

SYNAGOGUE MARRIAGES IN BRITAIN IN THE 1980s

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Sources and Trends

THE findings presented in this paper are the latest instalment in a series initiated by Prais and Schmool in 1967:¹ they are based on the annual compilations of synagogue marriages throughout the United Kingdom, as returned to the Community Research Unit of the Board of Deputies of British Jews in London, and on special tabulations of returns to the Registrar General of marriages solemnized in England and Wales according to the usages of the Jews for the years 1981, 1983, 1985, and 1987; a summary of the annual figures for 1971 to 1990 is given in the Appendix. Although there are individual years between 1971 and 1990 which show an increase, the general pattern is one of a decline, more marked in the case of synagogue than of national marriages. In 1989, all marriages in England and Wales were 85.7 per cent, and all religious marriages were 75.8 per cent, of their 1971 level; but synagogue marriages in 1986–90 were 62 per cent of their 1971–75 level.

The pattern of decline of synagogue marriages is not consistent throughout the community. The Appendix shows that weddings in Liberal synagogues have fallen by some 57 per cent whereas the parallel decline in Reform synagogue weddings is 23 per cent over the same period; on the other hand the Right-wing Orthodox show an increase of 15 per cent between 1976–80 and 1986–90. The major part of the overall decline is accounted for by the fall in weddings in Central Orthodox synagogues, which are for the most part under the auspices of the Marriage Authorisation Office of the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations.² For the years 1986–90, 64 per cent of all synagogue marriages were solemnized in Central Orthodox synagogues; but in 1970, the proportion had been 73.9 per cent of (the then larger total of) all synagogue marriages that year.

Marital Status of Brides and Grooms

Jewish law not only allows divorce but indeed prescribes it in certain circumstances. Nevertheless, the incidence of divorce has traditionally

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been low in Jewish communities.³ Until very recently, the records of synagogue marriages showed that the proportion of brides or grooms who were divorcees was consistently lower than half the percentage of divorcees entering into another marriage in the general population of England and Wales.⁴ However, these data underestimate the incidence of remarriage after divorce among British Jews: some divorcees remarry in a Register Office either by choice or because they have been unable to obtain a *get* (bill of divorcement) and therefore cannot marry in an Orthodox synagogue.

These civil marriages in a Register Office do not provide data on the religion of the spouses, so that there is no direct means of discovering from public records the numbers of civil marriages where one or both spouses, of whatever previous marital status, was or were Jewish. Consequently, it is to be expected that synagogue marriage registers will show a high proportion of unions between bachelors and spinsters and a correspondingly low proportion of weddings where one or both partners had been previously divorced. Table 1 confirms that throughout the 1980s, although there was an increase in the proportion of divorcees remarrying, more than 80 per cent of both brides and grooms marrying in a synagogue were marrying for the first time. The comparative proportions for the general population of England and Wales during the same period were 73 per cent of grooms and 74 per cent of brides. However, it must be remembered that there has been an overall decline in the *number* of all synagogue marriages while the incidence of remarriage has risen and that the proportion of synagogue marriages where both partners were marrying for the first time fell from 82 per cent in 1981 to 77 per cent in 1987.⁵

TABLE 1. Marital status of persons marrying in synagogue, selected years

Year	Total 100%	Grooms			Brides		
		Bachelor	Widowed	Divorced	Spinster	Widowed	Divorced
1981	1041	86.3	5.2	8.5	86.1	5.2	8.7
1983	1064	83.4	5.2	11.5	84.1	5.0	10.9
1985	1005	83.5	4.9	11.6	85.5	3.9	10.7
1987	916	82.3	4.8	12.9	83.1	4.8	12.1

Source: OPCS.Tabulations

Kosmin and Waterman have reported that between 1974 and 1978, the proportion of synagogue marriages where both partners were marrying for the first time fell from 83.6 to 82.4 per cent.⁶ The latest available data show a further seven per cent decline in first marriages since 1978. As is usual with overall trends, this pattern is not

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homogeneous throughout the community, nor is it restricted to any one section of it. The Community Research Unit of the Board of Deputies has been able to provide some rudimentary data on variations in marital status of brides and grooms between synagogal groups. In 1981, 11.8 per cent of those solemnizations authorized by the Chief Rabbi's Office involved at least one divorcee, but by 1988 that proportion had risen to 18.9 per cent. According to information provided for 1988 by 60 synagogues (mainly Progressive, but including one major Orthodox grouping), 27.9 of all weddings in those 60 synagogues had at least one partner remarrying after a divorce. Unfortunately, the Community Research Unit could not obtain data about marital status for weddings solemnized under the auspices of Right-wing Orthodox groups, which are popularly believed not to have incurred an increasing rate of divorce. (Although some informed observers have commented that even these sectors are being affected by the general rising divorce rate, these observers have not produced hard evidence.)

