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**PHILANTHROPIC PRIORITIES
IN LIGHT OF PEW**

CAN THE PEW FINDINGS GUIDE PHILANTHROPIC INVESTMENT IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY?

by LEONARD SAXE

The 2013 Pew Research Center's "Portrait of Jewish Americans" was like manna from heaven for pundits across the Jewish world. The study unleashed a virtual tsunami of commentary. Most commentators lamented the state of American Jewish life described by Pew and saw the findings as evidence of fuzzy identification with Judaism, growing secularization and lessened Jewish engagement. Pundits typically saw the findings as confirming their respective views of the Jewish community and bolstering their prescriptions for renewal of Jewish life.

A cross-sectional survey such as the one Pew conducted is not, however, a diagnostic instrument, nor is it a strategic planning document. A host of questions remain about the state of American Jewry and what one might do to address the challenges suggested by the findings. In addition, there are a number of questions about the study itself and whether the interpretation of pundits is accurate.

A threshold question is whether the American Jewish situation is as bleak as commentators believe. It's not. Pew reports that American Jews are an increasingly small portion of the total U.S. population and that the secular population is growing, particularly among young adults. According to the study, the proportion of Americans who claim Judaism as their religion has dropped by nearly half in the last 50 years (from nearly 4 percent to less than 2 percent). More than 20 percent are Jewish, but Judaism is not their religion. These conclusions, however, obscure the most important finding: The U.S. Jewish population has grown over time.

As estimated by Pew, the total Jewish population is now 6.7 million. Not only has the overall population grown, but in contrast to the bleak narratives some have drawn from the report, there has been a substantial increase in the number of Jews by religion — the population most engaged in Jewish religious and cultural life. Thus, compared to 1990, there are today at least 25 percent more adult Jews by religion (a total of 4.2 million). More American Jews engage in Jewish life, including ritual life and support for Israel, than ever before.

Just as there are more Jews by religion, Pew also found that there are more secular Jews ("Jews not by religion"). As Pew

reported the findings, the proportion of the population that is secular has remained relatively stable over time, although these numbers may be even larger than they estimated. Pew also identified nearly 2.4 million adults of Jewish background (i.e., individuals who have Jewish parents or upbringing). Although Pew did not consider them to be Jewish because they are thought to have another religion, most of these individuals *consider themselves* to be all or partly Jewish and many engage regularly in Jewish practices.

What accounts for the population increase identified by Pew? Although some have suggested that the finding is a methodological artifact, this is unlikely. The estimate of the number of nearly seven million Jews by religion comports with findings by my colleagues and me at the Steinhardt Social Research Institute. Our estimates are based on a synthesis of several hundred surveys that ask questions about religion, and it was statistically improbable that their estimate would be very different.

There are several explanations for the population increase, including immigration to the United States, intermarriage, the growth of Orthodoxy and the longevity of the Jewish population. Intermarriage may be the most surprising factor, but it is also the most important. Increasingly, Jewish identification no longer ends when someone marries a non-Jew. Increasingly, it is passed on to the children of intermarried couples. Because intermarriage results in an increase in the Jewish population when the rate of children raised Jewish increases by more than 50 percent, it is likely that the effects of intermarriage rates will have even more significant impact in the future.

One of the most controversial interpretative issues of the Pew study concerns individuals who consider themselves "partly" Jewish. According to Pew, a Jewish child is one who is being "raised Jewish" — either fully or partly. It is not clear, however, how respondents interpreted the question. For some, it may have indicated how much formal Jewish education parents were providing. For those being raised partly Jewish, is it that they are being given no Jewish education, or are they being provided religious training in another faith? Pew's estimate of 1.3 million children excludes .5 million children who live in Jewish households. For many purposes in the Jewish community, such as eligibility for Taglit-Birthright Israel, having a Jewish education is not a prerequisite to participation and, in the Taglit case, more than 20 percent of participants

have had no formal Jewish education.

What do the Pew findings suggest about philanthropic strategy and the use of communal resources? It's crucial to note that the portrait is not of a community in distress or in need of urgent remediation. To the contrary, the picture of American Jewry provided by Pew is of a growing community. American Jews are highly educated and socially successful. But, more importantly, more than 90 percent of American Jews are "proud" to identify as Jews.

