

Professor Sergio DellaPergola has been described as “the man who counts the Jewish people”. The Italian-born academic, now based at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is considered by many as the world expert on Jewish demography. According to his latest report, we’re on the up - the world Jewish population grew by 88,000 in 2012, taking the total to 13.75 million. But before we get too excited or self-congratulatory, it’s worth noting that that figure represents an increase of 0.65%, compared to the world population growth of 1.26%. Economists might say that we’re declining in real terms. (The professor also uses definitions of Jewish status that many would consider to be too broad, and hence artificially inflating the figures).

Of course, the total size of the Jewish people is not, in of itself, particularly significant. Demography is not a contest that one team “wins” with a greater “score”. It is the Jewish engagement and Jewish future of each individual Jew that matters far more than some abstract, estimated, population count. The existence of the Jewish people as an entity – large or small – is not in question, and the quest for programmes and schemes, or the re-casting of Judaism itself, in an effort to create “more Jews” is misplaced effort (See Deuteronomy 7:7 for a similar idea, from a higher authority).

But the more important trend revealed by these figures, and with a greater statistical significance than the tiny changes in the total, is the numerical movement *within* the Jewish world. The report describes how the Diaspora shrunk last year by 10,000, mainly due to assimilation and emigration to Israel, whereas the Jewish population of Israel shot up by 98,000, the result of immigration and natural growth. Today, Israel’s 5.97 million Jews constitute 43% of the Jewish people (up from 37% in 2001), overshadowing America’s number of 5.46 million (39%).

Israel is now home to by far the largest, youngest, and fastest growing Jewish community in the world. Within a very few years – probably before the end of the decade – it will contain the majority of the world’s Jews. But own perception has not caught up. Too often, we still continue to view Israel-Diaspora relations with the mindset from another age.

In Israel’s early years, she was the “poor relation” of the Diaspora, dependent on outsiders’ money and the lobbying of their own governments in her support. From this reality grew the false belief that the communities of New York or London were the fonts of wisdom and leadership, that they could also graciously donate to the new state.

This paternalism can still be found in the calls by Diaspora leaders for influence over Israeli government decisions; in the patronising comments emanating from the annual conferences of the “great and good” who deign to visit Jerusalem (but not to stay); and by overlooking the fact that the donations we send to Israel, welcome though they may be, are paltry when compared to the taxes paid annually by each Israeli citizen.

As for influence over the Middle East policy of our home countries - sometimes we pay too much attention to the antisemitic fantasies about the power of the infamous “Jewish lobby”. Governments choose whom to support in foreign conflicts based on their principles and their interests. When a pro-Israel stand meets these criteria it endures, but history testifies that as soon as it fails either test government policy changes, however hard we cajole and schmooze in the corridors of power.

In truth, the Diaspora needs Israel infinitely more than the reverse. We look to Israel as a centre of Jewish culture, learning and destiny, providing leadership and expertise to Jews around the world. For good or ill, Jewish identity in the Diaspora is a response to the esteem, or otherwise, in which Israel is held.

And now the numbers tell the same story. The Zionist dream has indeed come true and there is an inexorable shift of population away from the Diaspora towards Israel. No longer the “unfortunate cousin”, Israel is now the “big brother”, and very soon will be the parent, not the sibling. Perhaps she does not have the monopoly on wisdom or leadership, but she can certainly claim the lion’s share of both.

Conversely it is the Diaspora that should be assuming the discarded mantle of the “poor relation”. With a declining birthrate, assimilation reaching new levels of penetration, smaller communities are simply turning out their lights, the continuation of the Diaspora itself is far from guaranteed.

Once there was a time when the existence of Israel depended on the efforts of the Jews abroad. It’s time we realised that now it’s the future of the Diaspora which is at stake, and we’re going to need Israel’s help to survive.