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Guest Comment on Rabbi I. Jakobovits'
on "Population" for Child and Family

I am pleased to applaud the views of Chief Rabbi Jakobovits, one of the most eminent authorities on the Jewish teachings on ~~medico~~ medico-moral problems. His article eloquently and cogently expresses the wisdom of the Jewish tradition on an issue of the greatest import for all humankind. I identify with all his major points, including his trenchant criticism of the "individual conscience" argument.

Two points raised by Dr. Jakobovits deserve further elaboration. In mentioning them briefly, he has offered directions for consideration, further fruitful/~~discussion~~, and I should like to carry that discussion just one step further.

The first of these is the halakhic (=Jewish law) judgment on non-Jewish use of contraception in order to curb population growth. Jewish law is designed primarily for Jews, upon whom it lays a large number of obligations and prohibitions affecting all aspects of life. But it also contains a body of teaching that it declares obligatory upon Gentiles ("the sons of Noah"). Noahide law in the Halakhah expresses Judaism's universalist norms. (Eliyahu Benamozegh, the Rabbi of Livorno, Italy, in the last century, maintained that Noahide Law was essentially rational, whereas the bulk of Halakhah, directed at ^eJews, was revelational, and that even the rational elements are interpreted as revelational.) While there may be no headlong rush of the nations to Jewish teachers breathlessly awaiting our considered verdict, it might be of some interest to thoughtful non-Jews to know what a great religious tradition, albeit a minority one, thinks about the demographic

Halakhah constitutes the minimum of religious obligation; beyond the Halakhah lies the endless realm of Agadah or moral values that defy the precise formulation ~~and~~ that is characteristic of Halakhah.

And speaking from the vantage of this Jewish tradition, we must say that, provided these minimal halakhic requirements are observed, the moral question must focus on the issue of survival. (Rabbi Jakobovits hints at this when he refers to pikuach nefesh.)

Now, survival is a value which leads to different results depending upon the circumstances. Thus, if the ZPG advocates are right and the exponential population growth of the world jeopardizes human life on the planet, then in general survival would dictate a policy of population control as a moral good. Specifically, overpopulated countries would be under moral obligation to keep their growth down. But, discriminatory as such conclusions might seem to the superficial observer, such strictures would not apply to Canada or even the United States, as Dr. Jakobovits writes, ^{QVSL} because these and similar countries are by no means overpopulated. But then we must turn to such nations and peoples who, contrariwise, are threatened not by overpopulation but underpopulation. The same moral ^{sense} ~~/imperative~~ that impels us to protect imperiled species of fish or wildlife in order to preserve the ecology of nature ought to make us concerned about the ecology of nations, cultures, and ethnic groups. Are Armenians, Jews, and American Indians ~~a~~ less valuable in the cultural ecology of man than the whale or ostrich in the balance of nature? The richness of nature and ^{ethnic} ~~of human~~ diversity and ^{the varieties} of culture must all be preserved and their survival assured. Hence, Jews, whose survival is endangered by demographic attenuation -- and Dr. Jakobovitz is most convincing here in the

frightening picture he has drawn -- must, on moral grounds, ~~xxxxxxx~~ forgo the halakhic warrant for oral contraception and exceed ~~the biblical~~ ~~exceed~~ the halakhic norm for fulfillment of the commandment to "be fruitful and multiply" (defined as, at least, bearing one male and one female child). Dr. Jakobovits is unquestionably right about the real motivation of most liberal, well-to-do whites in their ² ~~zeal~~ for population control. It most certainly contains an element of genuine ^{idealistic} conviction about the dangers of population explosion, but there are other elements as well. One of them is a defensiveness about appearing to conclude that the other fellow ought to refrain from having a large family: since it is mostly the Third World that is endangered by excessive growth, not the suburban white, the latter fears that his idealism might be misinterpreted as self-serving^v. Hence, he sacrificially limits his own family in the rather childish confidence that all the rest of mankind will, in appreciation, follow suit. More important, as Rabbi Jakobovits points out, is the hedonistic motive. Another child to feed, clothe, and educate means less luxury and indulgence for those who already were born and who enjoy the right to life.

In a word, if we accept survival as a moral value, and if we assume (as I believe we must) that such survival must be considered not only for mankind as a ^h ~~whole~~, but for individual branches of mankind ^{as well,} then the moral problem is far more complicated than the simplistic picture ^{that} ~~of~~ the population control advocates have ^{drawn for us.} ~~led us to believe.~~

For stimulating thinking in this direction, and for presenting such a cogent advocacy of a point of view that is decidedly nonconformist and unpopular, Dr. Jakobovits and the editors of Child and Family are to be warmly congratulated.