



Part 1

The Changing  
Face of Jewish  
Identity in  
America



# Jewish Megatrends

## Charting the Course of the American Jewish Future

Rabbi Sidney Schwarz

The Jewish community is in a time of transition. Those who are active in the community certainly know this. Many of the institutions that have been the backbone of the organized Jewish community—synagogues, JCCs, Federations, membership organizations—have been losing market share for more than two decades. This is a decline that cannot be attributed to bad leadership or a bad economy. The decline is deep and systemic, and it will require dramatic rethinking on the part of those who are the stewards of the Jewish world.

This essay offers a framework to help us better understand the dramatic changes taking place within American Jewry and how those in a position of leadership in the community—Jewish communal professionals, rabbis,

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Rabbi Sidney Schwarz founded and for twenty-one years led PANIM: The Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values, an organization that is dedicated to inspiring, training, and empowering Jewish youth to a life of leadership, activism, and service. He is also the founding rabbi of Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Bethesda, Maryland, where he continues to teach and lead services. A PhD in Jewish history, Rabbi Schwarz is currently a senior fellow at Clal—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership and a consultant to Jewish organizations. He is the author of *Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews Can Transform the American Synagogue* and *Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World*.

lay leaders, and foundations—might be able to address the challenges that face the major institutions that compose the organized Jewish community. It reframes the conversation away from more typical hand-wringing and doom and gloom expressions, which are hardly constructive, toward a clearer understanding of the challenge that we need to collectively confront.

## From Generation to Generation

I begin with a personal narrative. My parents typify the Shoah (Holocaust) generation. Both their families came from Poland and emigrated from the poor backwaters of the Polish shtetl to the more cosmopolitan Berlin in the 1930s, where the families came to know each other. My maternal grandmother sensed the dangers of Nazism and prevailed upon my grandfather to move to the *Yishuv*, pre-state Palestine, where my mother was raised. Financial hardships in the Holy Land then brought them to Baltimore and, after that, to New York.

Most of my father's family perished in the camps, but two siblings survived. At age fourteen my aunt went on Youth Aliyah to Israel, where she raised a family and lived her whole life. My father was ransomed out of Germany by relatives in the United States when that was still possible. Just two weeks before *Kristallnacht* (the Night of Broken Glass, which launched the physical assault on Jewish people and property in Germany in 1938), he came to New York at age sixteen without his family. He was a passenger on the last successful voyage of the *St. Louis*, a boat whose next voyage would be termed "the voyage of the damned," because it was forced to return to Europe when the ship was not allowed to disembark the Jewish refugees aboard even though the ship was within sight of Miami. Half of the passengers of that ship subsequently lost their lives in the Shoah.

As were hundreds of thousands of other Jews who came to these shores, my parents were deeply scarred by the Holocaust, in awe at the founding of the State of Israel, and eternally grateful to the United States of America, which allowed them to build a new life. Their lives revolved around their synagogue, the events of the Jewish community, and the fate of the State of Israel, where dozens of their family now lived. As immigrants, they could not imagine navigating American society without the intermediary agencies represented by the Jewish community.

I was born in 1953. My most powerful childhood memories include the anxiety in my household in the weeks leading up to the Six-Day War. My parents felt certain that Jews were about to face another holocaust if Israel were to be overrun by invading Arab armies. The subsequent Israeli victory was seen as a miracle—David slaying Goliath.

Nine years later, in 1976, I was on a public bus on a crowded street in Israel when all traffic stopped. The bus driver turned up the radio, and we heard the news bulletin that an Israeli commando team had succeeded in flying twenty-five hundred miles to an airport in Entebbe, Uganda, to rescue more than one hundred Jewish passengers who were being held hostage by terrorists and the soldiers of dictator Idi Amin. The rescue symbolized that Israel was an international protector of Jews; Jews would no longer be victims. As the newsflash ended on the bus, everyone stood up, as if on cue, and sang “Hatikvah,” Israel’s national anthem.

Fast-forward: December 6, 1987. The Jewish community decided to organize a rally in solidarity with Soviet Jewry to coincide with the visit of Russian premier Mikhail Gorbachev to meet with President Ronald Reagan in Washington, D.C. The Summit Rally for Soviet Jewry was not without its risks. Until then, the largest Soviet Jewry rally was a few years earlier and held across from the United Nations when then premier Leonid Brezhnev came to New York. The crowd then was estimated at ten to twelve thousand people. On the huge expanse of the mall behind the U.S. Capitol, ten thousand people would have spelled “failure.”

David Harris, now the head of the American Jewish Committee, was then the director of the AJC’s Washington office. He coordinated all of the plans for the rally. I was then the executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington, D.C., and I served as one of David’s lieutenants. On the permit we filed for the rally with the National Park Service, we had to provide an estimate for the crowd we expected. We put down fifty thousand, though no one in any position of leadership thought that was possible, including us. Not during the winter. Not in Washington, D.C., where the Jewish population was a fraction of what it was in New York. More prudently, we planned on setting up shuttles from airport and railway terminals for twenty-five thousand people coming in from out of town.

I was privileged to be on the speaker's podium that day behind the Capitol along with then vice president George Bush, Elie Wiesel, newly freed Jewish refusenik Anatoly (soon to be Natan) Sharansky, and Peter, Paul and Mary, who sang. The windchill factor was about zero. But people came. Not 25,000. Not 50,000. But 250,000. The next morning President Reagan started his meeting with Premier Gorbachev by showing him the front pages of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, both of which featured photos and stories about the rally. He stated that there would be no increased trade, no progress on arms reduction, and no warming of relations between the United States and the USSR until Gorbachev changed his policy of repression against Soviet Jews.

Within a year of that Summit Rally the gates of emigration opened for Jews. Close to one million Jews left the Soviet Union, most of them moving to Israel. The Soviet Jewry movement, a cause that had fully engaged me for twenty-five years, since my first visit to Russia as a high school student with United Synagogue Youth (USY, the Conservative Jewish national youth movement), could claim victory. The movement has been cited as a turning point in the history of human rights, because it gave evidence of the power and effectiveness of international citizen activism against a totalitarian regime.

I begin with these personal stories because they help explain why the Jewish community today is struggling to engage the next generation of Jews. In the course of my life I have been exposed to events and people that reflect both the tragedy and the triumph of Jewish history. My parents and their families were directly affected by the Holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel. I have firsthand memories of several glorious chapters in Israel's history, including its victory in the 1967 Six-Day War and its dramatic rescue of Jewish hostages at the airport in Entebbe. Meeting with Jewish refuseniks, who had the courage to practice Judaism and fight for immigration rights despite the dangers that entailed, gave me a deep sense of pride in my own Jewish heritage and subsequently shaped the course of my life and my career.

My generation now fills the ranks of the professionals and lay leaders who run the organized Jewish community. It is a generation that came of age in the 1960s, and we have a hard time imagining that we are now on

the other side of a generation gap. We believe that we invented the generation gap and thus are immune from the blind spots that affect those on the older side of the divide. Yet the Jewish community has lost major market share among generation X (born 1965–81), and it seems that we are poised to do even worse with engaging the millennials (born 1982–2000) as they mature into adulthood.

