

# Address to the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland (JECC)

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I am so excited to be here and celebrate with you. With a still-weak non-profit economy and troubling data from the Pew report on American Jews, it is helpful for me to be reminded of all the accomplishments and promise in the field of Jewish education. The Cleveland community and JECC embody that promise.

I want to take the opportunity to make a few substantive points in response to the Pew Research Center survey report, "A Portrait of American Jews," in particular about practical implications of the data.

I am going to assume that most of the data is well known. I want to share some "supplemental findings" crafted by journalist Andrew Silow-Carroll, who felt the need to inject some humor into troubling survey results:

- 96% of the Jews named David Cohen resent the other guys named David Cohen
- 26% of New Age Jews have experienced anti-Semitism in someone else's lifetime
- Among Jews married to non-Jews, 38% have an uncle who has no idea how what he said at the bris could offend anybody

And, courtesy of Steven Wright:

- 86.7% of statistics are made up on the spot

These "supplemental findings" are funny, the real findings less so. The trends that made headlines in 1990 have not been reversed and in fact have accelerated.

- 20% of Jews overall, and a third of Jews 18-32, think of themselves as Jewish but do not identify with the Jewish religion (and that does not count those who practice another religion).
- Relatedly, there is an over-70% intermarriage rate among younger non-Orthodox Jews, which is important because the majority of the children of intermarriage either do not identify as Jews at all or are Jews of no religion.

The key point is not that more Jews are *secular*; after all, many Israelis identify as secular and are completely devoted to the majority Jewish culture. The problem identified in Pew is that American "Jews of no religion" are unlikely to raise their children as Jews, be attached to Israel, give to Jewish causes or see being Jewish as important in their lives. Among American Jews of no religion, only 20% give to Jewish organizations, only 4% are members of Jewish organizations and two-thirds are raising their children as not Jewish at all.

My overall takeaway from Pew is that communities need to use data to evaluate what has worked in instilling commitment to core Jewish values and the Jewish community, and then massively *redeploy* resources to scale what works. Here are a few more specific thoughts:

First, I remember the debates in the 1990s about the relative priorities of funding inreach to those at the “core” of Jewish life vs. outreach to those on the “periphery.” Based on the Pew data, I believe that it is important to strengthen the efforts to educate the hundreds of thousands of Jewish children already in congregational schools, day schools and summer camps. The Pew study indicates that the future Jewish choices these young people will make are uncertain, requiring increased investment in programming for them. The best chance to solidify the Jewish identities of the next generation is to intensify and improve the important work that you in this room are already doing. To take just one example, can we find ways to expand the pipeline of children in Jewish preschool who continue to Jewish day school, summer camp and other Jewish educational programs?

Second, we cannot reverse the challenging trends only through Jewish institutions. We also need to turn to our most committed young people who are themselves our best ambassadors. Two examples:

- A Jewish philanthropist I know went to visit alumni of a Birthright follow-up program he funded that involves resume-building internships in Israel. He challenged one of the Orthodox alumni to explain why the program, which hopes to build Jewish identity, should continue to accept Orthodox Jews whose identity is already deeply rooted. The bright young man answered that from the perspective of achieving the program’s Jewish identity goals, he was a more powerful influence on the other participants than any of the program staff (and far less expensive, too!).
- Similarly, 2010 data from a report of Jewish leaders under the age of 40 indicate that the graduates of Schechter, Community and Reform day schools are playing disproportionately large leadership roles in the Jewish community. Can we empower these motivated day school graduates to be influencers toward substantive, committed Jewish life?

Finally, the ultimate challenge facing Judaism in America is societal rather than programmatic. The Pew data do not show that our educational programs failed; rather, they were not strong enough to hold against the pull of the American melting pot and secular society. The melting pot theory holds that the ideal is for all Americans to be homogenous, in which case there is no reason for Jews to embrace a distinctive identity. The other theory is multiculturalism, a view that America is strongest when citizens nourish and bring to civic society their individual ethnic and religious identities. In this view, Jewish identity and the Jewish religion are assets rather than liabilities.

American Jewry will in the main continue to follow the trends of the American cities in which they live. As a result, Jews will embrace Jewish particularism (as opposed to just Jewish pride) only when multiculturalism is locally in vogue. For this reason, I believe

that American Jews should embrace civic causes – organizations, movements and public policy approaches – that promote increased dedication to multiculturalism and/or religion rather than a melting pot society.

There is a related point about communicating our own confidence in Judaism. This is the challenge I leave you with. If we want a next generation to care about Jewish life and Jewish community, we need to address not just the “what” and “how” of Jewish education, the content you teach and the pedagogy you employ. We must also radiate our individual answers to the “why” question. *Why* have you made Judaism and the Jewish community central to your lives? What deeper values does Judaism offer you and your community that will compel students to care about the “what” and “how” of Judaism in their lives? I have seen different expositions that I personally found compelling and want to share one with you, written by Rabbi Shalom Carmy in the Orthodox Forum’s *Developing a Jewish Perspective on Culture* (Yehuda Sarna ed., 2014, p. 250):

A religious life never forgets that as we are now is not the only way to be. Traditional religion, and Judaism especially, is countercultural; it can only flourish by forging an alternative to the culture around us. *Freedom* is freedom to stand apart from the tyranny of the present consensus; it is the freedom to transform ourselves into something faithful yet new, disciplined yet unprecedented; it is the freedom to realize the mysterious destiny that constitutes our dialogue with God. And so, we study history and know that the mores and forms of early 21<sup>st</sup> century Western culture are not the only way to live. We study literature and realize that there are modes of feeling and perception unimagined by the culture in which we find ourselves. The more we can creatively mobilize the sweep and scope of human experience in all its forms...the better situated we are to blaze a path worthy of our own transcendent destiny and worthy of the emulation and admiration of others.

I share this quotation with you because I found in it an articulation of my “why.” Judaism frees us to imagine our lives and destiny differently than the surrounding consensus. Your “why” may be different. But it is your ability to articulate – and even more importantly – embody and enact *your* “why” that will inspire your peers, children and students to follow in your path.

Rabbi Amy Wallk Katz, at Temple Beth El in Springfield, NJ, provides a metaphor and model for how to think about successfully transmitting Torah to the next generation. Rabbi Katz participates in the Arava Institute/Hazon bike ride every year. When her son Gabriel reached the age of 13, he joined her for the first time. The ride has a tradition that a different cyclist each day carries the five-inch Torah that accompanies them on the ride. One day, Gabriel was asked to carry the Torah since he was the youngest rider and represented the future of Judaism. Rabbi Katz proceeded to give her son advice about how best to place the Torah on the bicycle. Gabriel’s response: “Mom, I have it under control.” With that he carried the Torah in his own way.

The Torah Gabriel carried was the same as the one Rabbi Katz teaches, but Gabriel carried it in his own way. Perhaps the most we can do is instill in children and teens WHY to carry the Torah and the content of the Torah itself. They will figure out HOW

to carry it. When you go home tonight, I invite you to think about *your* “why,” and how you can use it to inspire others.

Thank you to all of you who dedicate your time and resources to advancing the Jewish mission. I want to express special appreciation to the Jewish educators in the crowd:

Thank you so very, very much for choosing a career that will shape, transform and illuminate the lives of the next generation of Jews. You inspire me, and I hope that your careers will continue to be blessed with success, meaning and continuing personal growth. Mazal Tov to all of you, and thank you for including me in the celebration!