

demography & strategy

a few thoughts on jewish organizing

**with not particularly reliable population data from
the UJA-Federation of New York City's 2002 survey**

shearith korakh zine #2

rozele made this

galut גלות golus exile

zine project #two & the embrace of love and resistance
for a vibrant jewish anarchist rebel culture

written in new york city, 'u.s.a.' fall 5767/2006
based on earlier writings from 5763/2003
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shearith korakh

tradition tells us: after the slave revolt in egypt, the former slaves and their allies wound up adrift in the desert east of the Red Sea, as mooses and aaron consolidated their power as 'leaders' of the revolt and escape, a group challenged their self-appointed rulership, the speaker for the rebellious group, korakh, used the religious/political language of the day to make the anti-authoritarian case: "you have gone too far! for all the community are holy, all of them, and the holy one is in their midst. why then do you raise yourselves above the holy one's congregation?" [numbers 16:31. it took murderous divine interventions, killing thousands in earthquakes, fire, and plague, to crush the anti-hierarchical revolt: the establishment of the hereditary high priesthood followed, institutionalizing the b'nei amram family's rule.

'shearith korakh' means 'the remnant or survivors of korakh': those who follow in the tradition of that rebellion, insisting on full freedom as we struggle, revolt, and escape.

this series prints zines, pamphlets, &c dealing with
political, social and cultural topics of interest
to jewish anarchists and our friends.

this zine is a contribution to the work of progressive and radical organizing in new york city's jewish communities.

it aims to help correct one of the most significant problems in the past few years' discussions of how to organize jews in the nyc area towards social change: a near-absolute lack of concrete information about the area's jews to guide strategizing. the various organizations of the local jewish left - from JFREJ to the JLC, the arbeter-ring to JATO/NYC - all seem to operate on surmise, stereotype and anecdote when they assess their current and potential constituencies, and even more so when they contemplate 'the community', and the communities, they all seek to engage.

this zine works from the best research available, bad as that is, to try to give a concrete grounding for future strategic decisions. it is based on a 2003 presentation at Jews For Racial and Economic Justice's last organization-wide strategy session, about the "Jewish Community Study of New York - 2002" telephone survey paid for by the UJA-Federation of New York.

each pair of facing pages includes statistics from the survey and a strategic analysis based on them. a methodological critique of the study follows - though which you may want to read it first - and the analysis throughout attempts to correct for the survey's biases as discussed there. all the statistical data about jews is directly from the study; as such, it should always be understood to be preceded by "the UJA-Fed study found..."; with all the skepticism that the phase implies. all of the broader population data used is drawn from the 2000 u.s. census. the analysis is my own; if you disagree with it, let's talk.

enjoy!

la salute è in voi! dos gezunt iz in dir! דו'ס געזונט איז אין דיך!

rozele

Basic Numbers

it is a truism, but an accurate one, to say that jewish radical and progressive organizing in greater new york has a remarkably large potential constituency. over 1/8 of the population of the five boroughs, and of the nyc area, identifies as jewish, though the proportion is noticeably higher in brooklyn and manhattan, and much lower in the other three boroughs.

this concentration makes jews one of the larger identifiable groups in the city, and makes jewish political opinion – and more importantly, **perceived** jewish political opinion – the major factor that it has been in city politics for the past century. recently, this importance has been exaggerated, in part due to the wildly inaccurate assumption that all jews are white and u.s. citizens, and the equally false subsequent calculation that therefore the community must account for nearly 30% of the city’s white population and up to 45% of u.s.-born non-hispanic whites.

based on fiction though it is, the influence that results from that exaggerated calculation is one of the resources at stake in the struggle to organize new york jews.

the age distribution of jewish new yorkers is only striking at its upper end. the size of the cohort of jews over 65 living in new york city is about twice the citywide percentage. especially with so many of these elders living alone, and the number of them (given the history of the community) who have been politically active on the left in the past, this implies several very substantial organizing opportunities. the most obvious have to do with the issues of affordable, accessible health care and housing which affect elders directly. if dealt with in ways that do not limit goals by age, these issues can ally jewish radicals with a wide range of other communities in struggle.

but work that engages union retiree organizations and other ‘movement veterans’ groups has a potential which goes far beyond this. one concrete example is the as yet unrealized natural alliance among jewish elders, local 1199 retirees (jewish elders & others), and home health workers (some of them jewish immigrants).