I want to focus on three factors that have contributed to the weakening of Jewish identity and affiliation in America: Israel and its ongoing challenges, the end of the ethnic era of American Jewry, and overarching trends in American society. I will then look at trends in American culture and society that require thoughtful and strategic responses. Finally, I will suggest four propositions that point to areas of activity that can and should serve as the focus of the American Jewish future. I think that these areas are ripe for significant investment on the part of philanthropists and intensive programmatic efforts on the part of synagogues and Jewish organizations. Despite some of the current indicators of communal deterioration, I see something very different. On the margins of the community there are stirrings of Jewish revival. It looks a lot different than the Jewish community of the last generation, but if properly nurtured, it has the potential to grow into a great renaissance of American Jewish life.

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## The Israel Variable

Gen X came to maturity as the optimism about the Oslo peace process focused on the Middle East came to a crashing halt with the onset of the Second Intifada in September 2000. An epidemic of suicide bombings throughout Israel over the next few years effectively ended the peace process. The UN World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa,

in September 2001 highlighted that, in a post-apartheid world, Israel—a democracy—was the new pariah nation of the international community. That, even though dozens of countries that had never known a fair and free election had far worse records on a range of civil liberty and human rights issues.

Notwithstanding the double standard, Israel bears more than a little responsibility for changing the way younger Jews started to think about their Jewish identity. Even as America remained Israel's strongest ally, a succession of Israeli governments continued to build Jewish settlements in the territories that were captured in the 1967 war despite strenuous objections of U.S. officials. Because Israel is a democracy, human rights organizations operate freely in the country, and they have found much to report on in terms of Israel's treatment of Palestinians under their control. Similarly, Israel's vigorous free press reported story after story that took the gleam off Israel's reputation as a country to be admired and emulated.

Israel became a badly tarnished brand. No PR efforts on the part of the Israeli government or by the resourceful and well-funded array of American Jewish organizations could counter the impression that Jewish youth received from the mainstream American media. After the Six-Day War, Israel was no longer the struggling democracy in a hostile Arab neighborhood trying to make the desert bloom. The miracle of *kibbutz galuyot*, the way a young and struggling nation spared no effort or expense to gather in oppressed Jews from the four corners of the world during its first decade of statehood, was now something for the history books. Instead, Israel was portrayed as the preeminent military power in the Middle East. It was also a country that was part of a select group of nations that possessed nuclear weapons (though Israel has never publically acknowledged this). If sympathy for a people decimated by the Holocaust helped create the international will to establish a Jewish homeland in the State of Israel, then international sympathy in the post-1967 period was firmly on the side of the Palestinians. Despite evidence that Palestinians were cynically used as pawns by Arab leaders, Israel was the nation seen as standing in the way of Palestinian well-being and political self-determination.

Even Israel's concessions for peace seemed to fuel Israel's diplomatic isolation and approbation in the international community. Soon after

“experimenting” with ceding a piece of captured territory—the Gaza strip—to the Palestinian Authority in 2005, the area was taken over by the terrorist organization Hamas in free elections. It wasn’t long before Gaza became a base for regular shelling of Israeli civilians and a safe harbor for Islamic extremists bent on Israel’s destruction. When Israel decided to act in her own defense by invading Gaza in early 2009, accusations of disproportionate retaliation filled the international media. A subsequent UN report from a commission headed up by respected international jurist (and a committed Jew) Richard Goldstone said that both Hamas and Israel were likely guilty of war crimes and that further investigations were warranted.

In the course of forty years Israel went from being a darling of the Western world and the impetus for a revival of Jewish pride and identity to something very morally complex. It is true that thousands of Jewish college students have been mobilized into Israel advocacy organizations and campaigns to defend Israel against unfair accusations in the court of world opinion. But the far greater majority of young Jews have distanced themselves from Israel. The result is that today Israel is anything but the unifying force in American Jewish life that it once was.<sup>1</sup>

One 2010 study compared attachment to Israel by age cohort. Asked if the destruction of Israel would be a personal tragedy, 80 percent of Jews over sixty-five said “yes,” while only 48 percent of Jews under thirty-five said “yes.” Forty percent of the older cohort considered themselves “very emotionally attached to Israel,” while only 22 percent of the younger cohort did. In a third question, 83 percent of the older cohort was “comfortable with the idea of a Jewish state,” while only 53 percent of the younger cohort was. The authors of the study, Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, who have tracked these questions over time, note two significant variables. One was that attitudes among younger American Jews strongly correlated with the marital status of their parents. The offspring of the intermarried were far less attached to Israel than those from in-married families, suggesting that if the intermarriage rate continues to rise, the attachment to Israel may become even more tenuous. But the authors also note that over time, large sections of younger Jews were moving from “disengaged” with Israel to “alienated” from Israel.<sup>2</sup>

The single most significant intervention that might change the trajectory of the trends cited above is Birthright Israel. Promoted by philanthropists Charles Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt and launched in December 1999 as a partnership between the Jewish Federations of North America and the government of Israel, Birthright has sent close to three hundred thousand young adults to Israel on free ten-day trips. Participants have come from sixty different countries and more than one thousand North American colleges and universities. The most recent study of alumni who had participated in the program five to ten years earlier suggests that the impact of the trip on Jewish identity has staying power. As compared to a peer group that did not participate in the program, Birthright alumni were 42 percent more likely to feel very committed to Israel and 45 percent more likely to marry other Jews.<sup>3</sup> Assuming that funding for the program remains stable, Birthright has the ability to significantly impact the attitudes and behaviors of next-generation Jews on matters related to Jewish identity and ties to the State of Israel.

## **Tribal Jews and Covenantal Jews**

Tracking the changing relationship of Jews to Israel is important because for more than a century, American Jewish identity has been driven more by ethnic affinity and a concern for survival than it has by faith and religious observance. To a community so shaped by tragedy and persecution, Israel became, in the words of one scholar, “the civil religion of American Jewry.”<sup>4</sup>

But there are other generational differences between the younger American Jews and their elders that are not related to Israel. In my 2000 book *Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews Can Transform the American Synagogue*, I identified several characteristics of what I called the “new American Jew”:<sup>5</sup>

- They do not respond emotionally to appeals based on the Holocaust or the State of Israel.
- They do not derive their sense of place from their Jewish connections.
- While aware of historical anti-Semitism and ongoing anti-Israel animus in the world, they do not share the persecution phobias of earlier Jewish generations.

These observations paralleled the findings of a major study of Jewish identity by Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen that came out the same year in the book *The Jew Within*.<sup>6</sup> Cohen and Eisen coined the term “the sovereign self” to describe a generation that was radically individualistic and less and less inclined to identify with the public institutions of Jewish life.

