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Suburbia, Gentrification and Jews

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This speech is about the relationship between Judaism and suburbanization (by which I mean, the post-World War II mass movement of Americans from cities to suburbs). In particular, I'd like to address several questions, focusing on three issues: What, Why and Who Cares?

The "What" in my speech asks: How extensive has suburbanization been? And has the intown revival of the past decade or so affected American Jewry? The why asks: why have some regions been affected differently than others? The "who cares" asks: is suburbanization good or bad for the Jews?

To start off with, let's talk about what happened. At one extreme, some cities have actually been pretty successful at retaining their Jewish population. In New York, for example, virtually every neighborhood in Manhattan is within walking distance of a synagogue, and the Upper West Side in particular is a major Jewish hub. In fact, more New York Jews live in the five boroughs than in the major suburbs; there are almost a million Jews in the five boroughs, as opposed to about 730,000 in Long Island, Westchester and Northern NJ combined.

Even some smaller cities have withstood the ravages of suburbanization. In Pittsburgh, most of the region's Orthodox population and a big chunk of the non-Orthodox population is in a neighborhood called Squirrel Hill, which is about four miles from downtown and on all of the major bus routes. If I was going to grade Jewish populations on urbanness, Pittsburgh and NYC would get an A.

At a slightly lower level are cities such as Chicago and Philadelphia, where a significant urban Jewish presence exists, but the major hubs of Jewish population are in the suburbs or at the edge of the city near the suburbs. For example, about a third of Chicago's Jewish households live in the city limits, and Chicago has a decent number of synagogues near downtown. However, the major Jewish hubs (in terms of things like kosher restaurants etc) are unquestionably West Rogers Park (just barely in the city limits) and suburban Skokie. Similarly, Philadelphia (where about 1/3 of the region's Jews live) has quite a few synagogues downtown, but there are lots of areas with no or almost no Jews, and the day schools are all in the suburbs or in Northeast Philadelphia (a part of the city that is functionally a suburb in terms of transit access and distance from downtown). I'd give these cities a B.

A third type of city is where suburbia dominates to a much greater extent than in Chicago or Washington, but even so there is some downtown Jewish life. Atlanta comes to mind. There is one or two congregations of each type of denomination in intown Atlanta, and one intown eruv. However, most of the community is suburban; the region's kosher restaurants and day schools are in inner ring suburbs, for example. In Dallas, much of the community is within the city but really at the city's far north edge, in areas that look more like suburbs than the relatively urban part of Dallas. I'd give each of these places a C.

The most suburbanized Jewish communities tend to be in smaller cities, especially in the Rust belt. For example, only 8 percent of all Jews in metro St. Louis live in the city, and

St. Louis only has one congregation (a Reform one) within the city limits, though it has several in the relatively walkable inner ring suburb of University City. Cleveland is similar: it has a Reform congregation and a new Chabad house in the city, a chunk of the community in inner ring Cleveland Heights, and a huge concentration in Beachwood, a further out suburb.

If any major city gets an F from an urbanist perspective, it's Kansas City. The only congregations left in the city limits are a couple of small Reform congregations that aren't big enough for Saturday morning services, and a Chabad that, in my experience, got a minyan only on the High Holy Days. And unlike in St. Louis and Cleveland, there aren't really any walkable inner ring suburbs. Most of the Jewish community is in Overland Park, Kansas, a suburb a 30-minute drive almost 20 miles from downtown, where buses are limited to 9-5 service and do not run on nights and weekends.

Another way of looking at the situation is to ask: what has changed? Has the urban revival of the past few years had any impact on Jewish populations? I looked at this question in two ways- first, I looked for signs of improvement in organized Jewish life, such as new synagogues and minyans, and second, I looked at population data.

As to the first issue, I haven't spent a lot of time compiling historical data, but I have researched a few cities I've lived in and thus have some memory of- in particular Buffalo, Washington, Philadelphia, Cleveland and St. Louis. None of these cities have actually lost congregations to suburbia, and some have even added capacity, mostly in two forms: small minyans and Chabad houses.

In Washington, there are two nondenominational minyans that did not exist when I lived there a year ago: Rosh Pina (a partnership minyan) and the more liberal minyan at the old Sixth and I synagogue, which was just a museum 20 years ago. In addition, a couple of the city's major universities now have Chabad Houses, which was not true a decade ago when there was only one urban Chabad. In Philadelphia, a once-dead congregation in South Philadelphia is gradually being brought back to life- they have services once a month.

