

More Unites Us Than Divides Us: A Haredi Perspective



NO JEWISH COMMUNITY to my knowledge has ever long flourished without widespread Jewish literacy and a vibrant culture of Torah learning. What can be done to prevent that fate from befalling the non-Orthodox segment of American Jewry?

1 | WHERE WE ARE

Based on the 2013 Pew Research Center survey of American Jewry, Professor Edieal J. Pinker of the Yale School of Management projects an American Jewish community in 2063 that will be one-third Orthodox, one-third Reform or Conservative, and one-third that's of "no religion or partly Jewish." Over that period, the overall Jewish population will decline because of the "substantial shrinkage in the number of Reform and Conservative Jews, as well as of the departure from the Jewish people of many children of the intermarried,"

before gaining again in numbers because of rapid Orthodox growth. According to Pew, by 2030, half the American Jewish children under nine will be raised by Orthodox parents.

Demographic trends, including declining rates of marriage and lower fertility, are hard to reverse, especially when they parallel broader trends in society. None will be harder to reverse than the present intermarriage rate of 71 percent among non-Orthodox Jews. The stigma that once attached to intermarriage has long disappeared, and indeed it is those who express opposition to it who now risk communal calumny. As intermarriage rates climb, the pool of potential Jewish spouses shrinks.

But numbers alone capture only part of the story—the Torah itself predicts that we will always be the smallest of the nations (Deuteronomy 7:7). No less concerning is the “thinning” of the quality of American Jewish life. As Rabbi John Moscovitz, rabbi emeritus of one of North America’s most prestigious Reform congregations, argued recently: “Above all, Jewish ideas do not grip liberal congregations, or galvanize them to action, which can only happen when a critical mass of the community has committed to the regular study of sacred texts.”

Liberal communities, he continues, do not set a “religious worldview” as a goal. Heterodox clergy are expected to focus on programming, pastoral work, and, increasingly, on the politics of the moment, rather than learning and teaching Jewish sacred texts. The latter, like support for Israel, is deemed too parochial.

Of those things that, Pew tells us, American Jews list as defining Jewish identity—including remembering the Holocaust (73 percent), leading an ethical life (69 percent), working for justice (56 percent), a good sense of humor (42 percent)—none are exclusively Jewish or provide a reason for marrying another Jew.

As historical memories of ghettos and murderous pogroms fade, and ethnic Jewish enclaves disappear in America, the once deeply ingrained sense of Jewish peoplehood and mutual responsibility has declined sharply. A 2007 study by sociologists Steven M. Cohen and

Ari Kelman reported that over half of non-Orthodox Jewish adults under 35 responded that the destruction of the State of Israel would not be a “personal tragedy” for them. And only 47 percent of the same age cohort responded affirmatively to the question of whether Jews worldwide have some special responsibility for one another (as opposed to 75 percent of Jews over 65).

Another threat to Jewish identity comes from the changing face of American antisemitism. The stereotypical antisemite is no longer an Aryan Nation member in Idaho, but an Israel Apartheid Week crusader on campus. Jewish students are increasingly challenged to disavow their Jewish identity or be ostracized from the progressive circles to which they often gravitate.

2 | ATTACHING TO THE JEWISH STORY

The survival of the Jewish people in exile as a solitary sheep among 70 wolves, in the language of the Talmud, is history’s longest-running miracle. Arguably even more miraculous has been the Jews’ ability to preserve a national identity even while uprooted from their historical homeland, and to return to that tiny sliver of land after almost 2,000 years. Louis XIV of France once asked the great mathematician Blaise Pascal for proof of the existence of miracles. “The Jews, your majesty, the Jews,” Pascal replied.

Appreciation of the Jewish story fills one with a sense of privilege to have been born into such a remarkable people. Whether one adopts a naturalistic or a supernatural approach, no student of Jewish history can deny that Jewish survival is inseparable from the Torah. At the very least, that history makes plausible an idea upon which the Torah insists repeatedly: that Jews are G–d’s Chosen People, charged with a mission to bring knowledge of G–d to the entire world.

