

American Jews are vanishing

By Jerry Klinger

As the saying goes, there are statistics and there are STATISTICS.

Someone else once said that all statistics lie.

Baltimore, Maryland is one of the largest and most cohesive Jewish communities in the U.S. The Jews are so cohesive that most live within an area of northern Baltimore – actually Baltimore County, called Pikesville. They have their own eruv and can be seen walking or riding up and down Reisterstown Road, to and from their various *shteibels*, synagogues or temples, on Shabbat or Yom Tov.

Baltimore's Jewish community is one of the oldest in the United States. The reform community Baltimore Hebrew Congregation traces its origins to the 1830's. The community is so organized that it maintains the excellent Jewish Museum of Maryland. The Museum has its own considerable building, sandwiched between two unused but preserved historic synagogues, one reform and one orthodox. The two synagogues were splintered from each other and although only a block apart, did not speak to the other because one group was "not Jewish enough" and the other "too Jewish" to be spoken to.

The Museum has a truly excellent web site. <http://www.jhsm.org/index.html>. It was the timeline of the website that first drew my interest, a few simple lines about the growth of Baltimore Jewry's population. In 1907 there were about 40,000 Jews in Baltimore. By 1921-1924 the numbers had grown to 65,000. After WWII the population numbers increased to 80,000 and reached a high in 1975 at an estimated 94,000. Since then the Jewish population has decreased to 91,400 in 1999.

It is well documented and often repeated that the Jewish population in the United States has not grown much since World War II. It was between five and six million Jews in 1945 and remains that today. Jews have been spending much too much time on other things. The total American population has grown from about 165,000,000, during the same period, to 300,000,000 today. Jewish population, as a percentage of the U.S., has been falling dramatically.

Curiosity being as it is and having grown tired of watching the grass grow, I wondered about how the Jewish Museum of Maryland's population numbers for Baltimore Jewry compared with the city as a whole. Could an inference be shown that Jews are a dying people and a dying way of life?

It did not take much time on the internet to find the American census figures, since 1900, for Baltimore city and Baltimore county. American law requires a new census every ten years to apportion the representation in the U.S. House of Representatives. What I found was very interesting and challenged some of my assumptions.

Forgive the simplistic statistical approach but Baltimore's Jews, perhaps very inconsiderate, did not take a Jewish census every ten years to coincide with the national census. So I had to extrapolate – a fancy term to arbitrarily fudge a standard number to compare, what the Jewish Museum reported the Baltimore's Jewish population to be, to the non-Jewish population. For example, if the Museum said the Jewish population was approximately 40,000 in 1907 and the U.S. Government census number said the population for the city and the county was 599,800 in 1900 and 680,800 in 1910, I simply took an annual average increase of the difference between 1900 and 1910 and multiplied it by the number of years until the Jews got around to estimating how many Jews there were in the city. That being said – if there were 40,000 Jews in 1907 then there were about 663,500 people in 1907 in the area including the Jews. Jews then made up about 6.028% of the total population.

Oy, all these numbers! I am getting a headache.

Let me put it in a simple table format about Baltimore and the Jews.

Year of Jewish population estimates	1999	1975	1957	1922	1907
Baltimore City & County combined population	1,407,760	1,484,650	1,367,980	832,780	663,500
Population growth change %	-5.18	10.85%	64.26%	25.50%	
Estimated Jewish Population	91,400	94,000	80,000	65,000	40,000
Jewish population growth change %	-2.77%	17.50%	23.08%	62.50%	
Jewish % of Baltimore's population	6.49%	6.33%	5.85%	7.81%	6.03%
% Jewish & total population growth difference	-2.36%	6.65%	-41.18%	37%	

Now I have numbers, but what in the world does this all mean.

Between 1880-1920 millions of Eastern European Jews flooded to America. Baltimore was no exception. But in the early 1920's the open door of the "*Goldene Medina*" was slammed shut – open immigration was greatly curtailed.

Baltimore is one of America's greatest ports. The Great Depression seriously slowed economic incentives to move to Baltimore for everyone. The economic boom of the Second World War reversed that. People moved to Baltimore because that is where the jobs were. The Jews, in comparative numbers, did not.

Jews are, were and will be a minority in America. There is not an inexhaustible supply of new Jewish immigrants to bolster the numbers. Sadly during the War, a third of all the Jews in the world were murdered. Israel became of the land of choice since the U.S. did not want another flood of Jewish immigration.

After the war years, Baltimore's population leveled off and actually has declined in recent years. A reflection of economic change, the Port city is not the economic magnet it used to be. Throughout the 20th century Baltimore's percentage of Jews has averaged about a steady 6.5%. In the fifty years from 1922 to 1975 Baltimore grew 78% and the Jews 44%. Jewish population did not grow as much. Natural increase is one response but so is attrition. Baltimore Jewry did not fall apart.

What is happening here? We are supposed to be vanishing.

Perhaps in the rest of the country we are vanishing. I did not look there, yet. But in Baltimore, at least we are hanging on.

Why?

Do Baltimore Jews not intermarry? Maryland is a Southern State. Does Baltimore have Southern Jewish rednecks, pot bellies, torn tee shirts brandishing slogans on them, such as *Bubbe Loves you*, with shotguns standing at the Jewish ghetto walls scaring away Jews for Jesus?

Jewish life survives the assimilating pull of American life because of three factors, Jewish cohesiveness, identity and physical proximity. Jewish Baltimore is Jewish Baltimore because it stays together. Jewish Baltimore has a history and identity that it is proud of. Baltimore Jews manned the walls of Ft. McHenry when the British attacked in 1812. Francis Scott Key, safely offshore, was inspired to write the words of the Star Spangled Banner, as the bombs burst in the air above the Jews. Henrietta Szold, the founder of *Hadassah*, was from Baltimore. The internationally famous ship, the President Warfield, a modified ferry, was from Baltimore. The President Warfield, manned by Jews from Baltimore, was renamed the *Exodus* in 1947. There are Maariv services (evening prayers) at all Baltimore Orioles (Baseball) home games during the seventh inning stretch. There is even a vending stand, at the stadium that is certified kosher. Baltimore has excellent Jewish schools and, believe it or not, a very good *glatt* Kosher restaurant.

Survival and isolation is a factor in Darwinian natural selection. Some may argue that Baltimore Jewry survives by isolating themselves. Maybe, but just the same, much can be learned by the rest of American Jewry from Baltimore. Baltimore Jewry is because they have chosen to live not isolated from American culture but a part of it. Baltimore Jewry is because they have chosen to live as Jews in America as Jewish Americans.