In less rapidly gentrifying places, the rise of Chabad has created urban congregations where none existed before. In particular, Cleveland now has a Chabad downtown, providing an urban Orthodox option where none existed before. Some other cities have sprouted urban Chabads: there is one in downtown Detroit, and another in downtown Los Angeles. However, I'm not sure how many of these are full-fledged congregations. For example, when I visited Detroit for a convention that ran over Shavout weekend, the Chabad apparently wasn't big enough to run Shavuot services so I stayed in Ann Arbor. The Cleveland Chabad is strong enough for Shabbatot and presumably holidays, but not for Shabbat afternoon services as far as I could tell from their website.

So far I've been focusing on synagogues. But this is a very rough tool, capturing only the largest-scale movements: it doesn't capture smaller population moves that might be

reflected in growth of existing congregations or even be irrelevant to congregation growth (to the extent that it is among more secular Jews).

To address this issue, I looked at the Jewish Data Bank website, which contains population surveys from all over the nation, some of which even have longitudinal data (which is a fancy way of saying that they reflect changes over time). Because most communities conduct population studies every decade or two, and not all of the recent studies are really comparable to earlier studies when it comes to geography, I only have recent data for a few regions. Even so I found a pattern of urban growth. To name some examples:

*In Boston, there's been a major reurbanization. 33% of regional Jews now live in the city of Boston or its two most urban suburbs (Cambridge and Somerville) up from 22% in 2005. Much of this growth is concentrated among younger people: 50% of Jews under 34 live in these areas.

*In Miami's urban South Beach, the Jewish population increased by 20% between 2004 and 2014, after nosediving for yrs. In Central Miami (that is, the eastern half of the city of Miami) the number of households tripled between 2004 and 2014. Similarly, the number of Jews in Northeast South Dade (mostly the western half of Miami, plus some inner ring suburbs) increased by about 30 percent. On the other hand, outer suburbs have been gaining as well: the Jewish population in Palm Beach County, the northern edge of Metro Area, went up. The big losers are the in between places, places like East Kendall and Broward County that are very suburban but not quite as new or as far out as Palm Beach.

*In Chicago, the city population increased between 2000 and 2010, by 7 pct in the North side and 4 pct in the South Side. However, population in the northern suburbs contiguous to the city (as well as the far western suburbs) increased more rapidly.

*In Central Baltimore, a population survey measured both households and persons, yielding somewhat ambiguous results. The number of Jewish households increased by 46 percent between 1999 and 2010. On the other hand, the number of Jewish persons increased by only 2 percent. What's going on? Declining household sizes mean that older families are being replaced by young singles and couples.

*In 1995, about 2600 Jews lived in the city of St. Louis; by 2014 the number doubled to about 5000.

*There are a couple of regions that are outliers. In NYC, the pattern is less clear. On balance, the number of Jews in the five boroughs increased between 2002 and 2011. There was a slight decrease in Staten island and Manhattan, but huge increases in the other three boroughs. Suburban populations were pretty stable. And in Philadelphia, the city's Jewish population actually declined over time; however, the study didn't discuss trends by neighborhood, so I don't know whether the declines were in the urban core or in Northeast Philadelphia, which is essentially suburban.

Even so, the pattern seems clear: Jews are repopulating close-in neighborhoods in more regions than not.

To sum up the “What” part of the speech, Jews moved to the suburbs in large numbers- but to a much greater extent in some metro areas than in others. But this trend may be reversing to some extent.

So much for the what. What of the why? Why did Jews leave cities, why did they come back? By and large, Jews are like other well-off whites: when well-off whites left cities, Jews generally left- presumably for the same reasons other whites did (for example, high crime in cities, school integration and highways that made city to suburb commuting easy). When well-off whites stayed in cities, Jews generally stayed. The cities with the weakest intown Jewish communities tend to be cities where the overall city population has declined most precipitously: for example, Detroit, Cleveland and St. Louis are all cities with pretty weak intown communities, and they are all cities where (1) city household income is less than 2/3 suburban household income and (2) the city population is less than half of what it was in 1950.

The more interesting cases are the outliers: cities where the Jewish community either overperforms or underperforms compared to the white population generally. Pittsburgh and Kansas City are examples. The two cities are roughly the same size and have roughly similar crime rates, and Kansas City is actually a little richer compared to its suburb. Furthermore, both cities’ Jewish populations were in the city’s more affluent areas in 1970 or so (unlike in St. Louis and Cleveland, which were already pretty suburbanized by then). Yet Pittsburgh has lots of intown Jewish life and Kansas City almost has none.