Also noteworthy is that although Pew framed the study as an inquiry into a religious group, most respondents did not share Pew's frame of reference. Most respondents — including those who identify as Jews by religion — view being Jewish as primarily a matter of heritage and culture rather than religion. A piece of that identity, almost universally shared, is remembering the Holocaust. In contemporary terms, this may contribute to the sense by a vast majority of Jews that Israel is an important or essential part of their identity.

Thus, the philanthropic need is for the support of efforts that can strengthen and enhance Jewish life. For example, Jewish education is not universal, and approximately one-third of those who identify as Jews have had no formal Jewish education. In addition, much of the Jewish education received is of a poor quality and results in dramatically low levels of facility with Hebrew. Hebrew fluency not only facilitates engagement with Jewish religious institutions, but also with Israel and Israelis. There are tremendous opportunities here for well-considered philanthropic investment.

Specific philanthropic strategy needs to be built on more elaborate data than that which were reported in the Pew study. Philanthropic efforts need to walk a line between supporting the existing institutional structure and disruptive efforts that foster development of new forms of engagement. More specific data about how programs and institutions function for particular populations, as well as data from systems such as JData.com, can help these efforts succeed.

We live in an era in which Judaism continues to provide a framework for relating to the past and providing meaning for the future. In a world that is changing rapidly, the constancy of Jewish culture and tradition is no doubt one of the reasons the Jewish people have survived. But we want to thrive, not just continue to exist, and the Pew findings provide an important starting point for a conversation about how we accomplish that goal. ■

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INVEST IN THE CHILDREN OF INTERMARRIAGE

by THEODORE SASSON

A main focus of demographic concern since the publication of the National Jewish Population Survey of 1990 has been the rate of intermarriage. According to the new Pew Research Center survey, the rate of intermarriage began increasing rapidly in the 1970s, reaching about 55 percent for marriages between 1995 and 1999 and 58 percent for marriages between 2005 and 2013.

All else being equal, the mathematics of intermarriage are fairly simple. When two Jews marry each other they produce a single, inmarried household; when each

households that would raise Jewish children. Surveys asked intermarried parents whether they were raising their minor children as Jews. The National Jewish Population Study of 2000-01 reported that just 33 percent were doing so. Over the past decade, that statistic strongly bolstered the view that intermarriage contributes to population decline.

The Pew research group initially adopted the same general approach, albeit allowing for a greater range of possibilities. According to the survey, 20 percent of intermarried parents are raising their children Jewish by religion; 25 percent are

But the Pew report, administered after the wave of children of intermarriage born in the 1970s and 1980s had reached maturity, afforded the first possibility of an alternative look at the impact of intermarriage. After publication of the report, I asked the Pew research team to look at the rate at which the young-adult children of intermarriage actually identified as Jewish. The results are displayed in **Figure 1**. From the older to younger generation, the proportion of adult children of intermarriage identifying as Jewish steadily increased, reaching 59 percent among Millennials (born after 1980). Twenty-nine percent of the adult children of intermarriage identified as Jews by religion; 30 percent identified as Jews of no religion.

The higher-than-expected level of retention of the adult children of intermarriage has had a number of effects on the demography of the American Jewish community. It enlarged the young-adult age cohort — making it almost as large as the baby-boomer cohort — and skewed the overall Jewish population toward the young. It drove an increase, from older to younger generations, in the proportion of Jews that are the children of intermarriage — among Millennials, half of all Jews are the children of intermarriage (**Figure 2**). And, along with other factors, including immigration and the increase in the Orthodox population, it contributed to overall Jewish population growth.

The retention of the children of intermarriage has also driven an increase, from the older to younger generation, in the share of the population classified by Pew as “Jews of no religion” (**Figure 3**). When asked in the survey screener about their religion, these are people who responded “none” but then, in response to further questions, indicated that they have a Jewish parent and consider themselves to be Jewish or partly Jewish “aside from religion.” Most Jews of no religion are the adult children of intermarriage, and the increasing rate of intermarriage during the 1970s and 1980s fully explains the increase in the no-religion portion of the