Population

in new york city, **1,000,000** in the inner suburbs, **500,000** total jewish population: **1,500,000** ~13% of the city
~13% of the area

by borough & county:

brooklyn: 460,000 (~18%)	nassau: 225,000
manhattan: 250,000 (~17%)	westchester: 130,000
queens: 190,000 (~8%)	suffolk: 90,000
bronx: 45,000 (~3%)	
staten island: 42,000 (~9%)	

Age

12%	0-9	
12%	10-19	
13%	20-29	24% under 20 (360,000 people)
11%	30-39	
14%	40-49	
14%	50-59	
9%	60-69	25% over 60 (375,000 people)
11%	70-84	
5%	85+	(75,000 people)

28% of households have at least one resident under 18

46% of those over 60 live alone

71% of those over 85 live alone

Immigrants

given the study's bias towards an undercount of immigrants, a more accurate figure would probably be 1/3 or more of the jewish population, somewhat less than the proportion in the whole city. but also note that there is no figure for children of immigrants. the overall population of nyc is over 50% immigrants and children of immigrants, and judging by this study, that's also true of new york jews.

the strategic implications are quite wide-ranging. immigrant issues are jewish issues not because of the great 1880-1924 wave of ashkenazi migration, but because of the makeup of our current community. that means first of all a focus on eliminating discrimination based on documentation, and making the process of getting into the u.s. less restrictive (and less biased towards the wealthy, white, and well-connected) – and, dare i suggest, establishing a non-racist version of the open border policy which greeted european jews until 1924, if not abolishing the border altogether. but, further, it means a key strategic importance for accessible, multilingual health and education services; it means housing and employment discrimination affect jews not through anti-jewish prejudice but through xenophobia; it means that jews are among the targets of anti-immigrant attacks, whether open or coded, whether from senators, mayors or minutemen.

the jewish immigrant population is also extremely diverse. it's probably possible to assume that most recent jewish immigrants come from the former soviet union, but even this category includes groups as disparate as ashkenazim from ukraine, juhuro (so-called 'mountain jews') from azerbaijan and dagestan, and bukharians from central asia. this means that effective jewish organizing must be in some ways based on coalition, whether within or among organizations – communities with different histories, languages, traditions and religious practices cannot be assumed to hang together politically. this makes the concrete issues leading to alliances beyond the jewish sphere just as important within it. in a way, the diversity and size of the jewish immigrant population reinforces the old jewish left dictum that what unites jews and goyim best also unites jews best.

Place of Birth

73% born in the u.s.

60% in the nyc area

54% in new york city

27% born outside the u.s. (400,000 people)

Russian-Speaking Population

(not all of whom are immigrants;
and see the Methodology section)

225,000 "russian-speakers"

15% of the nyc area population

19% of the new york city population

27% of the brooklyn population

4% of the manhattan population

Diversity

even if all "russian-speakers" were immigrants, which is not true, there are:

at least **175,000** immigrants other than "russian-speakers"

12% of nyc area population

Class

jewish progressives and radicals have a choice to make. we can see our communities as composed primarily of the wealthy, and organize in ways that reinforce that notion; or we can see our communities as made up of the jewish poor and working class folks who it is often claimed don't exist. the number of poor and working-class jews, in fact, is rising, and may in fact be a majority in new york city (if not greater new york), depending on one's definition. by real estate standards, for instance, only a minority pass the \$80,000 floor for 'middle-income'. the jewish left, in the past few decades, has internalized the myth of jewish wealth to an impressive degree. the tendency among jewish progressive groups has been to recruit members mainly out of institutions catering towards the middle and upper middle class – upper west side and park slope synagogues, JCCs in better-off areas, private colleges and universities – and ignore the larger number of jews who are have not 'made it'. this is not a new dynamic; it's a version of the paternalistic approach from the early 1900s that today's groups often deride.

for those of us who are from privileged backgrounds, acknowledging that status and making the resources we have access to available to our movements is important. but one aspect of class privilege is making the assumption that everyone (or everyone 'like you' in one or another way) is also well-off. if jewish radicals and progressives who come from privilege make the choice to align our work away from the moneyed minority in our communities, ceasing to make that assumption is a first step. more broadly, if jewish radical and progressive organizing for economic justice is to be effective, it must be directed by the folks most directly affected by class-based oppression – the poor and working-class jews of new york. for most if not all existing jewish left groups, that means a deep transformation in their membership, and a thorough shift towards the democratization of their structures. it likely also means a shift away from the grant-funded 501(c)3 model of organizing, towards genuinely community-supported approaches less influenced by the service-oriented, professionalizing tug of most institutional funders.