Why? It seems to me that one key to the riddle is schools. Kansas City didn’t have much of a day school culture, and so most of the Jews go to public schools. So when school integration hit Kansas City’s wealthier neighborhoods in the 1970s, Jews, like many other well-off whites, suddenly decided that the public schools were horrible, and moved en masse across the Kansas state line where court-ordered busing would never pursue them. Even the region’s one Jewish day school is in a suburban office park.

By contrast, Pittsburgh has three day schools, two Orthodox and one nondenominational. So any problems with the city’s public schools are less pressing; in addition, the city’s major prestige public school, Allerdice, has retained well-off students through magnet programs, while Kansas City’s prestige public school closed down.

In sum, generally Jews behave like well-off white people: cities with lots of well-off whites like NYC generally have strong Jewish populations, while cities suffering from massive white flight tend to have weak Jewish populations. But there are some interesting variations to this pattern.

Now I’d like to talk about the Who Cares? part of my speech. This means I’d like to talk about the upsides and downsides (mostly downsides) of suburbanization. Or more

precisely, I'd like to talk about two Jewish points of view- the progressive perspective (focusing on broader public values such as charity and environmental protection) and the traditional point of view (focusing on ritual observance).

From a Jewish point of view, support of the poor is not optional. The book of Leviticus states that you should leave your fallen fruit for the poor and the stranger, and Deuteronomy states more broadly that you should not harden your heart from the destitute. Later Jewish law makes it clear that such obligations are not voluntary. In the 12th century, Maimonides wrote that the duty to give charity is actually enforceable in rabbinic courts. He also specified the proper modes of charity, writing that the highest level of charity is giving someone a job so that he can support himself.

Traditionally, suburban sprawl has exacerbated inequality. In the 1940s, most urban jobs were accessible on foot or by public transit. But government policy changed this status quo: throughout the 20th century, government funneled billions of dollars every year into highway construction, and now exceeds \$100b at all levels of government. This highway spending initially generated suburban residential development by making it easier for commuters to drive from suburbs to downtown.

Eventually, jobs followed commuters, because bosses wanted their companies to be near their homes and near their customers. As a result, many jobs, if not most, are in suburbs. And because government spending on highways was not matched by an equally extensive investment in public transit, many of those jobs have minimal access by public transit. Even in New York's suburbs (which are more transit-accessible than those of other cities) the typical suburban job can be reached by only 14 percent of the region's population through a 90-minute transit commute. In more car-dependent places the percentages are even worse: in Jacksonville, Fla. (where I lived for the better part of five years) bus service pretty much ended at the city line.

And where the suburbs and cities are in different jurisdictions (as is the case in most of the Northeast) suburbanization creates another inequity: the difference between rich towns and poor towns. For example, in most regions the cities are generally poorer than their suburbs, which means they have higher taxes and worse services. (Admittedly, the picture in NYC is more complex than this, because the city is not so poor). And within the category of suburbs, there is a pretty wide range: even though the average suburb is richer even than relatively affluent cities like New York and Washington, some suburbs are quite poor. For example, Camden is for all practical purposes a suburb of Philadelphia- but people often don't think of it as one because it is so poor.

What does that have to do with Maimonides? Everything. Because of sprawl and inadequate public transit, people too poor or disabled to drive can no longer reach jobs. In turn, this means that they must rely on public or private social welfare programs rather than being self-sufficient- thus creating a situation that is exactly the opposite of what Maimonides recommended. So in a way, sprawl makes poor people less sufficient by keeping them away from jobs.

On the other hand, suburban development does, other things being equal, increase the regional housing supply, which, other things being equal, means lower rents. And in fact, many of our nation's most sprawled-out regions, such as Atlanta and Houston, have fairly low housing costs. So does this mean suburbanization is actually good for the poor? Not necessarily. Because what you might gain in lower rents you lose in higher transportation costs, since people who might otherwise take a bus to work or forced to

spend money on cars. In some cities such as Los Angeles (and in the suburbs of high-cost regions like NYC and San Francisco), people have the worst of both worlds: most people need to own cars, yet the cost of living is still quite high.

Now I'd like to talk about Jewish environmental values. Judaism seeks to control both pollution and the expansion of urban land into the countryside, both of which were results of sprawl. The Torah addresses the latter issue by requiring an green belt of uncultivated land around small towns dominated by the Levite tribe.