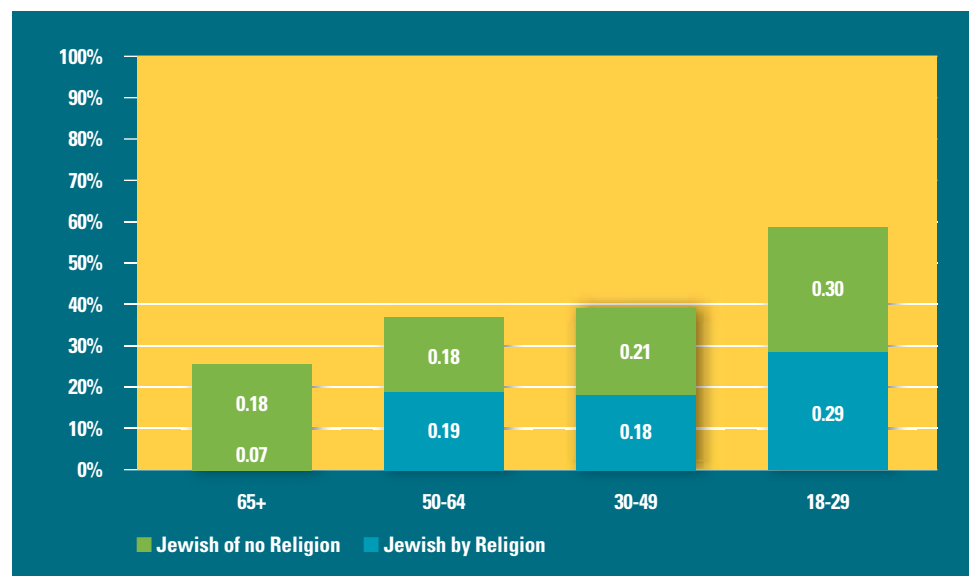


FIGURE 1: Percent of Adults with Intermarried Parent who Identify as Jewish (by Age Groups)

marries a non-Jew, they establish two intermarried households. Because intermarriage produces twice the number of households, the result is a net population loss only if fewer than half of intermarried households produce Jewish offspring.

Until the release of the Pew report, social scientists had only one method of predicting the proportion of intermarried

raising them partly Jewish by religion; 16 percent are raising them Jewish not-by-religion; and 37 percent are raising them not Jewish.

The first wave of commentaries on the Pew report emphasized either the glass half-full or glass half-empty implications of these numbers. On the one hand, just one-fifth are raising children Jewish by religion — by implication, with some form of Jewish education and household observance. On the other, 61 percent are raising children with a Jewish identity of one sort or another.

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population from the oldest to youngest generation.

In terms of their socio-demographic profile, the Jews of no religion look much like other non-Orthodox American Jews: They tend to be politically liberal, college educated and avoid non-Jewish worship services. However, their level of engagement in all aspects of Jewish life — secular as well as religious — is substantially lower.

If not a demographic guarantee, the higher-than-expected rate of Jewish identification among the adult children of intermarriage is nonetheless a significant milestone. The rate at which young-adult children of intermarriage identify as Jewish exceeds the rate at which their parents

claimed to be raising them as Jewish in the NJPS 2000-01 survey. This fact likely reflects a variety of dynamics including the increasing social prestige associated with being Jewish in America and the increasing reach of young-adult engagement initiatives.

Looking ahead, the philanthropic priority should be to maximize the proportion of children of intermarriage who are raised as Jews and then to keep the door open for young adults not raised as Jews to find their way into Jewish life as adults. The programmatic vehicles for accomplishing these goals are largely known. The critical programs are not the ones geared to the intermarried and their chil-

dren; rather, they are the programs that engage a broad range of Jews of all backgrounds: Jewish preschools, summer camps, youth groups, Hillels and Israel trips. And in addition to these programs, there is a great need to expand innovative cultural, social and educational initiatives geared to young adults and situated in the neighborhoods where they work and live.

Failure to draw intermarried families and their children into the heart of American Jewish life will ensure that the prognostications of the demographic pessimists will eventually come true. Success, however, will ensure the opposite result: a flourishing and vital Jewish community in the next generation and beyond. ■

