IS THE ISRAELI FAMILY LOSING ITS CHARACTER? A REPLY TO LEO DAVIDS

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Recently (I.S.S.R., 1(1)), Leo Davids argued that Israeli family patterns are rapidly becoming similar to those typical of the contemporary West. His conclusion is examined against data (marriage, birth and divorce rates) covering 35 years (1948-83). The data indicate the operation of several factors (ethnic composition of the population, the outbreak of wars, religious observance, etc.) which influence family-related behavior.

While an overall trend towards modern family patterns does exist, no recent acceleration of this trend could be traced. Furthermore, the gap in divorce rates between the USA and Israel did not diminish during the decade. Thus, it can be concluded that the Jewish family in Israel has preserved most of its unique atrributes.

In his brief article, "What's happening in the Israeli family? Recent demographic trends", Leo Davids (1983) argues that the picture drawn by a number of demographers and sociologists (Matras, 1973; Peres and Katz, 1980; 1981), who portray a relatively stable and central Israeli family, "may now be out of date." He concludes that, according to the "most recent demographic statistics..., Israel is now moving rapidly towards a late-modern type of family situation" (p. 37). To what extent are Davids' conclusions warranted by the data?

As a point of departure, it should be noted that recent data about Israeli marriage, birth, and divorce rates do *not* constitute sufficient basis for a balanced and reliable conclusion, because they cannot provide answers to two strategic questions:

1. To what extent did the trends "towards a late-modern type of family situation" really originate only in the last 6-7 years, not covered by earlier studies? Or, alternatively, to what extent have these trends accelerated recently?

2. Has the gap in major indicators of familism between Israel and other modern societies (specifically the United States) narrowed recently?

Conjugal stability, fertility, and other measures of family-oriented behavior should be evaluated on a relative rather than an absolute basis: has the situation of the Israeli family changed *vis-à-vis* the American family? If so, in which direction?

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The authors gratefully acknowledge the help of Sagit Raz of Tel-Aviv University in preparing the data.

Table I enables us to examine marriage, divorce and birth rates for the Jewish population of Israel over the entire 36 years (1948-1983) of the existence of the State.

Table 1. Marriage, Divorce, and Live Birth Rates in Israel per 1000 of Jewish Population, 1948-1983.

Year	Marriage		Divorce		Live Birth	
1948	10.9		1.4		26.3	
49	13.4	$\bar{X}$ = 12.4	1.7	$\bar{X}$ = 1.7	30.0	$\bar{X}$ = 30.1
50	14.5		2.1		33.0	
51	11.8		1.8		32.7	
52	11.3		1.7		31.6	
CH =		0.81		4.41		4.40
53	9.6		1.6		30.2	
54	8.8	$\bar{X}$ = 8.8	1.4	$\bar{X}$ = 1.3	27.4	$\bar{X}$ = 27.5
55	8.7		1.3		27.2	
56	8.4		1.2		26.7	
57	8.4		1.2		26.0	
CH =		-3.41		-7.69		-3.82
58	8.3		1.2		24.1	
59	7.9	$\bar{X}$ = 7.7	1.1	$\bar{X}$ = 1.1	24.3	$\bar{X}$ = 23.3
60	7.7		1.1		23.9	
61	7.2		1.0		22.5	
62	7.3		1.0		21.8	
CH =		-3.25		-4.55		-2.47
63	7.6		1.0		22.0	
64	7.8	$\bar{X}$ = 7.8	1.0	$\bar{X}$ = 1.0	22.4	$\bar{X}$ = 22.2
65	8.0		1.0		22.6	
66	8.0		0.9		22.4	
67	7.7		0.9		21.4	
CH =		0.32		-2.50		-0.68
68	8.6		0.9		22.8	
69	9.3	$\bar{X}$ = 9.4	0.9	$\bar{X}$ = 0.9	23.4	$\bar{X}$ = 23.9
70	9.5		0.9		24.2	
71	9.9		0.9		25.2	
72	9.8		0.9		23.8	
CH =		3.19		0.00		1.01
73	9.3		0.9		23.9	
74	9.9	$\bar{X}$ = 9.2	0.9	$\bar{X}$ = 1.0	24.5	$\bar{X}$ = 24.4
75	9.7		1.0		25.0	
76	8.7		1.0		25.1	
77	8.3		1.1		23.6	
CH =		-2.72		5.00		-0.31
78	8.1		1.2		22.3	
79	7.9	$\bar{X}$ = 7.6	1.2	$\bar{X}$ = 1.3	22.0	$\bar{X}$ = 21.9
80	7.7		1.3		22.0	
81	7.5		1.3		21.4	
82	7.1		1.3		21.5	
CH =		-3.29		1.92		-0.57
83	7.1		1.3		22.0	
CH (1948-1983) =		-1.21		-0.24		-0.55