I can testify personally to the power of being caught up in the Jewish story. The decisive turning point in my life occurred on the

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morning of July 4, 1976. I was then studying Hebrew in Jerusalem, taking a year off between Yale Law School and the start of legal practice. As I got on the bus that morning, there was total pandemonium. My Hebrew was not yet good enough to comprehend immediately the news blaring from the bus radio that Israel had successfully rescued more than 100 captives held in Entebbe. Eventually, however, I determined the reason for the joyous hugging of strangers all around me.

I began to ponder why I felt so much closer to all those on the bus than I ever did to my fellow passengers on a New York City subway. On the subway, I tended to be aware of the things that divided me from others — my “privilege,” if you will. On that Israeli bus, however, I felt connected to everyone else, no matter how different we were in family history, skin color, or education.

But what was my actual connection with the Yemenite Jew, several rows in front of me, whose ancestors were already on the Arabian Peninsula hundreds of years before the destruction of the Second Temple?

I concluded that the connection derived from the fact that every Jew on that bus was the product of an unbroken chain of ancestors, going back thousands of years — descendants of great scholars and

simple peasants, in almost every part of the globe, for whom the connection to G-d was so powerful that they resisted the most brutal of sticks, as well as every blandishment that could be offered, rather than go over to the other side. That conclusion led me to another question: Was the power that our ancestors found in their relationship to G-d something that could still be tapped into by a secular Jew like me in the last quarter of the 20th century? Though I did not act immediately upon that question, it continued to niggle over the next three years, until I first entered a yeshiva.

The truth is that I had been primed to ask at least the first question by my upbringing. I am the oldest of five sons, four of whom became Torah-observant Jews. As a consequence, my mother, now 91, has lived to see more than 115 Jewish descendants and counting.

If my parents ever wondered whom to blame for the fact that four of their Ivy League-trained sons ended up spending years studying Talmud, we had a ready answer, and one they never contradicted: “You have no one to blame but yourselves. You told us that being Jewish was the most important thing about us. We took you seriously, and decided to find out what Judaism actually is.”

Ours was not a particularly observant family, even by the standards of the Conservative movement, in which my brothers and I were raised and of which my maternal grandfather was a prominent lay leader in the 1950s. But we did grow up knowing that there were certain obligations that went along with being Jewish, such as attendance at the Shabbos dinner table, in semiformal attire.

And our Jewish identity was strong. We visited Israel frequently, and each of my brothers and I spent a year there before, during, or after college or graduate school. The only time a television was allowed near the sanctum of our family dinner table was during the UN debates preceding the Six-Day War of 1967 and for updates during the war itself.

Like most of the tens of thousands of Jewish young people between the early 1970s and the mid-1990s who entered yeshivas and seminaries designed for people with little background in Jewish

texts—many of us backpacking around the world—my brothers and I had two Jewish parents. If we had felt (and we did) that we had an identity we needed to explore, there was no question that it would be our Jewish identity. That is ever less the case for young Jews today.

3 | THE BOTTOM LINE

The study of Jewish history, Israel trips, and various forms of Jewish activism are valuable in part because they stimulate further questions—e.g., “What is my relationship to other Jews in distress or under threat?” A visit to Israel might trigger the question “Are Jews a nation or just a faith community?”

But ultimately, as Jack Wertheimer, the former provost of the Jewish Theological Seminary, has written, a revitalization of American Jewry depends on a reengagement with the “commandments, beliefs, and values for the sake of which Jews over the millennia...have willingly, and gratefully, set themselves apart.” One path that will not work, and can only prove counterproductive, is to attempt to “save” American Jewry by accounting tricks—like redefining who is a Jew—or by presenting Judaism as fully congruent with the modern zeitgeist. That path can end only in Judaism seeming infinitely malleable, extraneous, and ultimately trivial.

In a recent perceptive essay, “The Case for Wooden Pews,” Yuval Levin contemplates the plummeting attachment to religious institutions in America, even as the percentage of Americans who describe themselves as “highly religious” remains constant. The instinctive response to the loss of membership, writes Levin, is “to emphasize commitments to justice and to deemphasize specific strictures on personal behavior.” But that misses what people seek in religion: “Religious institutions need to show not that they are continuous with the larger culture but that they are capable of addressing its deficiencies—that they can...be counted on to do the work of molding souls and shaping character.” As Alexis de

Tocqueville long ago noted, in free societies it is precisely the moral and religious institutions that hold firm to orthodoxy — and not those that seek modernization and accommodation — that have proven most attractive.