More recently I have described the growing polarization in the Jewish world in terms of the difference between tribal and covenantal identity. Tribal Jews see their identity in political and ethnic terms. They are very concerned about threats to Jewish survival, both from enemies of Israel and the Jewish people and from the rampant assimilation within the Jewish community. They do not apologize for investing their time and resources in advancing group self-interest, and they have created an array of Jewish organizations to support their work. Tribal Jews have a strong affinity for the State of Israel because it is the most public manifestation and validation of the Jewish people’s existence and survival.

In contrast to tribal Jews, covenantal Jews see their identity less as a matter of group solidarity than as a spiritual legacy. I use the term “covenantal” to distinguish behaviors that align with core teachings of Judaism even if those behaviors are not attached to overt forms of affiliation with the group. If covenantal Jews feel an affinity to Judaism it is because of the ethics and values that Judaism has brought into the world, such as justice (*tzedek*), compassion (*chesed*), human dignity (*tzelem elohim*), and the protection of those who are most vulnerable (*ahavat ger*). Most covenantal Jews could not name these values in Hebrew or identify the source of these concepts in Judaism’s sacred texts, but they are aware that these are ideas that Judaism brought into the world via the Bible and they are very proud of it. In addition, despite the fact that the term “covenant” (*brit* in Hebrew) is closely tied to the Jewish people’s encounter with God in Exodus chapter 19, in the way I am using the term “covenantal Jew” here, theology has little to do with it.

Covenantal Jews feel pride when Jews in various fields of endeavor make contributions to the world, yet they resist the Jewish community’s emphasis on group survival as the highest priority. Motivated by what they see as the higher mandate of Judaism, their loyalties are decidedly more

global and universal. Covenantal Jews would not respond well to the classic Jewish teaching that requires supporting Jews before supporting non-Jews. Nor are they sympathetic to appeals that might come from parents or Jewish authority figures that they should marry other Jews. All such claims that privilege Jews over other human beings strike covenantal Jews as ethically objectionable. If Israel is accused of human rights violations, covenantal Jews are as inclined to voice their criticism about it as they are about any other country. Perhaps they are even more inclined to do so because it proves their commitment to principle over their own people.<sup>7</sup>

I hasten to add that the gap between tribal Jews and covenantal Jews is not exclusively a generation gap. There are younger Jews who strongly identify as tribal Jews and older Jews who identify as covenantal Jews. A stronger indicator is denominational affiliation and observance. Orthodox Jews skew heavily toward tribalism, whereas liberal/progressive Jews skew strongly toward covenantal attitudes and behaviors. But even here, there are exceptions. In fact, most Jews alternate between the categories depending on circumstances. Nonetheless, the categories are helpful to understand how the attitudes that determine Jewish behavior are changing.

What is important to note is that the institutions of American Jewish life (e.g., synagogues, JCCs, Jewish Federations, Jewish educational institutions) speak the language of tribal Jews and program accordingly. They do that even as they recognize their wholesale failure to attract and engage younger American Jews whose biases are decidedly post-tribal. Thousands of these “covenantal” Jews play leading roles in the fields of human rights, global peace, worker justice, gender and LGBT equality, education, domestic poverty relief, and international development efforts. A 2012 study found that one in six American Jews identified as “Jewishly engaged and congregationally unaffiliated.” Labeling them “cultural Jews,” the study found that their commitment to economic justice (52 percent) and spirituality (56 percent) was significantly higher than for comparable samples of synagogue-affiliated Jews. Despite avoiding any formal affiliation with Jewish institutions, many of these covenantal Jews (or cultural Jews) will identify with the Jewish historical narrative and ethical legacy as a source of inspiration and an important component of their formative personal identity.<sup>8</sup>

Here we enter the realm of what sociologist Herbert Gans calls “symbolic ethnicity.” Many Jews, with no identifiable patterns of Jewish affiliation or behavior, nonetheless define their motivation in the world in the context of their Jewish heritage. But given the way that the Jewish community currently functions, such Jews, who might otherwise be open to Jewish community initiatives or programs when such endeavors align with their universal and liberal values, are defined out of the tribe and driven away by implicit communal institutional messages.

Rabbis and the organized Jewish community are notoriously bad at understanding and validating covenantal Jewish identity. Drawing hard and fast lines on who does and who does not belong to the Jewish community becomes even more difficult and complicated because the Jewish identity of covenantal Jews is soft and highly ambivalent.

In my work with teenage, college, and young adult Jews over several decades, I have seen how impressionable they can be. Imagine a twenty-year-old, raised in a non-Orthodox synagogue-affiliated family whose Jewish education stopped after Bat or Bar Mitzvah. Let’s call him Bill. Like many who came before him, the totality of Bill’s involvement in the Jewish community may be attending High Holy Day services with no intention of any further involvement with Jewish life. Still, Bill may be proud of his Jewish identity and not at all reticent to be counted as one. However, if Bill gets engaged to a non-Jew and the one call he places to his childhood rabbi goes unreturned or the response to his call makes Bill feel rejected, there is a good chance that Bill will opt out of any ties to the Jewish community at all.

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But here is an alternate scenario. Bill signs up for a Jewish-sponsored alternative spring-break trip to Central America. He isn't motivated by the fact that it is sponsored by a Jewish organization, but he likes the destination, the price is better than two other trips he checked out, and the dates work for him. On the trip there is a fabulous Jewish educator, and in the context of living and working with people poorer than middle-class Bill could ever have imagined, suddenly the wisdom and ethical dictates of Judaism come alive. Bill comes back and becomes campus super-Jew, changes his major to Jewish studies, and is destined to become a pillar of the Jewish community for the rest of his life.

The story is not fabricated. It is a composite. I have seen a thousand variations of this story. I can offer a dozen examples of experiences that will turn Bill off to his Jewish identity for the foreseeable future, and I can offer the same number of experiences that will spark his Jewish identity. This is what I mean when I call covenantal Jewish identity soft and ambivalent. Bill's Jewish identity is up for grabs.

Covenantal Jews represent a growing pool of the Jewish market of the future. The future vibrancy of the Jewish community depends on leaders of the Jewish community reaching out to this constituency and finding ways to reach them, even as it will challenge many long-standing assumptions of what the Jewish community should look like.

## The American Context

Thus far, our analysis has mostly focused on the Jewish community. However, a strategy to better reach and engage the next generation requires us to also understand the larger social context in which young American Jews operate.

The Jewish community is not alone in facing declining interest on the part of gen X and millennials in the organizations that were created to reinforce and perpetuate religious identity. Robert Putnam and David Campbell's recent study of religion in America, *American Grace*, provides important data in this regard.<sup>9</sup> The data for the book comes from a 2006 national survey called Faith Matters. Putnam and Campbell track what they call "religious inheritance," which is the extent to which religious faith and affiliation gets handed down to the next generation. They found

that fewer than two-thirds of Americans simply inherited their parents' religion in terms of both affiliation and observance patterns. Because religious inheritance is much stronger among blacks and Latinos, it actually skews the data. Among white Americans, 40 to 45 percent switched away from the religion of their parents during their lifetimes or allowed their faith to lapse.