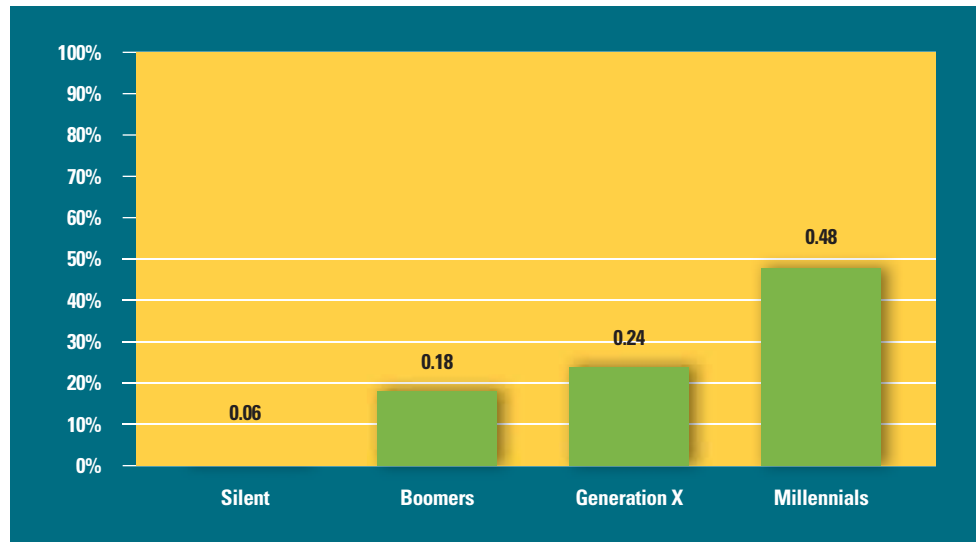


FIGURE 2. Percent of All Adult Jews with Intermarried Parents (by Generation)

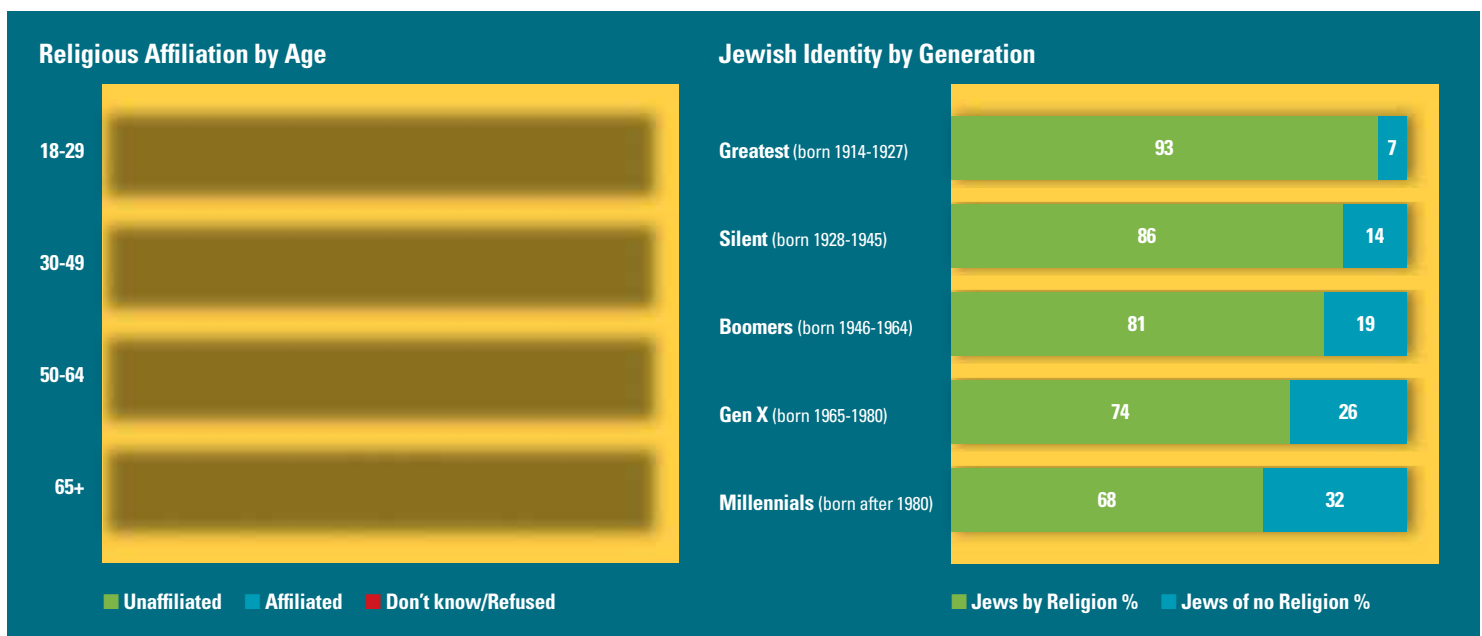


FIGURE 3. Jewish Identity by Generation

THE REFORM TENT: HALF FULL OR HALF EMPTY?

by FERN CHERTOK

The Reform Movement stands at a crossroads. The current moment is rife with challenges to traditional religious institutions, and the movement faces a set of critical decisions about how to adapt in order to engage and serve the next generation of American Jews. The ability of the movement's umbrella organization, the Union for Reform Jewry (URJ), its rabbinic organization, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), and its seminary, the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute for Religion (HUC-JIR) to adapt to the evolving nature of American Jewish life rests, in part, on its capacity to develop and use knowledge about the attitudes and practices of those who currently identify with the movement. The recent release of the Pew Research Center's "A Portrait of Jewish Americans" paints a complicated picture of Reform Jewry. Some findings should be cause for optimism, but some are troubling and should be of deep concern to the movement.