Poverty

living in households below 150% of the official poverty level (presumably gauged by income:

nyc area - **16%** (250,000 people)
new york city - **21%** (225,000 people)

For comparison, in 1991:

nyc area - 9%
new york city - 11%

53% of "russian-speakers" (119,250 people)

91% of "russian-speakers" 65 and older
(vs. 13% of all 65 and older)

Household Income

\$35,000 or less	31%	
\$35-50,000	14%	45% under \$50,000
\$50-100,000	24%	
\$100-150,000	15%	
\$150,000 or more	17%	

Self-Assessment

4%	"cannot make ends meet?"
32%	"just managing?"
38%	"have enough?"
22%	"have extra money?"
4%	"wealthy?"

36% do not "have enough" to live on
74% have no "extra money?"

Observance

the UJA-Fed study was hyped as showing a strong turn towards Orthodoxy compared to its 1991 edition. in fact, the most striking change is the huge rise in the non-movement identified population, both Secular and Non-Denominational religious. the study certainly undercounted at both ends of the spectrum, and at the secular end in particular (see the Methodology section), which makes this finding all the more impressive. strategically, the key point is the declining interest in the ‘mainstream’ denominations. other approaches, from ‘liberation theology’ projects to formal and informal havrutot to the growing ‘traditional egalitarian’ model, seem to feed on their decline. some of these - from svara, the queer yeshiva, to less formal efforts - are key sites for organizing progressive religious jews.

but the data on actual practice leads to a broader conclusion: new york jews are overwhelmingly non-observant. the most common practices (seders and hanuka candles) are the ones progressive secularists observe, one of which is the single jewish ritual most tied to social justice. synagogues form a regular part of life for well under 1/3 of jewish new yorkers.

this is one of the most important points in this zine. most new york jews - many congregation members among them - cannot be reached through synagogues. most new york jews are unlikely to be responsive to organizing that assumes observance.

in short, the recent rush to religiously-based organizing models is deeply counterproductive. first, by working mainly through synagogues, it abandons the many, often progressive, religious folks outside the ‘mainstream’ denominations. worse, its replacement of jewishness with judaism – of historical and cultural with religious identity – writes off not just the secularists who are by far the fastest-growing segment of the community, but the entire non-observant majority (much of it already progressive or radical). one of the biggest gaps in the current jewish left is the lack of organizing models aimed at that majority, not as ‘unaffiliated’ folks to be plugged into synagogue and ‘mainstream’ structures, but as the basic constituency of any effective work.

Denominational Identification

2002		1991
19%	Orthodox	13%
26%	Conservative	34%
29%	Reform	36%
1%	Reconstructionist	2%
15%	Non-Denominational	10%
10%	Secular	3%
25%	non-movement-identified	13%

Practice

“sometimes”		“always or usually”
92%	go to a seder	77%
88%	light hanuka candles	76%
72%	fast on yom kippur	not given (i.e. very few)
53%	light shabos/shabbat candles	31%
28%	keep a kosher home (1991: 25%)	

Synagogue Attendance

16% never	56% never or rarely
40% infrequently	
15% less than monthly	
12% monthly	
17% daily or weekly	29% regularly
43% congregation members (1991: 38%) of whom at least 32% do not attend synagogue regularly	

Commitment & Community

this may be the most interesting part of the study results. the thing that unites new york jews most is a commitment to social change - only "sometimes going to a seder" (the jewish ritual most directly related to social justice) has a higher percentage attached to it. in fact, many more (by 345,000 or so) new york jews care about social justice than about having a jewish identity.

but more immediately tied to organizing strategy is the remarkable number of jews who place great value on involvement in jewish community and don't feel themselves to be part of one: that 14% is over 109,000 people. even more telling is the overlapping number of jews who feel themselves not to be part of a jewish community despite congregation membership - here the 14% is over 90,000 people. this statistic can serve to reinforce the previous section's conclusions about the utility of organizing through 'mainstream' religious structures. these results are all the more striking from a survey sample heavily weighted towards jews involved in 'mainstream' jewish life.