Mormons and evangelical Protestants were two exceptions to this trend and were far more likely to successfully transmit religious loyalty to their children. More than 50 percent in each of those communities reported continuing to observe and affiliate with the religion of their parents. In contrast, fewer than 30 percent of Jews reported staying connected to the religion of their parents, a figure 9 percent lower than mainline Protestants, a sector of America's religious landscape that has suffered terrible attrition over the past forty years.<sup>10</sup> The single strongest indicator for religious retention is whether a person's family was religiously homogeneous (no intermarriage) and whether or not that household was religiously observant.

A second telling data point from the Putnam and Campbell study is what they call "the rise of the 'nones.'" Historically, Americans have been very loyal to their religious affiliations. Even as American society was seen by many as more and more secular (if not godless), Americans saw themselves as faithful to their houses of worship. In the 1950s, in response to the question "What is your religious preference?" 95 to 97 percent of Americans named a specific denomination (e.g., Baptist, Methodist) or a religious tradition (e.g., Christian, Jewish). This data means that only 3 to 5 percent of Americans checked the box that said "none" when asked about their religious affiliation. But by the year 2000 that number skyrocketed to 25 percent. Not surprisingly, the highest incidence of "nones" was among the young, a trend confirmed by comparing the Faith Matters data with comparable data from an annual survey of college freshman.<sup>11</sup>

The authors cite two large social trends as mainly responsible for this flight from religious affiliation. One was the aftereffects of the cultural revolution of the 1960s. That "revolution" was characterized by the liberal politics of President Johnson's Great Society programs, the civil rights movement, permissiveness in the realm of sexual mores and

drug use, and changing gender roles and norms. To many Americans, these were indicators of a growing moral decay in American society. In reaction to these dramatic changes in American society came the growth of evangelical Christianity and the rise of the religious Right. Millions of Americans were drawn to the reassertion of certitudes around God and country that the 1960s had undermined. Ironically, the very trend that raised the commitment of so many to religion was also what later alienated so many Americans and drove them into the “none” camp. Many students of American religion now assume that because so many of the “nones” come from the middle and left of the political spectrum, their rejection of religion is a backlash against the marriage between religion and conservative politics that became a major force in American life over the past thirty years.<sup>12</sup>

The findings of Putnam and Campbell correlate closely with a 2010 study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.<sup>13</sup> That study found that millennials are significantly less affiliated than baby boomers were at a corresponding age. They also found that a high percentage of Americans under the age of forty are open to associating with religious and spiritual organizations different than the affiliations of their childhood.<sup>14</sup> In one key question in the survey, “How important is religion in your life?” 69 percent of respondents over the age of sixty-five said “very important.” That response compares to 59 percent of respondents aged fifty to sixty-four and only 45 percent of respondents aged eighteen to thirty.

The survey data above paints a dire portrait for the future of American religious institutions. It puts into perspective the declining number of Jews who join synagogues or JCCs or who contribute to Jewish Federation campaigns—all classic indicators of Jewish identity and communal solidarity.

At the same time, there are trends in American life that present opportunities for a spiritual revival, albeit with a set of rules far different than is part of the playbook of most American religious institutions. In the last section of this chapter, I will lay out four strategies that present unique opportunities for synagogues and Jewish organizations promoting Jewish identity. But first a few words about the symptoms of what can only be described as the American spiritual malaise of the twenty-first century.

## An American Spiritual Malaise

Although it is far too early to make generalizations about this new century, the jury is clearly in on its first decade. If the twentieth century was the “American Century,” characterized by America’s dominance in the world by virtue of its military might, economic power, and cultural influence, then the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, provided a disturbing signal that that century was over. No longer do Americans feel secure in the knowledge that those around the world view us with respect. Closer to home, even before the start of the twenty-first century, there were growing concerns about the erosion of the American civic fabric. Robert Putnam’s groundbreaking book *Bowling Alone*<sup>15</sup> raised far more serious concerns than the decline of bowling leagues. He cited how key features of American democracy were eroding—membership in civic groups, neighborhood associations, participation in American politics, and so on. Other students of American culture followed Putnam’s analysis by citing the dangerous side effects of the age of technology. Although the conventional wisdom is that the Internet has helped to get people more connected, one recent study found that one-third of those who use text messaging prefer that medium to a phone call or an in-person encounter to communicate with another individual.<sup>16</sup> Anyone with a teenager knows this phenomenon well; the implications about the declining skills of young people to engage in normal social interactions are scary indeed.

Perhaps of even greater immediate consequence to the health of our society is the impact of technology on our political culture. MoveOn.org emerged as one of the most highly successful organizations that mobilized the younger generation into politics via the Internet. They burst onto the scene in 1999 to support President Bill Clinton against the efforts of Republicans in Congress to impeach him. They then began online organizing to oppose the war in Iraq. In 2003 their online primary catapulted Howard Dean to the front of the pack for the 2004 Democratic nomination for president and built a base of more than a million young people that they subsequently organized for a variety of progressive causes. But MoveOn.org’s own former executive director, Eli Pariser, now makes the case that the Internet has had some very negative consequences for American politics.

It has resulted, he argues, in people being exposed only to opinions with which they agree. The growing sophistication of search engines essentially customizes every person's computer, feeding them information that they will like. The strength of any democracy depends on a healthy debate in the public square about contemporary issues so as to advance the common good. A generation ago, Americans got their news from a handful of major media sources that felt a responsibility to fairly represent a broad range of public opinion. Today, that market has fragmented into hundreds of highly partisan niche sources. Pariser sees a direct connection between the growing

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hegemony of technology in American society and the partisanship and political gridlock that now characterizes the American political process.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the twenty-first century brought with it a growing concern about America's economic decline. The stock market crash of 2008 was the tip of the iceberg as economists noted the

twenty-five-year shift of manufacturing out of the United States and the rise of America's trade deficit and long-term indebtedness to other countries. For several generations it was assumed that children would outearn their parents. With unemployment hovering in the 7 to 9 percent range in the second decade of the twenty-first century and little chance that that number will shift dramatically in the near future, the prospect for America's younger generation seems less bright than ever before.

All four of these factors—the crisis in religious inheritance and the rise of the “nonés,” America's declining economic hegemony and prestige in the world, the breakdown of America's civic fabric, and growing partisanship and political paralysis—contribute to a culture with a deep spiritual malaise.

## Four Propositions

There is a Rabbinic saying: *makdim refuah l'maka*, “even before the onset of the malady, the antidote already exists.” It is another way of saying that embedded in every social problem lies the seed for its remedy.

In that vein, I believe that the crisis in American society at the dawn of the twenty-first century cries out for a spiritual response. Here I will frame that response in the language of Judaism with specific reference to how it might play out in the Jewish community. But I believe that the four strategies I set forth would have considerable appeal to Americans beyond the Jewish community. I will, however, leave it to others to translate these strategies for the other ethnic and religious subcultures of America.