The positive news is that Reform Jews comprise the largest denominational group of American Jewry. Thirty-five percent of those considered to be Jewish by Pew identify as Reform. These Jews are near-universal in their pride in being Jewish, and the vast majority have a strong "sense of belonging to the Jewish People." For many Reform Jews, leading an ethical life and working for justice are the essential components of their Jewishness.

Another cause for celebration is that the Reform Movement has made Judaism relevant for the 50 percent of its community who are part of intermarried families. *Midrash* tells us that Abraham and Sarah's tent was a structure with numerous entrances so that travelers approaching from any direction could easily find their way inside. Landmark policy changes in the late 20th Century opened the Reform tent to many children of intermarriage. In the mid-1980s, the Reform Movement accepted patrilineal descent. At the same time, the movement's prevailing approach to intermarriage shifted to creating a welcoming and supportive environment for interfaith families. The news from Pew is

that these policy decisions have succeeded. Intermarried households identify with the movement, and the vast majority of these families are raising their children Jewishly.

The Pew findings, however, also suggest a host of concerns for the Reform Movement. Thirty-five percent of those raised in the movement no longer identify as Reform. Perhaps the finding that should give the movement greatest pause is that synagogues are not central to the vast majority of American Reform Jews. Only 34 percent of Jews who identify as Reform currently belong to a synagogue, and less than one-fifth attend religious services at a synagogue even once a month. Many Reform Jews interact with their synagogues only sporadically, when they have a particular need such as a life-cycle event. The Pew data suggest that Reform Jews do not view being Jewish as mainly a matter of religion, but rather of ancestry and culture. It should not be surprising, therefore, that membership and engagement with a synagogue — the home of ritual practice — is not a priority.

The disengagement of so many Reform Jews from synagogue life is a significant concern in a movement where the organizational building block and the primary conduit of education, engagement and influence is the congregation. Synagogues, not individuals or households, join the URJ. In other words, if you are not a member of an affiliated congregation, you are not a member of the URJ — and in many ways you are outside its reach.

How can the Reform Movement respond to these concerns? The place to start the process of informed decision making and planning for the future of the movement is by better understanding the lives, attitudes and needs of those who identify as Reform. For example, who currently identifies as a Reform Jew — both those who are and are not affiliated with congregations? Where do they live, what do their families look like and what are they seeking from the Jewish community? What are the attitudes and commitments — toward religiosity, Israel, social justice, philanthropy — of those who currently identify as Reform or were raised in the movement? What are the changing needs of Reform Jews as they transition through different life stages including marriage, family formation, empty-nesting,

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retirement and senior citizenship? Where and who are the young adults (18-35 years old) who grew up in Reform congregations, and how might the movement help them to enact their Jewish identities during the extended period between their departure for college and the enrollment of their own children in supplementary schools? The answers to some but not most of these questions can be found in the Pew study. There is a clear need for additional information to support the policy planning of the Reform Movement.

Armed with a greater understanding of those who identify as Reform, the Reform Movement and its philanthropic partners need to develop opportunities outside the synagogue for emotional, behavioral and intellectual engagement with Jewish life, Jewish community and the Reform Movement. This might take the form of campus-based Reform clergy to engage college students who were raised in the movement. Perhaps it will entail developing the role of community rabbis to reach out to young adults, empty nesters and seniors living in metropolitan areas. One could also envision short-term, immersive programs to make Shabbat a joyous and meaningful experience and to help individuals and families experience Jewish life and community. Although synagogue membership may be the byproduct of these efforts toward engagement, it should not be the focus.