4 | HOW TO MAKE IT HAPPEN

What would it take to get American Jews to engage seriously with Jewish texts and the basics of Jewish practice? My answer: a personal relationship with a fellow Jew who takes the Torah seriously and attempts to guide his or her life in accord with the Torah's dictates, a Jew for whom being Jewish informs every aspect of his self-identity. The relationships should be ongoing and one-on-one. It is also crucial that the criterion of success for the religious partners is building a relationship, not whether their secular partner takes on religious observance.

Why do I think programs facilitating such relationships might have a significant impact? Because I have seen how powerful they can be in Israel. Let me give you a few examples.

For well over a decade, I have been writing about an Israeli organization named Keshet Yehudi. Initially, the organization arranged study partnerships between secular and Haredi Jews. It has about 4,000 such partnerships ongoing at any given time, many of which have lasted for years. I have been to many gatherings where study partners met one another in person for the first time (after a long period of learning by phone), and I've observed how they sit there for the rest of the evening with their arms around each other.

Over and over again, I've heard study partners describe each other as “my closest friend, an inseparable part of me” — and that comment is as frequently heard from the Haredi study partner as the secular one. That is in keeping with the message that Tzila Schneider, the Meah Shearim-raised mother of 11 who founded the organization, gives to each Haredi volunteer: “If you only seek

to do an act of *chesed* for an unlearned Jew, this is not the organization for you. Only if you believe that every time two Jews draw closer, that each can gain from the other, is Keshet Yehudi for you.”

Nine years ago, Major (res.) Gilad Olshtein asked Schneider to develop a similar program for the participants in the three pre-army academies (*mechinot*) he runs, to introduce his charges to the basics of Jewish practice and some of the major Torah concepts. He did not want a lecture series, but something deeper and more intimate that would help his charges authentically understand the Haredi worldview.

Olshtein had grown up on a virulently anti-religious Hashomer Hatzair kibbutz. After retiring from the army, he and his wife were sent by the Jewish Agency as emissaries to the Salonika Jewish community, a task for which he quickly realized he was supremely unqualified. How could he strengthen the Jewish identity of Salonika's Jews when he himself knew nothing about what it means to be Jewish? Over the next two years, he was a weekly Shabbos guest of the local rav and began to learn with him.

He returned from Salonika a changed person. He earned a Ph.D. in Jewish history and began leading five to eight trips annually of Israeli Jews to Poland. On those trips, he pounds home the questions: Is there a difference between you and a Gentile? If yes, what is that difference?

After the 1995 Rabin assassination, Olshtein and a few friends had the idea of creating one-year *mechinot* for specially selected students, with a focus on leadership, Jewish history, the history of Zionism, and understanding the various subpopulations of Israeli society. It bothered Olshtein that in most cases, the high-performing young people in his program had never heard of Havdalah and could not make Kiddush on Friday night and, above all, that they had so little sense of themselves as inheritors of something precious. If these young people were about to give two or three years of their lives, and perhaps their very lives, to the defense of Israel, they should have some understanding of why protecting the

Jewish people justifies such a sacrifice. And he suspected Haredim could help them find an answer.

For her part, Schneider was thrilled to develop a program for some of the most idealistic Israeli youth, many of whom go on to be officers in the IDF and to hold other leadership positions in Israel. It has long been her goal to heal the fissures in Israeli society, in particular that between Haredim and secular Jews. And she felt that the way to do that was to focus on their shared inheritance of Torah. “Torah was not given in Boro Park or Meah Shearim; it was given to the entire Jewish people at Sinai”—that’s her watchword.

Once a month, the Haredi volunteers meet for several hours with participants in the *mechinot* to study texts related to essential Torah topics—Shabbat, the transmission of Torah, Creation, etc. Each *mechina* participant spends at least one Shabbos in the home of his or her Haredi study partner. And the Haredi volunteers commit to maintaining a connection during the period of their partner’s army service.