If the strategies that sustained the American Jewish community for much of the twentieth century now fail to attract generation X (aged thirty to forty-five) and, even more so, Jewish millennials (aged eighteen to twenty-nine), what new strategies might be more effective? If the analysis above focused on the changes taking place in the *marketplace* (society), then we must also focus on the change in the *market* itself—next-generation Jews who we hope will carry on the legacy of Jewish heritage and Jewish life. To that end I offer four propositions that I believe hold the key to a renaissance of Jewish life. For each proposition, I will identify several examples of Jewish organizations or programs that are already experiencing success tapping into that trend. Hopefully, the analysis and examples will convince other Jewish institutions to follow suit.

### Wisdom/*Chochmah*

**Proposition 1: In an age of globalization, Jewish institutions need to offer multiple avenues to explore *chochmah*, the wisdom of our sacred texts put into the context of the world’s religions and in the language of contemporary culture.**

Globalization is often discussed in economic terms as global markets become increasingly independent due to advances in transportation and telecommunications. Yet far more significant than the fact that you might be wearing a shirt from China, pants from Indonesia, and shoes from Brazil is the fact that we live in a world where culture and ideas know no borders. Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sack’s important book *The Dignity of Difference* explores the implications of globalization on the way people think about their respective religious traditions. Provocatively he asks the question: Can we hear the voice of God in a language and a culture not our own?<sup>18</sup>

Jewish institutions need to dramatically rethink the way they will engage in the enterprise of transmitting the Jewish heritage. When so much information is available through computer terminals or smart phones and language can be taught with online language learning software, Jewish educators must increasingly get into the business of imparting wisdom and not just knowledge. Furthermore, the wisdom that gets imparted cannot be of a parochial nature. Judaism is part of a world wisdom tradition, and next-generation Jews are hungry to understand the similarities and differences between Judaism and other faiths and cultures in the world. Jewish “lite” will no longer appeal to the next generation of American Jews. Though it is true that the vast majority of Jews are Judaically illiterate (and even less competent in Hebrew language), younger Jews yearn for authenticity. It is no surprise that on college campuses and in their travels around the world there is a strong attraction to the Chabad Houses, an ultra-Orthodox approach to Judaism that has emissaries and houses all over the globe. Most American Jews that gravitate to Chabad

In an age of globalization, Jewish institutions need to offer multiple avenues to explore *chochmah*, the wisdom of our sacred texts put into the context of the world’s religions and in the language of contemporary culture.

Houses will not adopt the rigorous ritual observance that characterizes the Chabad rabbis themselves. Yet the young people like the feel of “doing the real thing,” even if they don’t show up every week.

There are other indicators as well. In 1980 a few young British Jews launched a program called Limmud. It was a multiday Jewish learning retreat over the Christmas holiday that attracted about eighty participants. Now Limmud rents an entire college campus and accommodates more than three thousand participants for a five-day program, attracting Jews from all over Europe and featuring some of the best Jewish teachers in the world. Nor has Limmud remained an exclusively United Kingdom operation. There are now sixty different communities sponsoring Limmud conferences throughout the year on five continents, and the phenomenon is still growing.

Starting in the 1970s Jewish studies programs were established on college campuses throughout America. Thousands of Jewish college students who got little out of their afternoon Hebrew school experiences were now studying about Judaism at an advanced level. But what is interesting about gen X and the millennials is that their interest in Judaism is no longer restricted to courses for college credit. Many Jews find their way to Israel to study at Pardes, an open and pluralistic yeshiva in Jerusalem, or at Bina, a secular yeshiva in Tel Aviv. In New York, several young rabbis started Yeshivat Hadar in 2006, a noncredit learning academy where young people, college and postcollege, commit to full-time study of Jewish texts for a summer or for a full year.

In a previous generation this seriousness about Jewish learning would have been restricted to Orthodox Jews. But the programs described above are attracting largely non-Orthodox Jews, and it is a phenomenon to be celebrated. The interest is also not restricted to Judaism. Increasingly, Jews want to be able to access the wisdom traditions of many different cultures around the world.

It is not uncommon to find more and more Jews engaging in “do-it-yourself” Judaism because there is so much material on the web for anyone who is so inclined. Jews who once would have been satisfied with using the Maxwell House Haggadah for their Passover seder will now put together their own booklets, and it will integrate the passages of the traditional text with excerpts from Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela. Many of the young people I meet who are most serious about Judaism are intensely interested in how their heritage compares to Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and other religions of the world. They explore those faiths not because they want to convert, but because they refuse to live and learn in an intellectual and cultural ghetto.

From 1997 to 2000, the organization that I founded and led, PANIM: The Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values, sponsored a program called the *E Pluribus Unum* (EPU) Project. Our flagship program, *Panim el Panim*, brought Jewish high school students to Washington to be exposed to politics, social justice, and community service, all through the lens of Jewish texts and values. Over several years we had fine-tuned an educational methodology that used the wisdom of the

Jewish tradition to inspire greater social and political activism. I became intrigued by the possibility that the same methodology could be applied to other faith traditions as well. With funding from the Ford Foundation, the Lilly Endowment, and the Righteous Persons Foundation, we launched the EPU Project, a three-week program each summer for sixty entering college freshmen exploring religion, social justice, and the common good.

With equal representation from Jews, Catholics, and Protestants, and including a small Muslim cohort in year three, the program had participants study the social teachings of their respective faith traditions and then explore both similarities and differences with the other traditions represented at the program. We learned together, did community service

For post-tribal, next-generation Jews, Jewish wisdom also needs to open a window to the wisdom of the world's great religions.

together, prayed together, and played together, all in the close quarters of a college campus. I had a faculty that represented all faiths, races, and ethnicities. I recall one prominent head of a national Jewish organization who served on my advisory board express shock that I would create such a program. He told me that he supported PANIM because he saw it as a great Jewish identity enhancer. What

did I think would come of a program that put Jews ages seventeen to eighteen in close quarters with *gentiles*!

Well I know what came of it, and I had a pretty good hunch even before we enrolled our first participant. Evaluations showed that our EPU Project had a much greater impact on our participants than did our *Panim el Panim* program. The ability of these young people to explore faith, politics, ethnic identity, and social responsibility in a religiously pluralistic setting was nothing short of transformative. Though it was seemingly counterintuitive to my skeptical board member, participants emerged more committed to their own faith, because they had to live and explain their faith to others who did not share their path. Faith communities are in the business of transmitting the values and practices of their respective heritage to the next generation. They mostly do so by creating

programs that are totally insular, essentially educational and intellectual ghettos. It won't work anymore.

For post-tribal, next-generation Jews, Jewish wisdom also needs to open a window to the wisdom of the world's great religions. Some of our teachings are unique. Other teachings have fascinating parallels in cultures and religions that are rarely if ever mentioned in Jewish educational settings. Jewish institutions that understand this will need to totally rethink their programming. If they do, they will find themselves able to engage younger Jews in new ways.