The Pew data presents the challenges of the changing landscape of Reform Jewry. At the same time, the overall trends reported also create opportunities for growth in the Reform Movement. Pew will hopefully prompt the movement's lay and professional leaders to think about new ways to create vibrant and engaging tents for Reform Jews throughout their Jewish journeys. ■

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GIVE A BOY A HAMMER

by AMY L. SALES

The public reaction to the Pew report has been extraordinary. There has been a sustained, high level of communal conversation that far exceeds anything we've experienced in the past. Results have been discussed not only on academic list serves but also in Jewish sanctuaries and boardrooms, and in gatherings hosted by every type of local and national Jewish organization and movement. Meetings that would usually attract 50 people bring in 150 when "Pew" is included in the title. The phenomenon appears to have extended to Canada and other Jewish communities as well. Perhaps they are concerned that the Pew study reveals something about their own future. Or perhaps, like everyone else, they do not want to be excluded from the big conversation.

The National Jewish Population Survey, by contrast, was an insiders' game. After the release of the 1990 NJPS, the research community gathered at Brandeis University to discuss how Jews are counted and to debate who is a Jew. The Federation world galvanized around the 52 percent intermarriage figure. It adopted the language of "Jewish continuity" and quickly followed with multi-million dollar investments in Jewish continuity initiatives. These methodological and policy conversations were largely limited to scholars and to volunteer and professional leadership in the Federation system. NJPS 2000 also had a limited audience. It was undermined by methodological controversy (a specialty of researchers) and failed to generate a compelling narrative (the driving force of policy). With Pew, however, everyone is in the loop. Even the Pew researchers have expressed amazement at the involvement of the Jewish community writ large, which they say has been unparalleled compared to their other studies of religious groups in America.

Why is this? One explanation is the Pew Research Center's orientation. It aims to inject timely, reliable information into the public discourse, and it explicitly welcomes debate. Although it assumes that debate will

lead to better policy, it defers to others on policy analysis and on all other matters related to the application of the data.

In addition, Pew was not interested in conducting the new NJPS, but rather it was pursuing the next frame for its ongoing research into religion in America. The Jewish community was not its primary audience and the Jewish press was not its first line of dissemination. Its audience was an informed American public and its target was *The New York Times*.

As a result of this stance, the findings were cast in terms of religion in America. In most regards, the Pew data are not comparable to NJPS numbers. To the extent knowledge advances by comparison, the comparison in this case will be to other religious groups in the United States and not to previous studies of Jews. The headline has thus been the secularization of American Jewry. The evidence has been the number and percentage of those who are Jewish but not by religion.

This narrative has captured the attention of the Jewish public and provoked and dominated public discourse. It is clear that people, Jews included, do care about research. It provokes their thinking and reflection. It can ignite a conversation in which they have a stake and on which they have opinions. They want to be informed and believe that having the data makes them so. They want to be part of the broader conversation — not the contentious one about Israel but the one about who they are, what they care about and what is happening to the American Jewish community. This is very good news for the research community and a game-changer for Jewish social science.

Asking a researcher to list philanthropic priorities in light of Pew is like giving a small boy a hammer. The boy sees that everything needs hammering and the researcher understands that more research and research education is needed.

Pew has given us descriptive data. The study was not designed with an eye toward the needs of Jews, the capacity of the community to respond to those needs, or potential interventions that might strengthen

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Jewish life and community. Large swaths of Jewish life are not included in the study (e.g., volunteerism, cultural arts, social networks) and there are no data from potentially important subgroups (e.g., Jews with mixed religious identities or Jews who have found a home in Chabad or with other Orthodox outreach groups).

The Pew data are best seen as a starting point for future research, as they raise a host of interesting questions. Answering these questions could help determine priorities for philanthropic investment. For example, when Jewish parents say they are not raising their children as Jews, what do they mean? Is this a comment on Jewish education, home life or something else? How do their children see themselves? And what implications do the answers to these questions have for families? Are those who consider themselves Jews Not By Religion (JNBR) similar to teens who refer to themselves as "just Jewish" as a way of eschewing denominational identification? How did the JNBR come to identify in this way? And what does it mean to them? Note that these questions cannot be answered with a socio-demographic survey. Rather, they need a qualitative approach that invites people to express personal meaning.

Another valuable form of research is the systematic testing of different policy options. Suggested interventions and policy prescriptions should be implemented as social experiments with built-in research components. This approach, known as action research, is based on the premise that the best way to understand a system is to try to change it. Results from these studies will deepen our understanding of the varieties of ways that Jews experience their Jewishness, the reactions they have to Jewish-related opportunities and the relative strengths (and weaknesses) of different interventions.

The investment in research should also include support for public education on how to assess, analyze, interpret and apply data responsibly. The level of engagement, conversation, debate and concern raised by the Pew research makes this a particularly propitious time to create a more data savvy Jewish polity. ■

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