women, like Medicaid, cover abortion, or not?

	All Americans	Religious Tradition									
	All Americans A	Jehovah's Witness B	Mormon C	Orthodox Christian D	Jewish E	Muslim F	Buddhist G	Hindu H	Unaffiliated I	New Age religion J	Other religion K
Unweighted Sample Size	40,292	174	712	204	868	253	316	206	9,374	198	189
Yes Column %	46%	25%	27%	47% BC	71% BCDFIK	58% BCD	67% BCDF	66% BCD	63% BCD	68% BCDF	61% BCD
No Column %	48%	67% DEFGHIJK	68% DEFGHIJK	45% EFGHIJK	24%	36% EGJ	28%	29%	32% EJ	23%	35% EJ
Don't know/Refused Column %	5%	8% CEI	4%	8%	4%	6%	5%	6%	5%	9% CEI	4%

9. Jewish reproduction in Israel

