

Last week's *Economist* magazine devoted its special report – a spot normally reserved for whole countries, or worldwide trends - to “Judaism and the Jews”.

The articles made fascinating and, for the most part, cheery, reading. One particularly hopeful piece demonstrated that the classification of Israeli society into secular, national religious and haredi is *so* last century. The reality today is that most Israelis find themselves at points along a continuum, where the traditional distinctions blur and blend. In 2009, 46% defined themselves as secular, but that included 30% who practised aspects of Jewish tradition. 90% of Israelis attended a seder. 70% declared that they only ate kosher food. “Traditional to some extent” would be a more accurate label than “secular”.

Especially exciting is the spread of Jewish learning amongst the “non-religious”. 20% of the population reported attending all-night study sessions on Shavuot, creating a secular version of a “tikun leil” - a concept that until recently was exclusively religious, and now one of many examples of Jewish motifs and practices being incorporated into general Israeli life. Jewish learning is spreading way beyond the confines of religious schools and synagogues. A variety of programmes and institutions, even “secular yeshivot”, bring classical Jewish texts and sources to an ever-widening circle.

Even Russian-born Israelis, after spending their first decade in Israel moving away from Jewish tradition, have moved back towards it in their second. It may be a little early to talk about a renaissance of Jewish life, but it is clear that Judaism is playing an increasing part in the evolving Israeli culture.

And it works both ways. The caricatures of haredim are less valid than in the past. Unnoticed underneath the recent furore over a compulsory draft for Yeshiva students, a small but increasing number of haredim are enlisting in specially created units, and the army is providing the suitable environment to encourage yet more. At the same time, institutions are quietly arising to meet the growing desire for practical, secular, training and qualifications amongst ultra-orthodox men and women.

Inevitably, there are fierce ideological tensions yet to be resolved, and plenty of opportunities lurk to fracture governments and society. But the weakening of the divisions engendered by growing respect and understanding gives much cause for optimism.

Yet the picture outside of Israel is not so bright. For all its challenges and problems, one threat to Jewish life only squeaks in Israel but roars in the Diaspora – intermarriage. Well over 50% of American Jews are marrying out (which remains the correct term; research from the US confirms that intermarried couples are less likely to bring up their children as Jews and less than 20% of such families join a synagogue). In Australia the situation is better – but not much. The 2006 census showed that more than 30% were marrying out, double the rate of thirty years before. In the key demographic, the marrying age, it was close to 40%.

*The Economist* reports that the exciting educational initiatives which are growing in popularity in Israel can be found in the Diaspora too. Independent, non-denominational prayer groups abound; Jewish studies are offered in nearly every North American University. Australia also has seen

innovative additions to the standard Jewish offering, attracting many who otherwise find no place in the traditional communal structure.

But such developments, though welcome as evidence of Jewish commitment and interest, have less significance here than they do for secular Israelis. When the most challenging question from Diaspora Jewish youth is “why should I marry a Jewish partner and build a Jewish family?” we – the educators, communal leaders and parents - have to prove that being Jewish is more than just a cultural add-on to “real life”, and that it is worth preserving for the individual and for future generations. Celebrations of Jewish life, or groups promoting “cultural Judaism” may enhance Jewish involvement, but without providing answers to that question they cannot serve as guarantors of Jewish continuity.

This is not a concern about numbers for their own sake. There is no imperative to have a large community, and Jewish history shows that it’s natural and inevitable for Jewish populations to ebb and flow and eventually move on. It’s about individual Jews, and ensuring that their fate is not disengagement and disappearance.

And it’s about the diversity and nature of the community itself. At this rate, simple Darwinian survival of the sub-group with the highest rate of growth and the strongest resistance to attrition will transform the face of Diaspora Jewry, including Australian Jewry, within two generations.

Amongst the blessings of the state of Israel is a society where children finding a Jewish partner is close to a given. For those of remaining beyond Israel’s borders, an engagement with Jewish culture is not enough. Our priority must be nothing less than creating the Jewish future, by ensuring the future of Jews, Jewish children and Jewish grandchildren.