

# Our future lies here, in this land

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Sholom Gold

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**I**N sermons and lectures over the past year, I predicted that by the end of the decade, Israel would become home to the largest Jewish community in the world.

This has not been the case since the peak period of Jewish population in the Second Temple Era. Scholars estimate that the world's Jewish population at that time numbered approximately 7,000,000, with between 2.3 million and 2.5 million in Eretz Yisrael, and the remainder dispersed throughout Asia Minor.

In fact, the number of Jews living in modern Israel exceeded that number some years ago (I don't believe that that milestone attracted any significant attention). But the community here did not as yet constitute the single largest concentration of Jews in the world.

Before the State of Israel was established, many countries in Europe, in addition to the U.S., had significantly larger Jewish communities than the 400,000-strong one that existed here. But in the wake of the Holocaust, only Russia, with three million Jews, and the U.S., with six million, surpassed Eretz Yisrael's Jewish population.

That began to change, for both good and bad reasons. The great influx of Jews from Moslem countries in the early years of the state and the stirrings of Russian aliya that came later pushed Eretz Yisrael into second place. At the same time, assimilation and intermarriage in the U.S. brought the Jewish population there down to below the six million mark to an estimated 5.5

million.

With the recent dramatic opening of the gates of Russia, the process began to speed up. I first estimated that in about 10 years, Israel would overtake America and become the world's largest Jewish community. I wanted to sensitize the members of my congregation to the rapidly approaching moment of great historical import.

I BELIEVED my prediction to be a reasonable one — until last week, that is. A study of American Jewry published in *The New York Times* shattered all previous estimates and

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put the size of the U.S. Jewish community at no more than some 4.3 million.

That figure, if even no more than close to the truth, constitutes devastating and tragic evidence that America is one of the most destructive exiles in all of Jewish history. A community that stood at six million in the '30s and '40s should by now have numbered close to 15 million or 20 million. Instead, it has fallen into deep decline.

Some American Jewish leaders take solace from the fact that the question was couched in religious terms, and that therefore the number of American Jews is actually far greater. But if Jews fail to identify with their religion, what does that say about their future, and that of their children's, as Jews?

Furthermore, this decline is taking place despite a thriving and dynamic Orthodox movement that includes day schools, yeshivot, mikvas, extensive kashrut supervision and a host of other manifestations of strong Jewish identity. The inexorable and rapid disappearance of most of American Jewry continues unabated.

The pain and grief of such a self-inflicted mortal wound can only evoke a Holocaust-like mourning.

Orthodoxy in America will probably save itself. But it cannot rescue the vast majority of Jews in the U.S. Never in history have we suffered

such grave losses in so brief a period of time in a land of such freedom.

This survey leads one to wonder whether the preeminence of Israel may be attained in even less than a decade. The continuing waves of Soviet aliya will tip the scales in favor of an Eretz Yisrael that will become home to the world's largest Jewish community.

Previously, we thought of Israel as a haven of physical safety for Jews, a place where they could enjoy political freedom, a national entity. Now we are learning that here and only here can there be a spiritual future for our people.

Despite the fact that the majority of Israel's Jews are not religious, the chances that our grandchildren will be Jewish are virtually certain.

THE PROCESS that began on the 5th of Iyar 1948, when the state was declared, is drawing to its prophetic conclusion. This leads me to revise a second prediction.

I had predicted that a decade or two after Israel became the world's largest Jewish community, a Jew stepping off a plane onto the tarmac of Ben-Gurion Airport would signal the most dramatic demographic change of all. At that moment, the majority of the Jews in the world would be living here. The last time this was so was during the period of the First Temple.

That change, which I now believe could take place much sooner, carries with it profound halachic implications. The laws of *t'ruma* and *ma'aser*, *shmitta* and *yovel* will become biblical in nature.

The Tora legislates that many of the mitzvot connected to the Land require that a majority of the Jews of the world live in Eretz Yisrael.

It is an eventuality for which we need to prepare ourselves now, the better to deal with these halachic ramifications.

The inevitable march forward in the Jewish time frame leads us back to the very beginnings of our people in this land in the days of Joshua. Great moments are in store for us. We need only be worthy and prepared for the astounding changes to come. No other people in history has been privileged to witness such a Divine rebirth.

After an absence of 18 centuries from its ancestral land, the masses of the Jewish People are being gathered in. Our people is coming home.

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