Jewish Continuity and Change: Emerging Patterns in America. By Calvin Goldscheider.


Calvin Goldscheider, a leading scholar in the field of Jewish demography, has written a book based upon data collected for a demographic survey of the Jewish community of Boston in 1975. He has interpreted the data and applied it to clarify national issues connecting social change, variations within American Judaism, comparisons with other ethnic groups, and Jewish continuity. His study pursues the answers to two central questions: 1. What are the distinctive features of the Jewish community, and how have these changed over time? 2. How do these distinctive patterns relate to ethnic assimilation or group continuity? The author answers these questions by looking at the following criteria: intermarriage, residential concentration, migration, marriage and family formation, fertility and family size expectations, household structure, socioeconomic status, self-employment, and secular and religious trends. Data pertaining to each question is analyzed by age cohort and, where applicable, by sex and/or by comparison with data on the non-Jewish Boston population which was also gathered in the 1975 survey.

Surveys of Jewish communities have been carried out independently in many urban areas, each designed locally, for the purpose of gathering data on which to base social service, institutional, and budgetary planning. No systematic attempt has been made to coordinate or synthesize the various studies. The author explains that his aim is to utilize unexplored data to come to larger sociological conclusions.

Goldscheider compares the distinctive pattern of Jewish assimilation with that of other ethnic groups by examining acceptance of intermarriage, family cohesiveness, number of children, education, occupational status and geographic mobility, the numbers of young adults and elderly people living independently, and the number of working women. Several of his findings represent important new knowledge. One recent trend which has not been emphasized in other work is the great degree of occupational homogeneity at high levels (60 percent professionals) which differentiates young Jews from older Jews as well as from other ethnic groups. Goldscheider interprets this shared socioeconomic status as a factor developing cohesion within the group and maintaining Jewish community.
Goldscheider breaks new ground in interpretation as well as methodology by refusing to accept as fact the theory of "modernization and assimilation." This is the commonly held assumption, most fully developed in the work of Milton Gordon, that ethnic change automatically means decline in the salience of ethnicity and decreased interaction of ethnics and their communities. Goldscheider changes the assumption to a core question. He asks if, indeed, extensive change is associated with group assimilation and with erosion of group cohesion. Charles Silberman, in his recent book (A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today, 1985) suggested that change did not mean dissolution or decline of American Jewry, but rather, stimulated new forms and new patterns of American Jewish life. Goldscheider comes to similar conclusions. Both see in current trends implications for the continuation of cohesive Jewish communities in the United States.

There are some caveats in accepting totally the data and methodology of this impressive work. The author acknowledges several of the limitations; the fact that each Jewish community has specific characteristics which make generalization risky, the absence of longitudinal data, and the scarcity of data on which to base national comparisons. Very important is the absence of data on young people who reached the age cohort of 18 to 29 after 1975. Reliance on data from a 1975 survey does constitute a very real limitation on the value of the conclusions. Also, some of the statistics presented are open to question. Several figures are inconsistent; tables are dense and difficult to interpret. The chief difficulty with the book is due, in this reviewer's opinion, to the linking of two complex questions. The question of Jewish distinctiveness from other ethnic groups is important and requires clarification. So too is the question of Jewish communal continuity. The juxtaposition in each chapter of the two questions is difficult to follow and tends to weaken the cohesiveness of the study.

These are minor objections, however, to a thoughtful and important study. Goldscheider has contributed to our understanding of Jewish distinctiveness and has presented a positive and well documented discussion of implications for the future of Jewish community life in the United States.

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