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Michal Kravel-Tovi, Ph.D.

Professor of Anthropology

Tel Aviv University

Born in 1973 in Be'er-Sheva, Israel

Studied Anthropology, Sociology, and Psychology at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

PROJECT

Accounting of the Soul: The Social Life of an American-Jewish “Continuity Crisis”

Over the last three decades, American Jewry, a small but highly established ethno-religious minority group, has been flooded by concerns about numerical decline, commonly tagged as the “Jewish continuity crisis.” Deeply invested in socio-demographic forms of knowledge, Jewish leaders and organizations have construed certain trends as approaching a critical threshold, framing them as both markers and catalysts of assimilation and assigning them an existential weight. Based on a long-term anthropological and socio-historic study, I ask how and why American Jewry perceives and manages itself as a community facing a “continuity crisis.” What are the scientific and discursive practices that shape this understanding? How do these practices steer certain population visions and policy interventions? And what can these communal dynamics teach us about the sensibilities, as well as strengths, of American Jewry as a minority, post-Holocaust, and diasporic Jewish community? By looking into the production and circulation of population statistics on various American-Jewish sites, I shed light on the constitutive role of social-scientific knowledge in the making of American Jewish imageries and policies of crisis. This inquiry implicates broader theoretical concerns, particularly the public life of demography as a generative social knowledge; the multivalent cultural value of quantification; and the governmental, survivalist strategies of minority groups as voluntary communal polities.

Recommended Reading

Kravel-Tovi, Michal, and Bilu Yoram (2008). “The Work of the Present: Constructing Messianic Temporality in the Wake of Failed Prophecy among Chabad Hasidim.” *American Ethnologist* 35 (1): 64–80.

Kravel-Tovi, Michal (2017). *When the State Winks: The Performance of Jewish Conversion in Israel*. New York: Columbia University Press. Paperback 2021.

—. (2020). “The Specter of Dwindling Numbers: Population Quantity and Jewish Biopolitics in the United States.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 62 (1): 35–67.

Accounting of the Soul: Quantification and the Crisis of Jewish Life in the US

Over the last three decades, the organized American Jewish community has been preoccupied with numerical concerns about demographic and cultural endangerment – a phenomenon ubiquitously dubbed as a “Jewish continuity crisis.” Jewish social scientists, along rabbis, professional leaders and other agenda setters well-versed in sociology and demography, have customarily mobilized population statistics to construct – and contest – a sense of a collective crisis underway. The talk is embedded within a book-project, which is set to explore the formative role of a saturating, vernacularized Jewish social science in communal discourses and narratives of endangerment. These dynamics revolve around the position of American Jewry as a numerically negligible yet highly salient ethnoreligious minority group in the US; statistics function in this context as a culturally negotiated means to engage with post-Holocaust, diasporic sensibilities in shifting terrains of identification in the US. The presentation problematizes the very fact that a voluntary minority community sets the demographic course of its population as an object of knowledge and policy intervention, and illuminates the cultural meanings of statistics as a powerful yet alienating representation and language of the social.

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOWS' LIBRARY

Kravel-Tovi, Michal (Cambridge,2020)

The specter of dwindling numbers : population quantity and Jewish biopolitics in the United States

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1850901015>

Kravel-Tovi, Michal (Osford,2018)

Accounting of the soul : enumeration, affect, and soul searching among American jewry

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1853672947>

Kravel-Tovi, Michal (New York,2017)

When the state winks : the performance of Jewish conversion in Israel

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1630445452>

Religion, culture, and public life

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1630445452>

Kravel-Tovi, Michal (Arlington, VA,2014)

Bureaucratic gifts : religious conversion, change, and exchange in Israel

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1853673730>

Kravel-Tovi, Michal (Arlington, Va.,2008)

The work of the present : constructing messianic temporality in the wake of failed prophecy among Chabad Hasidim

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1850897735>