$$*CH = \frac{Dn - D_1}{\overline{X}} \times \frac{100}{N} \text{ (change coefficient)}$$

D_1 = entry for the 1st year
Dn = entry for the n'th year
N = number of years
$\overline{X}$ = mean

Sources: *Statistical Abstract of Israel 1983,* Table 6/2.
Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, Monthly Bulletin, January 1984: 6-7.

To aid in this analysis, we divided the period under study into sub-periods of five years each (1948-1952, 1953-1957, etc.) and computed the mean and a measure of change $(=CH)^2$ for each sub-period. The direction of change is seen to shift (for marriage and divorce rates) three times in the course of the entire 36-year period. It thus seems premature to extrapolate from the last five or ten years.

These fluctuations do indicate the operation of several factors that influence the phenomena under study in various, sometimes countervailing, ways. First, the ethnic composition of Israeli society underwent a vast transformation in this relatively short time. This transformation was caused not solely by the immigration of 800,000 Jews from Asia and Africa, but also by the faster natural growth of those immigrants, which brought about a continuous increase in the percentage of traditional family patterns in the population. The drop in divorce rates from 1950 to 1961 can be attributed to this transition in the population's ethnic composition. If, however, each ethnic group is observed *separately*, a tendency towards relatively modern family patterns (lower birth rates; later marriages) can be indicated. These tendencies among Oriental Jews introduced long-term trends of modernization which can be observed in national data (decreasing marriage and birth rates in the 1950's and early 1960's).

These trends, however, were interrupted from time to time by the outbreak of hostilities between Israel and the Arab world. Birth rates actually increased immediately after the 1967 war and for four consecutive years afterwards. The same process occurred after the war in 1973, but lasted only three years. If we examine the very latest figures (which were not available to Davids), we again find a slight increase in birth rates from 1981 to 1983, the period of the Lebanon war.

An examination of marriage rates during the same periods (of hostilities) shows similar results, although the trend toward decreasing marriage rates was generally only interrupted, not reversed. Finally, wars did not seem to have any impact on divorce rates, which remained relatively low.

Do recent data show an *acceleration* of modernizing (or westernizing) trends? To answer this question, the rates of change (CH) during the late seventies and the early eighties should be compared with earlier data.

Marriage Rates

Acceleration can be observed in the drop in marriage rates. Should we conclude from this finding that an increasing percentage of Israelis refrain from marriage altogether? A direct examination yields a negative answer: the percentage of men or women beyond fertility age who never married did not increase (men: 1970 – 2.4%; 1975 – 3.1%; 1980 – 2.8%; women: 1970 – 1.9%; 1975 – 2.0%; 1980 – 2.0%; see *Statistical Abstract of Israel*, 1977: Table B/20; 1982: Table B/21). The decrease in

marriage rates may be interpreted as a tendency to postpone marriage rather than to avoid it. The mean age at marriage increased between 1975 and 1981 by about 9 months for bridegrooms and 8 months for brides (*Statistical Abstract of Israel*, 1975: Table G/9; 1983: Table G/5). Finally, the drop in the marriage rate may be a reflection of yet another process:the gradual aging of the population. In 1970, 10% of the population belonged to the 20-24 age-bracket, whereas in 1980, the same age group consisted of only 8.4% of the population (*Statistical Abstract of Israel*, 1976: Table B/15; 1983: Table B/17). Since the majority of first-marriage partners are young people, this "aging" factor may be a major cause of the recent decline in the marriage rate. Consequently, this decline cannot be considered a strong argument for the purported weakening of the family in Israeli society.