the implications of this seem clear: there are huge numbers of jewish new yorkers who want jewish community as well as social change, and who aren't finding community in religious contexts or other 'mainstream' organizations. for secularists as well as observant folks, a vibrant jewish community supporting and focusing that desire for social change is one of the most powerful things that jewish radical and progressive organizations can offer. groups which don't build community, or which substitute words for action, are unlikely to get far.

but in thinking about how to build jewish communities of struggle, it's important to keep in mind the other findings of the study. the longstanding conventional assumptions about who jews are - u.s. born, middle-class or wealthier, ashkenazi, white - are alienating hindrances to organizing the jews that actually exist in our city. similarly, the current vogue for religious modes of constructing community cuts off organizing efforts from most jewish new yorkers. effective radical and progressive jewish organizing must combat, not duplicate, the failings of the 'mainstream' in these areas.

“Very Important”

- 88% “making the world a better place”
- 65% “being Jewish”
- 52% “being part of a Jewish community”

“Mainstream’ Membership & Participation

- 43% congregation members (only: 24%)
- 28% JCC members (only: 9%)
- 19% both; 48% neither
- 67% attend jewish cultural events (only: 34%)
- 39% attend JCC events (only: 6%)
- 33% both; 27% neither

Community

of those who said being part of a jewish community is very important to them:

- 27% not a member of a congregation or jewish organization
- 23% don't participate in JCC or other jewish cultural events
- 14% feel “only a little” or “not at all” part of a jewish community
- 65% consider themselves part of a jewish community
- 14% of congregation members say they are not part of one
- 51% of non-members say they are not part of one

Invisible

entirely omitted from the UJA-Fed study were a number of important questions and categories of identity and commitment which seem to me crucial to the project of organizing jews for radical and progressive social change.

the study asked no questions about gender and sexuality. new york city is one of the acknowledged centers of queer and transgender jewish life, in all its forms from assimilationist to radical, punk to frum. particularly worth noting is that almost all jewish progressive and radical organizations rely on the labor of lesbians and queer women, and, increasingly, trans folks to survive. whether as paid staff, unpaid volunteers or dues-paying members, that's almost invariably the core which keeps groups alive. this is fairly typical of the left in general, as many feminist writers have pointed out. unfortunately, few of those groups reflect the importance of this key base in their actions or even words beyond occasional statements or support for the least controversial issues..

left unasked as well were questions on racial or ethnic identity, including jewish ethnicity. thus there is no way to know what the racial breakdown of new york's jews is, or how many are sefardi, beta yisrael, romaniote, ashkenazi, etc. this is a shame in part because the study could have contributed to the important work of combating the assumption of jewish whiteness and ashkenazi-centric approaches to jewish political and cultural work. both of these separate, though overlapping, issues is key to effective progressive and radical jewish organizing.

another absent category important to jewish organizing (if extremely difficult to measure) is the one composed of the thousands of jewish new yorkers active in issue- and neighborhood-based progressive and radical work, but not in the explicitly jewish sphere. they may well comprise the majority of politically active jews, as well as playing a significant role in a wide range of movements and organizations. one important role that jewish progressive and radical groups can play is to connect these folks, facilitating analytic, strategic and tactical cross-fertilization among the movements they work in.

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likewise absent was any assessment of community attitudes towards the state of israel and the human rights of palestinians. while perhaps the subject which causes the most drama within the jewish left, it is not one which can simply be set aside by organizations whose work it does not immediately concern. the effects of the 'mainstream' insistence on unquestioning support for any and all israeli government policy permeate jewish community life. anti-arab racism, anti-muslim prejudice, and a growing intolerance of political dissent in jewish communities affect all progressive and radical efforts, whether police violence, immigrant rights, or the occupation of iraq is the immediate subject. to deal effectively with these and many other issues in a jewish context is impossible without engaging with the question of palestine.