Age at Marriage

Two major factors influencing the incidence of, and subsequently the average age at, marriage are the age structure of the population and the attitudes of young persons concerning matrimony. The agedness of British Jewry⁷ may lead to a later average age at marriage, despite the influence of the host society where there is a younger age at marriage. Moreover, one must bear in mind the international Jewish pattern of a comparatively late age at marriage in modern times. The data in Table II show that British Jews do marry in synagogue at a later age than do all brides and grooms in the general population.

TABLE II. Median age at marriage of bachelors and spinsters and of all marriages, selected years: synagogue marriages and England and Wales

	<i>Synagogue Marriages</i>		<i>England and Wales</i>	
	<i>Bachelors</i>	<i>All grooms</i>	<i>Bachelors</i>	<i>All grooms</i>
MEN				
1981	25.77	26.37	24.14	25.91
1983	25.12	27.08	24.48	26.30
1985	25.55	27.57	24.88	26.67
1987	26.61	27.80	25.29	27.00
WOMEN				
	<i>Spinsters</i>	<i>All brides</i>	<i>Spinsters</i>	<i>All brides</i>
1981	23.29	23.34	21.95	23.40
1983	23.70	24.70	22.33	23.81
1985	24.01	24.71	22.80	24.28
1987	24.33	25.37	23.30	24.75

Source: OPCS Tabulations

Admittedly, there has been a recent tendency in British society for marriage at an older age; but Jewish brides and grooms have still regularly been older than those in England and Wales generally. The median age of Jewish bachelors at marriage was on average in the 1980s just over a year (1.04) older than that for all bachelors in England and Wales, while the median age of Jewish spinsters marrying in a synagogue was on average 1.24 years above the general England and Wales level. However, the difference in median age is smaller when we consider all brides and grooms — not just spinsters and bachelors. Although, with the exception of brides in 1981, all Jewish brides and grooms were overall older than those in the general population, the difference was not as marked as for those marrying for the first time: the median age of all Jewish bridegrooms in synagogues was, on average, 0.74 years above that of all bridegrooms in England and Wales, while all Jewish brides were 0.45 years older than brides in the general population.

The change in median age at marriage for Jewish bachelors and spinsters has not been as marked as that of bachelors and spinsters in the general population of England and Wales in the 1980s. From 1981 to 1987, the median age at first marriage for Jewish men rose by 0.84 years while that of men in the general population rose by 1.15 years. For Jewish spinsters, the rise was 1.04 years as compared with 1.35 years for all spinsters. This difference in increase may be related to the fact that the average age of Jewish brides and grooms has for some time been higher than the average age of brides and grooms in the general population⁸ and that the host society is only now showing a comparable change.

The comparative patterns of change are reversed when figures for *all* brides and grooms — not just those marrying for the first time — are considered. The median age at marriage rose by 1.43 years for all Jewish bridegrooms as against a rise of 1.09 years for all bridegrooms in the general population, and by 2.03 years for all Jewish brides as against a rise of 1.35 years for all brides in England and Wales; but these figures must be treated with caution, since they do not take account of civil remarriage after divorce. The remarriage of those who were widowed must also be kept in mind: in the case of Jewish widows and widowers, the age at remarriage has been about three years more than the age of those widowed and remarrying in the general population.

Community Replacement

Trends in synagogue weddings and knowledge of age and marital status at marriage may be utilized to throw light on communal containment. By using data on age at first marriage, we can estimate

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the shortfall between potential and actual numbers of persons marrying for the first time in any one year. In 1970, Prais and Schmool showed that the then current fluctuations in annual totals of synagogue weddings mirrored to some extent the serious fluctuations in the numbers of synagogue weddings of the parental generation during the years of the Second World War.⁹ Recent changes in social attitudes towards marriage and new styles of family formation no longer allow such assumptions, but it is still possible to calculate the numbers of bachelors and spinsters expected to marry; this in turn may help to estimate potential recruitment to the Jewish community.

