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## Why the Baby Bust?

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*Azure* is a serious journal of ideas that states its mission as providing “ideas for the Jewish nation.” In the Summer 2007 edition [Jewish year 5767], assistant editor Noah Pollak deals with the reality of the European baby bust.



Pollak deals first with the demographic reality. As he explains, the average number of children a woman will bear (known as the total fertility rate, or TFR) must be stable at 2.1 just to maintain the size of a nation’s population. The baby bust is evident in the fact that the TFR is just 1.89 in France. In Spain the TFR is just 1.1 — a birth rate the editors describe as in a “free fall.” Taken together, Europe’s total TFR is just 1.38.

What does this mean? It means that European nations will soon face the reality of fast-falling population levels — levels that will threaten social stability, economic security, and a host of other social goods. Economic security depends upon a stable or growing population. But economic security is not the only issue at stake — not by a long shot. Many observers believe that growing Muslim birth rates and immigration rates, coupled with a decline in the Christian population, will mean an Islamic future for Europe.

A number of very capable scholars have documented this reality. What Noah Pollak of *Azure* adds to the picture is serious attention to the question of *why* people decide not to have children.

Consider this paragraph:

*The explanation for Europe’s turn from reproducing its civilization is, in fact, as simple and self-contained as how children themselves are viewed. People avoid having children not because they are irreligious, lack financial means, fear the possibility of divorce, or carry university degrees. Rather, people do not have children because they do not want them: They find the curtailment of personal freedom and the assumption of the decades-long obligation inherent in parenthood unattractive, and they do not want to accept the basic restructuring of life that having a family requires. This is not a product of objective economic or social factors; rather, it is a subjective judgment about the meaning and purpose of one’s life and the civilization in which that life is lived. It is, ultimately, a moral answer to a moral question: The question of the value people ascribe to their own families and their own heritage, in a broader cultural context.*

Then this:

*This answer, such as it is, did not take shape in a vacuum. The current generation of child-bearing Europeans came to view their lives through the cultural revolutions engendered by the generation of 1968, the great mass of young people who, ironically, were products of the postwar European baby boom and ascended to power and influence by virtue of their own demographic weight. The cultural upheaval of ‘68 was an incongruous synthesis of revolutionary hedonism, political and economic collectivism, and a firm conviction that the West had become or had always been a force for imperialism, warfare, and environmental destruction. To a far greater degree than their counterparts in America, the ‘68ers achieved real political power and with it a cultural hegemony which dominates much of French and European political and intellectual life to this day.*

This is a brilliant argument, pointing directly to the essence of the problem — children mean obligation. They are needy, expensive, and dependent. People who are committed to personal autonomy as their greatest good will see children as an imposition, not a blessing.

I would modify the argument to explain that the eclipse of the Christian worldview in Europe is tied to the very cultural changes the editors rightly identify as contributing to the baby bust.

Mr. Pollak points to the nation of Israel as a counter-example to Europe, noting that young people in the (also young) Jewish nation saw the birth rate as a matter of national life or death:

*While young people in Europe celebrated a newfound awareness of their power and a desire to depart from the traditions of their forebears, their Israeli counterparts were called upon to rescue the Jewish state from annihilation. Young Europeans were looking to the future and seeing an era rendered infinitely malleable by enlightened reason and the good intentions of youth; Israelis looked to the future and saw enemy armies gathering on their borders with the intention of finishing what Hitler had started. Europeans, enamored of trendy, apocalyptic pseudo-science such as the "population bomb" theory, internalized the conviction that their civilization was part of the problem in the world, while Israel fought an existential war that assumed its own civilization to be part of the solution. Is it any wonder that Israeli families continue to thrive while Europe cannot sustain itself?*

Finally, Pollak suggests that the stability of the American TFR (due to a combination of birth rate and immigration) is due to the fact that "Americans believe in their own nation as a multi-generational effort to bring good to the world."

He offers a haunting word of warning: "Rome died from a lack of imperial vigor; Europe may die on its own soil, of its own barrenness." No real surprise there. Barren worldviews lead to barren wombs.