### Social Justice/*Tzedek*

**Proposition 2: At a time when our political culture seems so dysfunctional and the social and environmental threats to the planet grow exponentially every year, the Jewish community needs to provide ever more ways to advance *tzedek* in the world.**

One of the bright spots in American Jewish life over the past few decades is the explosion of organizations that have been created that offer Jews the opportunity to advance social justice through the framework of Judaism. The phenomenon started in the 1980s as a reaction to the growing parochialism of the organized Jewish community. It was a phenomenon not dissimilar to the way that the excesses of the American counterculture in the 1960s gave rise to the religious Right.

Several factors combined to drive the organized Jewish community into a more defensive, if not reactionary posture. First, the Yom Kippur War of 1973 revealed that the American progressive Left, a political sector that reflected the sympathies of most American Jews, was an unreliable ally when it came to Israel and the Middle East. Second, the Reagan presidency seriously challenged the premise that it was the government's responsibility to ensure a social safety net for the most vulnerable sectors of the population. Third, rising rates of intermarriage and assimilation increased concerns about the future strength and viability of the American Jewish community. Taken together, the organized Jewish community's priorities shifted decidedly toward "continuity," a buzzword for communal survival.<sup>19</sup>

Although it can be argued that this was a justified priority for the organized Jewish community, it nonetheless spurred a grassroots response from Jews whose priorities were becoming post-tribal. The affluence and organizational know-how of American Jews resulted in the birth of an amazing array of new Jewish organizations whose priorities were decidedly more universal. The 1980s saw the creation of the New Israel Fund (supporting progressive causes in Israel), Mazon (hunger relief), the Jewish Fund for Justice and the Shefa Fund (domestic social justice, later to merge together with the Progressive Jewish Alliance in California to form Bend the Arc), and the American Jewish World Service (aid and support to the developing world), to name just a few. The 1990s saw the creation of Avodah (postcollege Jewish service houses in urban neighborhoods), Hazon (food and environmental justice), Tzedek Hillel (social justice initiatives via college campus Hillels), and the Jewish Coalition for Service (an umbrella for more than twenty Jewish groups that promoted community service, later to evolve into Repair the World). In 2009 the Nathan Cummings Foundation further helped to build the field by creating the Jewish Social Justice Roundtable, made up of the executives of all the national organizations pursuing a justice agenda. By 2012, twenty-six organizations were part of the Roundtable.

These are just some of the larger, national initiatives in the realm of Jewish social justice. In dozens of communities around the country *tikkun olam*, “repairing the world,” programs were popping up everywhere. Synagogues sponsored Mitzvah Days that attracted families to spend a day in service to those in need. It became commonplace to have young teens undertake a *tikkun olam* project as part of their preparation for Bar and Bat Mitzvah. By the year 2000 there were more than a dozen Jewish organizations focused on some form of environmental work.

When I founded the PANIM Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values in 1988, it was a novel idea. Our mission was to inspire, educate, and train the next generation of American Jews for lives of commitment to leadership, activism, and service for the Jewish people and the world at large. PANIM did not force young Jews to choose between commitment to Judaism, the Jewish people, and the rest of the world. Its premise was that each of those commitments was core to what it meant to be a good

Jew. In so doing, PANIM reflected a new ethic that characterized much of the emerging Jewish social justice movement. Jews who might otherwise walk away from Jewish commitments and affiliations found a growing number of organizations that aligned with their values. Jews who increasingly saw themselves as global citizens were able to fulfill those passions through Jewish-sponsored programs. For many, it was the only way that they would be prepared to remain identified with the Jewish community.<sup>20</sup>

Part of what is exciting about this phenomenon is that it represents a much healthier integration of Jewish identity than was so long the case in the American Jewish experience. For the better part of the twentieth century, you could divide the Jewish organizational universe into religious, educational, and secular baskets.

Synagogues covered the religious agenda. Hebrew schools, day schools, camps, and Hillels were engaged in the work of transmitting Jewish identity to the next generation, and a large array of organizations dealt with everything from social services to caring for the elderly to community relations, which included relations with Jewish communities around the world and Israel. In the third basket were

the Jewish communal organizations that, despite being part of the Jewish communal umbrella and funded with dollars from the Federation community campaigns, did not see themselves as being in the Jewish content business. That was the work of synagogues and schools.

When I left my first pulpit in Media, Pennsylvania, in 1984 to become the executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) of Greater Washington, D.C., I experienced a bit of culture shock. The community relations field was in its heyday. The agenda included defending Jews against anti-Semitism, saving Soviet Jewry, mobilizing for the State of Israel, and when there was time and energy, some local interfaith and social justice work. I was deeply committed to

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the entire agenda of the agency. Yet when I attempted to introduce some Judaic perspectives into the social policy issues that we were debating week in and week out, I was chastised for being “too rabbinic.” Let synagogues do the Jewish content thing, I was told. We were in the business of ethnic politics and advancing group self-interest. Indeed, the Jewish community had become amazingly effective at doing just that.

Some fifteen years after I got that scolding, I was invited to offer a keynote talk to the annual convention of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, the national umbrella for all the Jewish community relations agencies around the country and a dozen or so national defense agencies like the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, Hadassah, and the like. My talk was on integrating Torah (Jewish learning and values) and *tzedek* (social justice). It was an indication of how far the community had come in a relatively short time. Indeed, looking around today at the fast-growing sector of Jewish social justice organiza-

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tions, I celebrate how many produce outstanding educational materials that do exactly what I had tried, unsuccessfully, to do during my tenure at the JCRC in Washington.

Because next-generation Jews more closely identify as covenantal Jews than as tribal Jews, the only way to reach them is to make sure that the Judaism they experience as youth reflects Judaism’s millennial commitment to *tzedek*, justice. Many Jews my age recall their Bar and Bat Mitzvah with a certain scorn and cynicism.

The “values” they recall from the event were about the ostentation and the party. I would hope that when this generation of tweens has children of their own, they will be able to recount how, as part of their Bar/Bat Mitzvah, they served food in a soup kitchen, collected sports equipment for children in a developing country, sent packages to wounded Israeli soldiers, and volunteered to work with developmentally disabled children.

Hopefully that is how they will recall how they became “*mitzvah* men and women,” the meaning of the term Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

Synagogues that make social justice central to their programming, like B’nai Jeshurun in New York and IKAR in Los Angeles, are thriving while dozens of other synagogues are losing membership. According to innovation labs such as Jumpstart and the ROI Community, and in social entrepreneurship incubators like UpStart Bay Area, New York’s Bikkurim, the Joshua Venture Group, and PresenTense, a significant number of the projects being created by younger Jews in the United States, Europe, Latin America, and Israel have a social justice or environmental focus. Mainstream Jewish organizations that understand this trend and are prepared to modify their modus operandi will flourish. Those that don’t will see themselves hard-pressed to maintain their current membership levels and support.