The crude synagogue marriage rate is half the overall marriage rate of the general population and has been so since the 1960s, but it would be unsophisticated to base any predictions on this type of data, without taking into account differences in age structures. This difficulty is overcome by examining the Jewish and the general society's records of expected and of actual first marriages and by noting the differences between British Jewry and the general population of England and Wales in this respect. If we use the method adopted by Prais and Schmool and assume that the fertility ratios in the late 1950s and the early 1960s were the same for Jews as for the general population, the number of brides and grooms expected to reach the average age at first marriage in any year can be estimated by applying the ratio of births to marriages of the appropriate year to the number of synagogue weddings in that year.¹⁰ For example, in 1981 the median age at first marriage for Jewish males was 26 years, giving 1955 as the year of birth. In 1955 in England and Wales, the ratio of legitimate male births to all marriages in the general population was 0.96 and the number of synagogue marriages was 2,158. By multiplying 2,158 by 0.96, we obtain an estimate of 2,072 Jewish men expected to reach the median age of first marriage in 1981. The parallel calculation for brides is based on the year 1957 and shows that 2,084 Jewish women would be expected to reach the median age at first marriage in 1981. The exercise was carried through for the Jewish and for the general populations and the results are presented in Table III. That Table shows a regular overall decline in the proportion of the expected numbers of brides and grooms who actually married, and the decline holds good for both men and women and for both the Jewish and the general population.

Some discrepancy between the expected and the actual numbers of marriages is not surprising, since not all persons survive to a marriageable age (approximately 2.6 per cent of men and 1.8 per cent of women die before the age of 25 years). Moreover, there has been for more than 20 years an increase in pre-marital cohabitation: in 1967 in England and Wales, about two per cent of all bachelors and spinsters had cohabited with the partners whom they eventually married while in 1987, the proportion had risen to 58 per cent of the men and 53 per

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TABLE III. Expected and actual first marriages, males and females, selected years

	<i>Jews</i>			<i>General Population</i>		
	<i>Expected marriages</i>	<i>Actual marriages*</i>	<i>Actual % of Expected</i>	<i>Expected ('000s)</i>	<i>Actual ('000s)</i>	<i>Actual % of Expected</i>
MALES						
1981	2072	984	47.5	371.2	259.1	69.8
1983	2287	964	42.2	384.3	251.8	65.5
1985	2142	931	43.5	405.5	253.3	62.5
1987	2214	837	37.8	431.2	258.7	60.0
FEMALES						
1981	2084	983	47.2	363.9	263.4	72.4
1983	2165	972	44.9	395.2	256.2	64.8
1985	2082	953	44.5	406.8	258.1	63.4
1987	2120	845	39.9	420.4	263.0	62.6

Sources: OPCS *Population Trends* 59, Spring 1990
 Registrar General's *Statistical Review of England and Wales 1964* Part 11
 OPCS Special Tabulations

* Estimated by applying the proportion of first marriages in the OPCS Special Tabulations to total numbers of synagogue marriages recorded by the Community Research Unit.

cent of the women who married in that year.¹¹ Clearly, cohabitation has delayed marriage; it has also in some cases replaced marriage, as is evident from the 25 per cent of births outside marriage in 1988. Furthermore, such births are being registered increasingly by both parents, from 49 per cent doing so in 1975 to 68 per cent in 1987.¹²

Table III shows that there is a difference of more than 20 per cent between the Jewish and the general rates of attained marriages, to the disadvantage of the Jewish community. However, this difference between the two groups has diminished since the early 1960s, when Jews attained about 72 per cent of expected first marriages at a time when the first marriages of the general population (with brides and grooms being younger than in previous years) were exceeding the expected numbers.

One explanation of this difference between the two groups is that the birth-to-marriage ratio, used to calculate expected numbers of individuals marrying for the first time, overestimates Jewish fertility in the 1950s and the early 1960s. The little available evidence indicates that the fertility of Jewish women at that time was 13 per cent below the national average.¹³ If we take this lower fertility level into account, the ratio of actual to expected first marriages would be raised by between six and eight per cent, making the resulting achieved numbers of bachelors and spinsters marrying lower by some 13 per cent than the parallel case for the general population. Part of this additional

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difference may be accounted for by emigration — not only to Israel (*aliyah*) but also to other countries — which, in turn, is offset by immigration of young Jews from abroad. With more native-born Jewish females than males marrying in British synagogues, we must presume that first-time brides marry some immigrant men, after allowing for an average six per cent of all the spinster brides marrying Jewish divorcees or widowers. Moreover, the national figures for the general population may have been augmented by the marriages of immigrants and their children, particularly from the British Commonwealth. Any allowances for these actual marriages would reduce the difference between the Jewish community and the general population even more.

Since post-war marriage trends in British Jewry were first charted in 1965, the gap between the general and the Jewish marriage rates has been regularly analysed. The model by Prais and Schmool for the 1960s indicated that for the period 1960–65, the shortfall between actual and expected synagogue weddings was 28 per cent; and for 1966–68, 31 per cent.¹⁴ This present paper has shown that between 1981 and 1987, the shortfall for bachelors rose from 52 to 62 per cent while for spinsters the increase was smaller — from 53 to 60 per cent.