Birth Rates

There has also been a drop in birth rates (from 25 per 1,000 Jewish population in the mid-seventies to 21-22 in the early eighties). To what extent does this finding justify Davids' supposition that Israeli fertility "may approach zero population growth in the not too distant future" (p. 38)? It should be noted that the rate of change for the last five years (1978-1983) was less than one percent per year (exactly: 0.55%). It should also be noted that the decrease in birth rates was much faster during the late 1950's and early 1960's, when the masses of immigrants from Asia and Africa introduced more and more effective birth control.

The fact that Israeli families have gained better control over their own growth is also demonstrated in Table II.

Table 2. Percentage of Live Births, by Mother's Age, at Five Year Intervals, 1950-1980

	Year						
	1950	1955	1960	1965	1970	1975	1980
Mother's age							
19	6.8	8.3	7.0	7.8	6.2	6.1	4.7
20-34	75.3	79.5	80.1	80.4	82.5	85.3	87.4
35+	17.3	11.9	12.9	11.7	11.2	8.5	7.7
Not known	0.6	0.3	–	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2
Number of live births	33.0	27.2	23.9	22.6	24.2	25.0	22.0

Sources: *Statistical Abstract of Israel*
1952, No. 3, Table 20: 19
1957, No. 8, Table 19: 24
1962, No. 13, Table 30: 86
1967, No. 18, Table III/23
1972, No. 23, Table III/26
1976, No. 27, Table III/23
1981, No. 32, Table III/26

Here the percentage of live births is arranged by mother's age. Our assumption is that the 20-34 age-bracket is most preferable for giving birth, and thus most planned births will occur in this age-group.[2] Table 2 indeed shows that the percentage of births

which occurred when the mother was in the 20-34 age-bracket increased continuously over a 30-year period (from 75% in 1950 to 87% in 1980). About one-third of the overall percentage reduction in birth rates can be accounted for by the decrease in the number of births among very young girls (below 19) or among older women (35 up). Thus, the overall decrease in birth rates is due, at least, partially, to more careful family planning rather than to avoidance of conjugal or parental responsibilities.

Divorce Rates

Divorce rates did show an increase in the last decade; but over the course of this decade (1973-1983), the pace of change did not accelerate. The current rate of divorce is exactly the same as it was in 1955. A simple comparison between crude and age-specific divorce rates (Davids, 1983: 35) shows that the pace of increase is in fact *slower* when age-specific rates are considered: CH (of crude rate) = 6.4% per year; CH (of age-specific divorce rates) = 4.2% per year.

Finally, it is instructive to examine the *ratio* between U.S. and Israeli divorce rates.

Table 3. Israeli and U.S. Divorce Rates 1970/1980

	Year				
	1970	1974	1976	1978	1980
Israeli divorce rate	0.9	0.9	1.0	1.2	1.3
U.S. divorce rate	3.5	4.6	5.0	5.2	5.5
Ratio	0.26	0.20	0.20	0.23	0.24

Source: *Statistical Abstract of Israel,* 1983, Table G/2
Statistical Abstract of the U.S., 1982-1983, p. 82.

The divorce rate in Israel has remained in the range of 20%-25% of the U.S. rate; the relative difference between the two nations seems to be rather steady.

Even in the light of this partial analysis, Davids' conclusions should be seen more as a remote eventuality than as an up-to-date interpretation of the data. Meanwhile, the Israeli family retains most of its unique attributes.

FOOTNOTES

[1] CH shows the divergence between the last and first entries of the period ($Dn\text{-}D_1$) as a percentage of the mean of the period or sub-period.

[2] This does not mean that most births in this age-bracket are planned.

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