further, many politically active jews are reluctant to get involved with progressive jewish projects because of the inconsistency between many groups' overall politics (in particular around racism) and their statements or silence in relation to israel. while those jews who are seriously committed to an uncritical support of the israeli government will likely never get involved in the jewish left, those alienated by jewish progressive and radical groups' double standard on palestinian human rights are exactly the ones most likely to become committed active members. the prevailing strategy of silence, equivocation, or at best words belied by actions is counterproductive at best.

in relation to other progressive and radical groups as well, jewish organizations can no longer maintain an exception in our politics for israel. for decades, excuses have been accepted to justify israeli government actions which we would never entertain from the u.s. government, much less supporters of any other regime - 'security reasons', 'existential threat', 'defense of democracy', etc. similarly, jewish nationalist ideologies have been exempted from the critique - and indeed rejection - we accord the same ideas when they appear in any other group. these exceptions, which rewrite the myth of jewish chosenness, must end if we wish to remain in any true sense part of a movement for social justice for all people, rather than nominally progressive apologists for right-wing nationalism and the human rights abuses it creates.

Methodology

the UJA-Fed made “a priori” decisions based on “prestudy estimates” about the number of jews in each neighborhood, and then used them to weight the survey area’s telephone exchanges (1st 3 digits). 174,128 randomly-chosen numbers were called, reaching 68,900 “households”. the households were screened, and 6,035 households were labeled as jewish. the flaws in this are of course legion. the highest-weighted category was based on UJA-Fed & JCRC phone lists, practically guaranteeing a disproportionately ashkenazi, observant and wealthy sample, even if there had been an attempt to assess what neighborhoods actually have high jewish population densities rather than relying on a priori assumptions (a.k.a. stereotypes).

further, being labeled as a jewish household was based on rather restrictive criteria. a household had to contain at least one “Jewish person at least 18 years old” to make the cut. about 150,000 people were eliminated for having only jewish-identified folks under 18 in the household, or because the folks over 18 in their households who had jewish parents or grandparents didn’t identify themselves as jewish or jewish and something else. another 20,000 households judged to be “messianic” were screened out according to no clear criteria, whether they identified themselves as such or not.

even beyond the 170,000 or so respondents who were altogether erased, the study was conducted only in english and russian, so speakers of other languages - yiddish, arabic, judezmo/ladino, spanish, uzbek, tajik, azeri, mayalalam, farsi, to name some spoken by new york jews - could not in any case be identified as jewish or not.

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the only specific jewish sub-population the study identified is “Russian-speakers”. it is unclear what that means – as best i can tell, it’s that the interview was done in russian. among the many other possibilities, pointing to some of the subjects of inquiry glossed over if that is the actual criterion, are: russian as the respondent’s first language; russian as the primary language of the household; better russian than english (regardless of first language); russian the only language shared with the interviewer; born in russia; born in any former-soviet state. we cannot, apparently, be trusted with more complete information.

there is a similar lack of detail as to observance. it’s hard to even know what Orthodox populations the study covered - did it reach traditionalist and ultra-orthodox communities (washington heights’ misnagdim; brooklyn’s khasidim; forest hills’ bukkharans; etc.) at all, and if so, which ones? did it cover khasidim but not traditionalist sefardim? lubavitch but not satmar? etc. the secular end of the spectrum, which was likely more seriously undercounted given the UJA-Fed/JCRC seeding of the list, suffers from a similar lack of clarity. are humanistic jews counted as Secular or Non-Denominational? how was someone who reported a Conservative upbringing and present atheism recorded? and what about those 150,000 folks of jewish origin who the surveyors didn’t interview?

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overall, the study’s methodology weighted out and thus undercounted: jews outside of stereotypically jewish neighborhoods; recent immigrants (who are less likely to speak english or agree to participate in a telephone survey); folks without telephones (and perhaps those with only cellular phones). on the other side, it weighted in and thus overcounted: jews on JCRC & UJA-Fed membership and mailing lists, jews living in stereotypically jewish neighborhoods (which are mainly ashkenazi and comparatively wealthy areas), and those with work schedules allowing them to be home to answer the phone for a survey (i.e. folks who’re economically better off).

the stated margins of error run from +/-1.8% to +/-3% for most questions, but for the population estimates themselves, they are much higher: from +/-5% for the number of households in brooklyn up to +/-10% for the bronx.

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these built-in biases, and the substantial margins of error, should be kept in mind when looking at any statistics drawn from the survey.