Conclusion

The internal communal shift from Progressive to Right-wing Orthodox marriage in recent years has led some observers to suggest that overall loss from all groups would be more than offset by the increasing numbers of weddings of strictly observant Jews. However, the Appendix shows that this has not been the case. Moreover, there has been a weakening of conventional Jewish marriage patterns,¹⁵ as is revealed by the decline in first marriages in Table 1.

On the other hand, divorced men and divorced women have entered into second religious unions in increasing numbers: between 1981 and 1987, there was an increase from 88 to 118 men, and from 91 to 111 women, who had been divorced and who had their remarriage solemnized in a synagogue. We must also bear in mind that anecdotal evidence suggests that some British Jews may be following the national trend of cohabitation instead of (or before) marriage. These individuals may not be estranged from Judaism, especially if they are cohabiting with a Jewish partner, even if they do not eventually decide to enter into either a civil marriage or a religious union.

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Appendix

Synagogue Marriages in Great Britain: annual averages 1971-1990;
annual totals, 1986-1990

<i>Year</i>	<i>Central Orth.</i>	<i>Right-wing Orth.</i>	<i>Sephardi</i>	<i>Reform</i>	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Total</i>
1971-75	1388.4*			224.8	128.6	1741.8
1976-80	899.4	97.8	43.2	189.8	88	1318.2
1981-85	763.8	102.4	40.4	179.2	67.6	1153.4
1986-90	692.2	112	48	172.6	55.8	1080.6
1986	699	122	46	160	70	1097
1987	659	96	43	184	62	1044
1988	702	121	56	182	46	1107
1989	679	118	47	170	43	1057
1990	722	103	48	167	58	1098

* Includes Sephardi and Right-wing Orthodox.

NOTES

¹ S. J. Prais and Marlena Schmoool, 'Statistics of Jewish Marriages in Great Britain: 1901-1965', *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, vol. 10, no. 2, June 1967 (pp. 149-74); S. J. Prais and Marlena Schmoool, 'Synagogue Marriages in Great Britain 1966-8', *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, vol. 12, no. 1, June 1970 (pp. 21-28); and Barry A. Kosmin and Stanley Waterman, 'Recent Trends in Anglo-Jewish Marriages', *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, vol. 28, no. 1, June 1986 (pp. 49-58).

² Most London, and all except four provincial, Ashkenazi Orthodox synagogues require marriage authorization (the equivalent of a civil marriage licence) from this office before performing the marriage ceremony. Other Central Orthodox marriages are from the small Masorti group of synagogues, which is ideologically akin to the Conservative synagogue grouping in America; the number of marriages in this group each year is small and has been included with the mainstream figures, since the annual compilation of British Jewish marriage figures began in 1965.

³ Calvin Goldscheider, *Jewish Continuity and Change*, Bloomington, Indiana, 1986, p. 58.

⁴ Kosmin and Waterman, *op. cit.* in Note 1 above, p. 54.

⁵ The comparable figure for England and Wales in 1987 was 64 per cent. For a full discussion of the situation in England and Wales, see Maire Ni Bhrolchain, *Age Difference Asymmetry and a Two-Sex Perspective* (OPCS Longitudinal Study Working Paper 70), London, 1990.

⁶ Kosmin and Waterman, *op. cit.* in Note 1 above, p. 54, Table II.

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⁷ Stanley Waterman and Barry Kosmin, *British Jewry in the Eighties: A Statistical and Geographical Study*, Board of Deputies of British Jews, London, 1986, p. 11.

⁸ Sergio DellaPergola, *Recent Trends in Jewish Marriage*, Occasional Paper: 1989-07, Institute of Contemporary Jewry, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem; 1989, p. 2.

⁹ Prais and Schmool, 'Statistics of Jewish Marriages . . .', op. cit. in Note 1 above, p. 159.

¹⁰ Prais and Schmool, 'Synagogue Marriages . . .', op. cit. in Note 1 above, p. 23.

¹¹ John Haskey and Kathleen Kiernan, 'Cohabitation in Great Britain — characteristics and estimated numbers of cohabiting partners', in *Population Trends* 58, London, OPCS, 1989, p. 25. See also Bruce Penhale, *Living Arrangements of Young Adults in France and England and Wales*, London: OPCS Longitudinal Study Working Paper 68, 1990, p. 12.

¹² Kathleen Kiernan and Malcolm Wicks, *Family change and future policy*, Family Policy Studies Centre, London, 1990, p. 8.

¹³ Prais and Schmool, 'Synagogue Marriages . . .', op. cit. in Note 1 above, p. 24. In view of the increase in remarriage, the present calculations have been restricted to numbers of people marrying, and have not been taken further to give numbers of first marriages.

¹⁴ Prais and Schmool, 'Synagogue Marriages . . .', op. cit. in Note 1 above, p. 25.

¹⁵ DellaPergola, op. cit. in Note 8 above, p. 29.