

The Pew Report: IT REALLY MATTERS

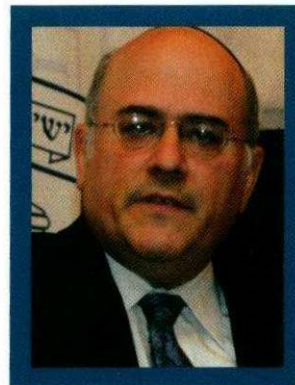
By Jacob J. Schacter



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Many words have been spoken and much ink has been spilled about the Pew report. This report—both in general and with regard to many of its specific points—has been dissected, discussed, debated, examined, analyzed and questioned. And, from my perspective, two points are clear.

One, it matters. It is not about *yenem*, someone else. It is about *us*, *our* people. The Orthodox community needs to pay close attention to the findings. The



Orthodox community in the United States needs to pay more attention—serious attention—to what this report presents about American Jewry, *our* Jewry.

Second, I see this report as an indictment of Orthodoxy. Yes, our intermarriage rates are very low (2 percent); the median age of those who

identify as Orthodox is the lowest (40, compared to the median age in the net Jewish population, 50); our fertility rates are the highest (4.1, more than double the overall Jewish average of 1.9); our retention rate in the 18- to 64-year-old categories is the highest, and there are other signs of our significant success. However, it graphically highlights just how much we have failed to meaningfully engage and impact the broad spectrum of *acheinu Bnei Yisrael* in this country.

But first, as always, a Torah thought.

All aspects of the *mishkan* are described in great detail in the second half of *Sefer Shemot*—not only once, but twice. The text focuses on the structure of the *mishkan*, its vessels and the garments worn by the priests who ministered within it. The Torah de-

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cribes, in great detail, the curtains, the beams and the pillars, the ark, the altars, the menorah and more. But there is one very small segment of the *mishkan's* structure, often ignored and overlooked, that is highlighted by an interesting Midrashic passage on a verse at the beginning of *Parashat Pekudei*.

The *midrash* (*Yalkut Shimon, Pekudei #415*) relates that after the work of the *mishkan* was completed,

Moshe invited the Jewish people to make an accounting. "Thousands of shekels were collected and thousands of shekels were spent," he said.

"Let us make sure that all the money was allocated appropriately and that both sides of the ledger match with one another." All the Jews gathered around, continues the *midrash*, Moshe com-

menced the audit and, lo and behold, when he was finished, he was 1,775 shekels short. The money was raised but he could not account for how it had been spent. He began to panic and was afraid that his honesty would be suspect and that his integrity would be impugned. He even expressed the fear that the Jews would accuse him of embezzling the funds! Once again Moshe feverishly scanned the entire structure of the *mishkan*, searching for something he might have missed. Finally, God "enlightened" him and drew his attention to the tiny little hooks that held the *mishkan's* pillars together, the "*vavin la'amudim*." Here he found the objects for which he had spent that money (*Shemot 38:28*). At that moment, concludes the *midrash*, the Jewish people were appeased and the potential problem was averted.

Why is the *midrash* drawing our attention to these tiny hooks or links or hinges? It would appear that it is trying to highlight the hooks or the links or the hinges, sometimes tiny and sometimes easily overlooked, that connect either pillars to one another or, I would suggest, Jews to one another. In Hebrew, the letter "*vav*" means "and," linking two objects or people together. The *Midrash*, I believe, teaches us the power of the *vav*, the connections. It is never about us as individuals; it is always about "us and," in ever-larger concentric circles—us and our families, us and our communities, us and the Jewish people, us and the larger world in which we live and us and the *Ribbono shel Olam*.

The *Rema* in *Yoreh Deah* (273:6) notes that there is a *hiddur* for every column (*amud*) of a *sefer Torah* to begin with the letter *vav*, and he refers to this by a name with which we are now familiar, *vavin la'amudim*. Every new

The Orthodox tend to have larger families, suggesting their share of the Jewish population will grow.



Orthodox	4.1 Children	
U.S. general public	2.2	
All U.S. Jews	1.9	
Conservative	1.8	Among adults
Reform	1.7	ages
No denomination	1.4	40-59

The average number of children born to Orthodox Jews (4.1) is about twice the overall Jewish average (1.9).

column of our lives, every pillar of our existence, needs to be animated by the lesson of the letter *vav*.

Furthermore, the Torah tells us that after Cain killed Abel, "And God appointed a sign (*ot*) for Cain" (*Bereishit 4:15*), colloquially referred to as "the mark of Cain." What, exactly, was the mark of Cain? The *Midrash* informs us that it was not simply a random mark but it was, literally, an *ot*, a letter, and it refers to the Hebrew letter "*vav*." Why this letter, of all possibilities? The late Rabbi Meir Shapiro, the Lubliner Rav, one of the greatest scholars and communal leaders of the twentieth century, explained that Cain, the person who was only concerned about himself and who could have the temerity to say to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (*Bereishit 4:9*) had to be taught for the rest of his life the lesson of the letter "*vav*." Emblazoned on his forehead for all eternity is a reminder that it is him *and*. His concerns had to transcend only himself; he needed to see himself as linked to others. Indeed, he was his brother's keeper.