Despite some initial skepticism from parents of the *mechina* members, the program has been an overwhelming success. Twenty-four *mechinot*, with approximately 1,200 members, will be participating this year. And that rapid expansion has been entirely at the initiative of *mechinot* seeking to join the program.

But no matter how many new *mechinot* join, the places for Haredi volunteers have always been oversubscribed. The Haredi community long ago shed the isolationism it adopted in the early days of the state, when it was a tiny and beleaguered minority. (It is growing every day: 30 percent of incoming Israeli first-graders are in Haredi educational systems.)

The secular participants in the program are exposed to Jews for whom being Jewish is the greatest imaginable privilege, who are fully imbued with the belief that the Jewish people have a world-historical mission. When a Haredi volunteer shows up to a session bringing her nursing newborn with her, her study partner

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feels clearly how important the commitment, and how precious each Jewish soul, is to her.

In addition, the secular participants experience lives that derive their meaning in ways often diametrically opposed to what they are used to. Psychologists speak of two types of pleasure: hedonic (a good dinner) and eudaimonic (a generalized sense of well-being and purpose). The latter is associated with longer lives and reduced chances of dementia. In *The Power of Meaning: Finding Fulfillment in a World Obsessed with Happiness*, Emily Esfahani Smith explicates four elements among those who rank high on the eudaimonic scale: a sense of transcendence; a feeling of belonging to a community; an ability to tell a story that fashions a coherent narrative of one’s life; and finally, a feeling that one’s life has purpose.

All four are endemic to Haredi life. G-d awareness (transcendence) is instilled from an early age. The communal dimension of life, particularly prayer, and common rhythms centered on the Jewish calendar provide a sense of belonging. The belief that G-d is directing the show makes it easier to connect the events of one’s life as more than random happenstance. And finally, the recognition that G-d does not create any doubles, but has a unique mission for each of us, fills life with meaning. As a granddaughter remarked recently on the occasion of my 70th birthday: “The day you were

born is the day that G-d decided the world can no longer get along without you.”

I have focused on one organization, Keshet Yehudi, but there are many others creating the same types of deep interpersonal relationships between religious and nonobservant Jews. Just based on the organizations with which I’m familiar — Lev L’Achim, Ayelet HaShachar, Keshet Yehudi, Partners in Torah Learning — I can say that at least 10,000 secular Israeli Jews are learning weekly with a Haredi study partner or in small groups.

Or consider Be a Mensch, which began with the social demonstrations against high food prices a number of years ago, when Yehuda Shine unfurled a banner proclaiming, “Haredim and *chilonim* (secular Jews) refuse to hate one another.” He became an instant social-media star, and he and a few others began meeting weekly with senior leaders in the Israeli Scouts movement. The impact was such that the Scouts have given Be a Mensch carte blanche to set up as many meetings with teenage scout troops as they want.

The laws of family purity revolving around the laws of separation during a woman’s menstrual cycle would seem an unlikely vehicle for drawing Jews closer to Torah. Yet the rules of Israel’s Chief Rabbinate dictate that brides in Israel receive instruction in these laws before their weddings. In 2004, an organization named Lahav was created to provide precisely this kind of private, one-on-one instruction, and prior to COVID it was serving approximately 4,000 brides (and their future husbands) annually. Though initially skeptical, the nonreligious brides-to-be invariably finish their study sessions filled with effusive praise for their teachers (average rating 4.9 out of 5) and with a newfound sense that there is great wisdom in the Torah of immediate relevance to their lives. Many even express eagerness to practice the laws about which they have been learning and to continue their Torah learning.

Believing Jews are an optimistic lot. They are confident that G-d will one day bring the world to its ultimate destination (described repeatedly in the High Holy Day machzor) and that the Jewish people will be the central players in that process, no matter how bleak our prospects at any given moment.

But that confidence does not lead to passivity. For our part, we must do everything possible to ensure that no Jewish soul is left behind. There are no magic solutions — all the money and glitzy campaigns in the world cannot do it. Only touching as many Jewish souls as possible, at their root. *