### Community/Kehillah

**Proposition 3: At a time when technology has made meaningful social intercourse much harder to come by, the Jewish community must offer places where people can find support in times of need, communal celebration in times of joy, and friendships to make life fulfilling.**

We have already cited the extent to which America has suffered a breakdown of its civic fabric over the course of the past twenty-five years. There is no doubt that the very factors that contribute to this trend have exacerbated the membership/affiliation declines in the Jewish community. The two largest national synagogue umbrella organizations, the Union for Reform Judaism and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, have suffered significant drops in their respective membership rolls during that period.<sup>21</sup> Even more dramatic is the fact that donors to the Jewish Federation system in America—the central fundraising and allocation arm of the organized Jewish community—has dropped from 900,000 donors to 450,000 donors since 1985.<sup>22</sup> One recent study found that even as American Jewish philanthropy to Israel increased from \$1.05 billion in 1975 to \$2.06 billion in 2007, the share of that philanthropy that passed

through the centralized Federation system dropped from 79 percent to 16 percent.<sup>23</sup> All of this points to the fact that American Jews are voting with their feet and with their wallets in ways that signal the weakening of the central, national institutions that have been at the center of American Jewish life for more than a century.

This is not to suggest that Jews are no longer seeking each other out. It simply means that Jews are turning their backs on larger, mainstream organizations that are experienced as top-down institutions in an era when Jews want to do it themselves. Even as synagogues and Federations have

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experienced sizable declines, there has been significant growth in other sectors of American Jewish life. One such sector is independent *minyanim*, which are prayer groups that meet at least once per month, are not affiliated with national synagogue bodies, and have no paid clergy. The New York–based Mechon Hadar has taken the lead in organizing a national conference for independent *minyanim* since 2006, which has grown from eleven participating groups that year to forty-five in 2010. As Hadar has tracked and defined the phenomenon, they count more than one hundred such *minyanim* in the United States today, as compared with six in the year 2000. This does not count the many *minyanim* that

take place within synagogues throughout the country, attracting members of the synagogues who prefer a do-it-yourself prayer experience over the service led by the rabbi and cantor.<sup>24</sup>

It is clear that, as compared to independent *minyanim*, there are even more Jews involved in groups that gather with a Jewish focus other than prayer.<sup>25</sup> These would include Jewish book clubs, groups that gather periodically for Shabbat or holiday celebrations, and Jewish study groups that explore every Jewish topic imaginable. I am aware of many such

groups where the participants have dropped their synagogue membership because the self-run groups meet their needs just as well for a fraction of the cost. Ironically, the Internet, which has contributed to the decline of membership-based institutions, also makes it easier for informal networks of like-minded people to come together and access the resources necessary for running such a group. The fact that those resources are available for free makes it hard for synagogues or JCCs, whose dues run into the thousands of dollars, to compete. It doesn't take much for a volunteer to use the Internet to prepare to lead a group in a prayer, a book discussion, or a conversation about Jewish mysticism.<sup>26</sup>

In my 2000 book *Finding a Spiritual Home*, I profiled four synagogues, one from each denomination of American Judaism, that represent a new and more effective approach to engaging the next generation of Jews. I suggested that the factors the four synagogues had in common represent a new paradigm for the American synagogue called the synagogue-community, and I contrasted that new paradigm with the one that is still predominant in the American Jewish community—the synagogue-center. One of the key differences between the synagogue-center and the synagogue-community is that in the former, the clergy and staff are primarily responsible for the program of the institution. Members have a consumer relationship with their synagogues. They pay a fair market price for an array of programs and services that they want.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast, synagogue-communities realize that there is enormous creative talent and energy among the membership if only it were invited. Members still pay dues to the synagogue, but significant parts of the synagogue program are generated and led by laypeople. People of talent are drawn to such institutions because they thrive when they are provided with avenues to give back or provide leadership for a worthy endeavor. The synagogue-community requires rabbis to adopt a very different leadership style than they have been trained for. Rabbis must move from talk/control mode to listen/empower mode. In synagogue-communities the emphasis shifts from an obsession with membership (the number of members matters most) to ownership (Jews who see themselves on a journey toward more engaged Jewish living). Rabbis, who so often complain about congregants with little commitment to Jewish life, find that this

more empowered leadership style actually moves their congregations to precisely the kind of engaged Jewish life that the synagogue enterprise should be about.

While the universe of American synagogues has a long way to go to adopt this new paradigm, the principles underlying the approach have been central to the major synagogue change initiatives over the past twenty-five years. Those initiatives, which have affected dozens of synagogues and several hundred rabbis, have included Synagogue 2000 (now Synagogue 3000, or S3K), the Legacy Heritage Synagogue Innovation Project, and STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal). The seminaries that train rabbis and the national synagogue bodies were initially resistant to these change initiatives, but with declining rates of affiliation, all seem eager to rethink their approach. The Reform movement was recently put on the defensive when a loose confederation of large Reform congregations and their rabbis voiced their dissatisfaction with the direction of the denomination. The Conservative movement, experiencing dramatic declines in membership, undertook a major strategic plan in 2010 under newly appointed United Synagogue executive director Rabbi Steven Wer-nick. Among the recommendations of the Conservative movement's study was to put a greater emphasis on the communal dimension of synagogues (they use the Hebrew word *kehillot*) as well as on spirituality.

Synagogues that understand the generational shifts that are already in play and adapt their models accordingly will have the best chance to capture the energy and loyalties of younger Jews. But I think that there are also opportunities for initiatives that are not yet so well tested.

One area of dramatic growth is the Jewish food movement. An extension of the interest among Americans for healthier and more locally grown food, the Jewish phenomenon is also deeply spiritual in its approach, grounding its work in the Rabbinic teachings about proper stewardship of God's creation. The New York-based organization Hazon has both shaped this trend and capitalized on the interest. They started a national Jewish Food Conference in 2006 that had 150 attendees. In 2010 that conference, held in the San Francisco Bay Area, attracted 600 participants. Hazon has also seen dramatic growth in their network of Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs) based in synagogues and JCCs throughout

the United States. I believe that the next few decades will see the emergence of more and more environmentally focused co-ops based on locally grown food and sustainable living, which will attract people looking for small networks of like-minded neighbors committed to the same values and lifestyles. It is a trend that Jewish institutions would do well to embrace, because it could provide a new form for Jewish engagement.

Even less well developed right now but also a trend that Jewish institutions should explore is co-housing. The nascent co-housing movement develops properties in which families can share common living spaces and, depending on the specific community, common tasks like preparation of meals, child care, and the like. With a stagnant American economy, serious rethinking about the benefits of mortgaged-based home ownership, and the search for community that is the by-product of an over-techified, individualistic society, co-housing has significant potential. Jewish leaders who want to anticipate trends instead of playing catch-up may want to explore ways to seed Jewish co-housing communities.

### Lives of Sacred Purpose/*Kedushah*

**Proposition 4: In an age when we better understand the shortcomings of capitalism and the culture of consumerism, the Jewish community must offer a glimpse of *kedushah*, experiences that provide holiness, transcendent meaning, and a sense of purpose.**

One of the most wrongheaded assumptions of Jewish leaders over the past generation is that Jewish communal life is suffering because it costs too much money and it takes too much time. Don't get me wrong. Many Jews will use the costs associated with Jewish institutions (e.g., synagogue dues, Jewish day schools, expectations for charitable gifts by Jewish Federations and an array of Jewish organizations) as an excuse to disaffiliate or avoid affiliations altogether. It is also true that there is a small segment of the community that is truly unable to bear the high cost of Jewish living.

