

Demographic clock keeps ticking for one Jewish family in U.S.

THE RABBI'S TURN

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What time is it in American Jewish life? As I read the latest demographic figures on our American Jewish community, I hear the clock ticking. If our day began with the immigration of our families to these shores, how much of that day has already passed? How close are we to irretrievable assimilation, to the point when there will be no more possibility of return to Judaism? That is the moment when the clock — or the Jewish heartbeat! — stops ticking.

Each Jewish family has its own reckoning of such time. Here I would like to share a little bit of my own family's clock.

Our Jewish life has had much to do with a grandfather, my mother's father, who died in 1977 at the age of 99. I often contemplate that life span, 1878 to 1977, and think about what it was like to live through that century. Grandpa was born and raised in a 19th-century shtetl that really belonged to the later Middle Ages rather than the modern era. He died in the age of jet travel, color television and napalm war.

What a century! He lived through the First World War, the breakup of traditional Jewish life, the Holocaust and the rebirth of Israel. (The framed copy of Israel's Declaration of Independence that hung so proudly on the wall above his tailor's sewing machine now hangs in my office.) How can the mind comprehend such an intense period of technological, political and social transformation?

My grandparents came to America in 1904; he was fleeing conscription in the Russo-Japanese War. They moved from New York to Paterson, N.J., where they raised four children, three of whom tragically predeceased them.

Though far from Orthodox — the tailor shop was open on Saturdays for all its 60 or more years — they were traditional *balebatishe* Jews. Especially those things that depended upon my strong-willed grandmother were carefully observed: Shabbas candles, a kosher home, holidays and all the rest. Judaism was passed on with love, warmth and a strong sense of family.

A couple of weeks ago, I attended a family wedding — that of my nephew, the great-grandchild of our family patriarch and matriarch. The wedding was held in a New Jersey Catholic church, conducted by a priest. As my nephew had not converted, there was no mass, but it was a fully Catholic

wedding. God was mentioned frequently and in the context of fully Christian religious language.

At the end of the ceremony, the priest added, somehow as an afterthought, "There are some weddings at which it's a custom to break a glass." He then handed a napkin-wrapped glass to my nephew, who stepped on it and broke it. "And what's that word you say?" asked the priest, with obvious discomfort. "Mazeltov!" And thus the wedding was concluded.

I attended the ceremony purely as a guest, and I know that was the right thing to do. My nephew is married to a fine young woman, who seems to love him dearly. I wish them only the best.

At the same time, I could not help feeling the presence of my grandparents, peering over my shoulder, looking and wondering. They were certainly sad and shocked that their great-grandchild was getting married in a church. Perhaps they were no less shocked to see me, the most Jewishly committed of their grandchildren, calmly sitting through the ceremony.

To be fair, I should add that my nephew and his bride looked for a rabbi who would co-officiate at the wedding. Apparently aware of my opposition to co-officiation, they did not put me in the difficult place of asking for my assistance. They were unable to find a rabbi who would stand with the priest at the altar.

As for the priest, he certainly meant well, but I was disturbed by his inability to mention directly my nephew's Jewish heritage. His phrase, "There are *some* weddings at which a glass is broken," galled me terribly.

The truth is, I felt as though God Himself had gone off and been baptized as a Catholic. We were left as those people — What were they called? I can't seem to remember the word — who had this odd custom of breaking various bits of glassware and crockery at otherwise happy occasions. What were they called again? Maybe they were the "mazeltov" people.

Is this where the clock stops ticking? Do all those generations of Jewish life end right here? It certainly felt that way.

But there we were, a few weeks after the wedding. I don't see this nephew very often, and it was more or less by chance that we happened to meet again at my sister's home. We were all having brunch together when my nephew, who has for many years evinced no interest in Judaism, suddenly asked me whether I couldn't help him find some books on Jewish history.

It seems that the very fact of intermarriage had stimulated this thought in him. He wanted to know more about what it meant to be a Jew.

So I sent him some books I hope he will read and decided that in this family, or at least in this branch of the family, the clock is still ticking. Despite all indications to the contrary, the day has been prolonged once again.

Perhaps that, too, is part of the miracle of Jewish existence. It seems to be about the only level of miracle we can muster up these days, so it will have to be sufficient. ■

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