The former issue is more complicated. The Torah itself does not directly address pollution- but later Jewish tradition does. For example, the Talmud prohibits smelly activities such as tanneries from being too close to cities.

How does unfettered suburbanization affect these values? Suburbanization causes large-scale development to spread into the countryside, and increases pollution as well.

Because most suburbs are extremely automobile-dependent places, people drive more. Each mile driven creates more pollution. The correlation between car traffic and pollution was demonstrated during the 1996 Olympics: when the city encouraged Atlanta motorists to drive less, traffic on Atlanta roads decreased by 23 percent...and emergency room visits related to asthma dropped by 42 percent! And of course, all those cars increase greenhouse emissions as well. A recent study by Harvard economist Edward Glaeser showed that the most transit-oriented cities emit the fewest greenhouse gases, compared to both other cities and to their suburbs.

What about the traditional side of the argument- the relationship between suburbia and Jewish observance? The Torah prohibits work and kindling a fire on Shabbat (from Friday at sundown to a little after sundown on Saturday). For a variety of reasons, traditional Jews interpret this rule to prohibit driving on Shabbat, primarily because most cars burn gasoline, which arguably constitutes setting a fire. (What about electric cars, one might ask? The dominant view among Orthodox rabbis is that turning on electricity is itself a violation. However, Conservative rabbis have historically been divided about electricity-related issues, so I am not sure if there is a Conservative consensus position on electric cars).

But in much of American suburbia, walking to synagogue (or anyplace else) is often a life-endangering experience, for a few reasons. First, many suburbs are so thinly populated that only a few dozen houses are really within walking distance of a synagogue. Many suburbs have just one or two houses per acre. Since an acre is roughly comparable to a small city block, this means only one house per block- not enough for many people to walk to shul.

Second, even in more dense areas, walking can be difficult or dangerous due to anti-pedestrian street design. For example, in Jacksonville most of the community's synagogues were on or near a street called San Jose Blvd. San Jose is 8 lanes wide in some places; such wide streets encourage 50 mph traffic and are thus dangerous for pedestrians. (In fact, a year after I left Jacksonville a congregant of my shul was killed walking to Kol Nidre, by a motorist who had killed someone else a few years earlier.) And because the same government that designed San Jose Boulevard requires buildings to be at least 25 feet from the street and have lots of parking, the shuls are bordered by large parking lots, which means that the walker who survives the eight lane street also has to survive the parking lot.

Third, in residential areas, streets are often dead-end (or cul-de-sac) streets rather than being on a grid. Because these streets do not connect with each other, their residents cannot walk from one residential street to another without going out of your way to walk on the main commercial artery nearby. So even if your synagogue is located on a residential street, you might not be able to avoid walking on scary high-traffic streets. So as a result of all these policies, it is sometimes difficult for Jewish suburbanites to walk to synagogues or anyplace else.

It could be argued that some mitzvot are facilitated by suburbia- for example, where people have their own houses, it is easier for them to have their own sukkahs rather than relying on a synagogue's communal sukkah, and it is easier for people to have each other over for meals in bigger houses. But these sorts of things are obstacles to observance, if at all, only in high-rise environments like parts of Manhattan. The most frum parts of Brooklyn are far more compact than most of suburbia: for example, most of Boro Park has about 30 or 40 households per acre, far more than in most American suburbs.

Furthermore, I don't want to overstate my case: I'm not arguing that intown communities are consistently more observant than suburban ones. In regions where intown residents are primarily young singles, the most observant communities tend to be in family-oriented suburbs. However, they generally aren't in the most sprawling, car-oriented suburbs. To put it another way, a traditional community can function adequately in a suburb with quarter-acre lots, but not in a suburb with two-acre lots.

So what can we do about the negative features of sprawl? In our role as consumers of housing, we should prefer walkable places. We can also oppose government policies that generate sprawl's worst features, such as:

- *Anti-density regulation. Suburbs are not dense enough to support walking because zoning laws artificially limit population density (that is, the number of households per block or acre).

- *Minimum parking requirements and setback requirements that require apartments and houses of worship to be surrounded by parking.

- *Widening of commercial streets that make those streets unwalkable.

If you want to know more about how to make American suburbs more pedestrian-friendly, I'd recommend going to the Congress for New Urbanism (cnu.org) to learn more.