

Kings of the hill

The Jewish slice of the Big Apple is increasingly kosher.

START spreading the news. Jewish New York is changing. An oxymoron, no? Of course it's always changing. It's New York after all. But when the changes make *The New York Times* op-ed and letters pages, and touch off a controversy in the shtetl-sphere, it's probably time to pay attention.

The controversy began when David Brooks, a distinguished *New York Times* columnist and author, wrote a very admiring and positive column (08/03) about Orthodox Jews. That's good, no? Arriving in New York a few days later, however, I found that Brooks was under attack. The strong blowback from non-Orthodox – and some Orthodox – commentators showed he had struck a nerve.

The facts that Brooks presented were not new. But by broadcasting them on *The New York Times* op-ed pages, Brooks highlighted some dramatic and sobering demographic trends first reported last year in *The Jewish Community Study of New York 2011*. Brooks summed up the survey's results this way.

"Nationwide, only 21 per cent of non-Orthodox Jews between the ages of 18 and 29 are married. But an astounding 71 per cent of Orthodox Jews are married at that age. And they are having four and five kids per couple. In the New York City area, for example, the Orthodox make up 32 per cent of Jews overall. But the Orthodox make up 61 per cent of Jewish children. Because the Orthodox are so fertile, in a few years, they will be the dominant group in New York Jewry."

Depending on how you view Orthodox Jewry, and ultra-Orthodox Jewry especially, you'll conclude the trends are "gut far Yidn" – good for the Jews – or "nisht azoy gut" – not so good. But whatever your prejudices or concerns, you now need to think quite differently about the largest Jewish community outside Israel.

Put simply: it's not the city many of us knew, or thought we knew, just 10 years ago, let alone 20 or 30 years ago. New York Jews are as diverse as ever, but in new and significantly different ways. The long-held image of New York Jews as "liberal, affluent and well educated" was always somewhat distorted. But it certainly no longer applies.

Today, and considering Jewish New York as comprising the five boroughs – Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, The Bronx, and Staten Island – and the Nassau, Suffolk and Westchester counties, Orthodox Jews represent 32 per cent, and Russian-speaking Jews make up 15 per cent of New York's 1.54 million Jews. Some 20 per cent are living in poverty.

For perspective, New York's total population in 2012 was 8.3 million. Jews represented 18 per cent; Hispanics 29 per cent; African-Americans 25 per cent; and Asians, the fastest growing segment, 13 per cent.

But New York's Jewish population is also growing fast. In

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the last 10 years it has added 100,000 Orthodox Jews, while Conservative and Reform Jews have each dropped 40,000. Interestingly, there are an additional 100,000 "other" Jews, i.e. those who do not belong to any denomination. The two "extremes" are growing at the expense of the "middle".

This is certainly true within Orthodox Jewry. In the New York survey, "Orthodox" covers three categories: Chassidic i.e. Lubavitch, Satmer, Bobover, and others who have rebbes and courts; non-Chassidic "black hat-yeshivah"; and Modern Orthodox. The latter, however, comprise only 10 per cent in this segment; 90 per cent are Charedi/ultra-Orthodox.

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Which is who Brooks was talking about. Basing it on a visit to Pomegranate, a high-end kosher supermarket in Brooklyn, accompanied by Modern Orthodox leader Rabbi Meir Soloveitchik, he concluded: "The families stuffing their groceries into their Honda Odyssey minivans in the Pomegranate parking lot represent a challenging counterculture. Mostly, I notice how incredibly self-confident they are. Once dismissed as relics, they now feel that they are the future."

But it's also fair to ask what sort of Jewish future will that be? Because, as the survey's authors concluded, the ultra-Orthodox are "self-segregated and relatively disconnected from the rest of the Jewish community". Brooks did not mention "self-segregated and disconnected". That is a bleak future for the Jews of New York outside the circle of Hondas in Pomegranate's carpark.

And yet Brooks's admiration is understandable. He was writing about a growth industry. A very American story. By contrast, if the test is Jewish continuity, the other streams of American Judaism – Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and even Modern Orthodox – despite their impressive achievements, have failed. They have not yet found sustainable answers to modernity, and they certainly haven't matched the ultra-Orthodox in the numbers game.

Yes, I've heard the quality not quantity arguments. But for a small people such as the Jews, the numbers game still matters. In New York and everywhere else.

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