

The View from Pew: Where We Are

JA MAG

We Also Need to Care for Ourselves

By Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter



When I was a little boy, my parents spoke to me only in Yiddish. I remember they told me a story more than once (or was it a joke?) but all I can recall is the punchline, “*oyb es iz azoy git, farvus iz azoy shlecht?*” (they spoke a Galitzianer Yiddish). “If things are so good, why are they so bad?”

I was reminded of this phrase when I reviewed the Pew Research Center’s latest study entitled *Jewish Americans in 2020*. Much of the research shows that for Orthodoxy “*es iz takeh azoy git*,” “it is, indeed, so good.” Most extraordinarily, only 3 percent of American Jews above the age of 65 self-identify as Orthodox and 7 percent between the ages of 50 and 64 do so, but that number jumps to 17 percent of those between the ages of 18 and 29. This indicates that the percentage of all Jews in America who are Orthodox Jews will grow significantly in the years ahead and that, therefore, in the future the Orthodox community will be playing a much greater role in American Jewish life. In 1990, 6 percent of American Jews identified as Orthodox; that number now is 9 percent and shows every indication of growing.

The news for Orthodoxy is, in fact, *zeyer git*, very good, and our community has a lot for which to be proud. Young people growing up in our community in the last few decades have no clue how weak Orthodoxy was in America even as little as sixty or seventy years ago.¹ But, *baruch Hashem*, the situation has changed. Not only is Orthodoxy alive in America, defying all prognostications to the contrary, we are growing and flourishing in America.

But *es iz nisht azoy git* for the rest of the community. Some pundits have been optimistic about the results of the study because it “is evidence of the innovative and ever changing ways Jewish religion is practiced, not grounds for panic.”² While I welcome different ways Jews connect to their Jewishness, I am concerned for two reasons. First, the study showed that many, even self-identifying, Jews are not at all involved in any way “Jewish religion is practiced,” even most broadly concerned. Fully one-third of those who were raised as Jewish are not Jewish today, either because they identify with a religion other than Judaism (19 percent consider themselves Christian) or

because they do not currently identify themselves as Jews in any way. I also wonder how meaningful even practices identified as religious can ultimately be absent any non-negotiable commitment to the notion of *mitzvah*, or commandedness, a concept more and more problematic in a contemporary world governed by personal autonomy and individual choice.³ The study also shows that among non-Orthodox Jews who got married in the last decade, 72 percent say they are intermarried. 72 percent! How robust could their Jewish religious practice possibly be?

In my response to the *Jewish Action* symposium on the 2013 Pew study,⁴ I focused on our responsibility to the larger American Jewish community, but here my interest is in our Orthodox community. To my mind, the current study shows that *es iz nisht azoy git* for Orthodoxy either. The following data on even those who self-identify as Orthodox Jews emerges from the study, some based on the very statistics I cited above:

- 14 percent do not report that religion is very important in their lives;
- 5 percent do not report that being Jewish is at least somewhat important to them;
- 25 percent do not report that their religious faith provides them with a great deal of meaning and fulfillment;
- 17 percent do not report that observing Jewish law is essential to being Jewish;
- 31 percent do not report that being part of a Jewish community is essential to being Jewish;
- 23 percent do not report that they often mark Shabbat in a way that is meaningful to them;
- 9 percent do not report that it is very important to them that any potential grandchildren are Jewish;
- 17 percent report that they attend synagogue a few times a year or less.

I am not sure how to interpret these numbers. What, in fact, does it mean to consider oneself “Orthodox?” But most disturbing and upsetting to me is the finding in this study that 33 percent of Jews raised as Orthodox do not continue to identify with Orthodoxy as adults. I want to repeat this. *Fully one third of children (our children) whom we raise (in our homes) as Orthodox leave Orthodoxy!* I personally am aware of a number of such cases and in each one of them the parents of these children are wonderful and positive role models; they have done all they could possibly do to raise their children as committed and observant Jews. But, communally, we need to devote much more attention to this than we have been giving it until now.

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I want to suggest that we need to take a hard look at re-shifting our communal priorities. Enormous amounts of energy have been expended on *kiruv*, or bringing Jews into the Orthodox orbit, but this study also shows that we have largely been unsuccessful. There are relatively very

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few Jews joining Orthodoxy from other denominations (2 percent of formerly Conservative Jews currently identify as Orthodox and 1 percent of formerly Reform Jews do so). It seems to me that this moment requires that we focus much more of our resources on those of us who are

already “in the room” to ensure that they not leave. The OU’s Heshe and Harriet Seif Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (OU-JLIC) educators across the American university landscape are already correctly paying much attention to the Orthodox students on their campuses and they should be given more help. NCSY, historically a *kiruv* organization, is correctly devoting more and more attention to young girls and boys already in day schools, and this work should be given more resources to expand.

Of course, the entire Jewish people is our concern, but Chazal have already determined that *aniyei ircha kodmin*, “the poor of your own city take priority” (*Bava Metzia 71a*). We need to strengthen ourselves even as we work to strengthen the totality of the Jewish people.

Notes

1. See my contribution to “The Sea Change in American Orthodox Judaism: A Symposium,” *Tradition*, vol. 32, no. 4 (1998): 92-93.
2. Rachel B. Gross, “If you’re asking American Jews if they’re religious, you don’t understand American Jews,” the *Forward* and *JTA* (May 11, 2021).
3. See my “Halakhic Authority in a World of Personal Autonomy,” in Michael J. Harris, Daniel Rynhold and Tamara Wright, eds., *Radical Responsibility: Celebrating the Thought of Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks* (Jerusalem, 2012), 155-76.
4. “The Pew Report: It Really Matters,” *Jewish Action*, vol. 74, no. 4 (summer 2014): 58-60.

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Reading the Future

By Dr. Erica Brown

In 1883, the Canadian artist Paul Peel completed his painting “Reading the Future.” That intriguing title does not prepare us for a tender portrait of a young woman looking at the bottom of her gold-rimmed cup, reading the dregs of her tea leaves for a clue about what her future might hold. The artist almost whimsically suggests that with a simple turn of her head, she may be better informed by looking up instead of staring at the residue of an empty tea cup.



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