And, finally, on what day was Adam created? He was created on "*yom vav*," not to be understood only as "the sixth day" but, perhaps more profoundly, as "and day." Already at the dawn of creation, the first human being ever created was taught that as the universe will unfold with him at its center, it will never be about him alone; it will always be about him *and*. Indeed, in a real sense, all of us Jews must consider ourselves as bound by the lesson of the letter "*vav*," each one of us standing not alone but committed to "*me and*," not only to ourselves but also to those who exist beyond and separate from us.

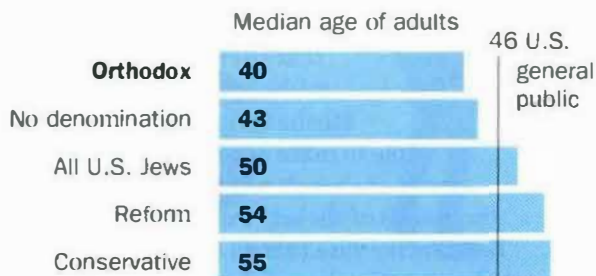
Those wonderful hooks or connectors that held together the structure of the *mishkan* represent the connectors that need to hold together all Jews. What happens to

The growing insularity of American Orthodoxy is a tragedy because we carry on as if we are all who matter.

Jews across America matters to us because we are connected to them. We are one people. The growing insularity of American Orthodoxy is a tragedy because we carry on as if we are all who matter. I was deeply upset and saddened to hear that one of the prominent members of our community stated publicly on various occasions that the Pew report is not all that alarming because committed Jews were, historically, always a minority and that this report simply describes the most current iteration of that phenomenon. While this may be historically true, it dare not absolve us of the responsibility to do what we can to raise the level of engagement of other Jews with Judaism, one by one by one. This effort needs to be included in the list of the current priorities of the contemporary Orthodox community.

The picture painted in this report is not a pretty one. One-in-five American Jews describe themselves as having “no religion”; among Jews who were married since 2000, nearly 60 percent are intermarried; only 31 percent of American Jews are members of a synagogue—any synagogue!; only 26 percent of American Jews say that religion is very important in their lives (compared with 50 percent of Americans in general) and there is more. And all this happened as Orthodoxy was, thank God, growing in numbers and intensity. The good news is that many of our synagogues are filled with *shomrei Shabbat* Jews, and the bad news is that many of our synagogues are filled with *shomrei Shabbat* Jews. Where are the non-*shomrei Shabbat* Jews going on Shabbat morning? What are we doing to make them feel comfortable in our shuls? Yes, our *batei midrash* boast shelves full of the latest Machon Yerushalayim *Minchat Chinuch*, Mosad HaRav Kook’s *Torat Chaim Chumash*, *Mishnah Berurah Menukad*, *Tur veShulchan Aruch HaBahir*, the *Metivta U’Velechtecha BaDerech Talmud Bavli HaMevo’ar* (*Mahadurat Zichron Moshe*) and the Talman Shas. And this, indeed, is wonderful (if they are being used). But where is the “yarmulke box” or the “doily box” in our lobbies? We simply have failed to demonstrate the beauty, meaning and warmth of Judaism not only to one in six of our children in the 18 to 29 age category who are not religious (one of the findings of this survey), but to millions and millions of Jews across the country. The reason is not because our “product” is faulty; it is because we have not made this a priority. Shame on us that this disaster is taking place under our own noses. We, partially, need to bear some of the responsibility.

Orthodox Jews and Jews who do not identify with any denomination are younger than Jews overall...



Orthodox Jews (median age of 40) are substantially younger than Conservative Jews (55) and Reform Jews (54).

I have a number of practical suggestions we should be considering, each one worthy of significant attention. We should be placing more JLIC couples on campuses (the Orthodox Union, in partnership with Hillel, administers the Heshe and Harriet Seif Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus [JLIC], a program that helps Orthodox students navigate the college environment), and we should be establishing (once again) afternoon Hebrew schools in our shuls for those children in our broader communities who are not attending a day school. And here’s a simple suggestion that wouldn’t cost much: The OU should spearhead an effort to arrange for all of its constituent synagogues (100 percent participation) to urge all their members (100 percent participation) to devote one Friday night in the next six months to invite nonaffiliated family members, neighbors, business associates or others to their homes for a Friday night Shabbat *seudah*. Educators should be commissioned to prepare a simple “how-to guide” to Friday night in the home with talking points on how to present Kiddush and *lechem mishneh*, how to explain the meaning of various *zemirot*, why *bentching* consists of multiple paragraphs and themes and more. And, I venture to add, no one will be surprised when it will soon become clear that our families themselves will benefit so much from this more mindful Shabbat experience.

With the lesson of the *vav*, and with the letter *vav* at the top of the *amud* of our communal priorities, we will have a chance to change the face—even if only slightly—of the American Jewish community—our community. The need is urgent. The time is now. ■

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