Yet the Jewish community is still among the most affluent groups in American society. Jews will pay enormous sums of money for the highest caliber theater/symphony subscriptions, second homes, spa/wellness getaways, personal coaches, trainers and therapists for themselves, and

private school education for their children. One study of more than a dozen (non-Jewish) spiritual retreat centers in America noted that many of the attendees were Jews.<sup>28</sup> The fact of the matter is, Jews will spend significant sums of money and find the time to access experiences that provide value for their lives.

Surely, Jewish institutions must provide the funds so that Jews who cannot afford dues or tuitions can fully participate in Jewish life. But, for the most part, the Jewish community has not had the self-confidence to bring to the marketplace programs of great quality that pass on the costs of providing those goods and services. Jewish schools are notoriously under-resourced, as are Jewish elder care facilities, JCCs, and synagogues.

In an age when we better understand the shortcomings of capitalism and the culture of consumerism, the Jewish community must offer a glimpse of *kedushah*, experiences that provide holiness, transcendent meaning, and a sense of purpose.

Each of these institutions relies on a small cadre of wealthy Jews to subsidize their respective programs and facilities via charitable contributions. The cadre of such philanthropic Jews is aging out and is not being replaced by younger Jews who possess the wealth or the commitment to Jewish life of the previous generation. It is a time bomb with serious consequences for the Jewish future.

The irony is that in the American marketplace, some of the services provided by the above-mentioned institutions are run as private businesses and

are enormously profitable. There is probably no issue that raises more concerns about the future of American Jewish life than the high rate of intermarriage. Millions of philanthropic dollars have been spent by Jewish organizations over the past few decades to increase the in-marriage rate among young Jews and/or to attract interfaith couples into Jewish communal programming. Yet the private company JDate may have had a more positive impact on increasing Jewish in-marriage than all of the Jewish organizational efforts combined.

Founded in 1997, JDate now has 750,000 users a year across the globe. Almost a third of them, almost a quarter of a million Jews, pay

thirty dollars per month for the premium service, over three times what one would pay for a non-Jewish dating site. In the United States alone, in any given year there are about 1.8 million single adult Jews and over 20 percent of them are active on JDate. There isn't any Jewish communal effort that comes close to this kind of market penetration. How did this happen? The founders of JDate set out to build a business. They identified a market—single Jews who wanted to meet other Jews—and then invested the money to make a Jewish dating service cool. JDate ads can be found in Times Square and on the London Tube. Not only does this effort not require any philanthropic dollars, but the company also currently makes thirty million dollars a year!<sup>29</sup> Two other entrepreneurs with impressive track records of business success in Washington D.C. have recently created a company called ShalomLearning, believing that they can deliver quality after-school Jewish education to children more effectively than the current after-school synagogue model, and they believe that they can make money doing it.<sup>30</sup>

Clearly not every Jewish communal challenge can be addressed through private business ventures. Yet the Jewish community needs to be far more nimble and creative to respond to the challenges it faces. Both elder care and pre-schools are areas that seem ripe to explore private solutions rather than continuing the current subsidized communal models. Where are the Jewish institutions that will take up the challenge of the capitalist marketplace to create programs of such quality that they will pay for themselves? Instead, the Jewish community creates a mentality of scarcity and subsidy, assuming that Jews will never pay a fair market price for their programs.

The most heralded program of the past decade in the Jewish world is a classic example. Earlier I cited the impressive achievements of Birthright Israel in sending hundreds of thousands of young Jews to Israel. Though some have criticized Birthright with not doing enough to engage alumni of the program after their return, overall studies indicate that there is a huge positive impact on the participants' connection to Israel and their Jewish identity. But then there is the law of unintended consequences. Even as Birthright programs generate significant increases in Jewish identity among its participants, might the largesse of the Jewish community in making the programs free come back to haunt us?

The long-term message of Birthright may be as serious a time bomb for the Jewish community as the aging of Jewish philanthropists. The

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next generation of Jews is learning by experience that someone else will pay them to “do Jewish.” Among the early casualties of Birthright was the array of programs that took Jewish teens to Israel. Families quickly figured out that it was foolish to pay \$3,000 to \$5,000 to send their teen to Israel on a summer program when they could get it for free in college. In addition, participation on an organized teen trip to Israel made that teen ineligible for the free Birthright trip, because the organization wanted to privilege the under-affiliated. Thus, despite its positive, short-term impact on participants,

Birthright both undermines other Israel trip programs that have viable, fee-for-service business models and creates a generation of Jews who are conditioned to put their hands out to Jewish institutions for subsidy and scholarships despite being more than capable of paying their fair share.

Some will argue that free trips are a good investment given the long-term, positive impact on the Jewish identity of participants. Yet there are dozens of great programs in the Jewish community that have been launched at highly subsidized rates due to the generosity of funders, only to disappear a few years later when the funders lose interest and move on to their next project. There is no question that the Jewish community benefits enormously from the fact that we are an affluent community and that not an insignificant number of those affluent Jews choose to give money to Jewish organizations and programs. Yet as the influence of Jewish family foundations grows and that of the Federation system wanes, the community suffers from a lack of centralized planning. Too many wonderful initiatives get launched without sustainable models, and the community is poorer for it.

Similar challenges face synagogues. Jews are among the most avid spiritual seekers in American society. Yet, for the most part, gen X and millennial Jews are turning their backs on synagogues as places to feed their spiritual hunger. About 70 percent of Jews affiliate with synagogues at some point in their lives. Typically, a family will join when their oldest child is ready to begin after-school religious education, and they will drop their membership after the Bar or Bat Mitzvah of their youngest child. During the time of their membership, few of the parents or children feel themselves touched or transformed by the experience of being part of a religious community. In interviews I did with dozens of young adults who were asked about their synagogue experiences, few recalled being engaged in discussions about God, life's purpose, or the possibility that Jewish worship, ritual, and study might give them a sense of the sacred. When many of these post-tribal Jews become adults and begin to ask questions about life's ultimate meaning, they have already concluded that such a spiritual search cannot be fulfilled by membership in synagogues, and they seek out spiritual alternatives beyond the Jewish community.<sup>31</sup>

A handful of rabbis and synagogues are beginning to address this spiritual hunger among Jewish seekers. The Institute for Jewish Spirituality (IJS) has programs that train rabbis in the practice of meditation and silent retreats. Since its founding in 2000, IJS has trained more than two hundred rabbis and close to one hundred cantors and Jewish educators. Jewish spiritual retreat centers like Isabella Freedman in Connecticut and Chochmat HaLev in the Bay Area attract Jews who might shun other forms of more conventional Jewish learning.

The fact that the past twenty-five years has seen the growth of new seminaries to train rabbis even as synagogue membership is shrinking is evidence of the fact that the well-established rabbinical seminaries may not be producing rabbis who understand the changing trends of the younger generation of Jews. These newer seminaries include the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (Philadelphia), the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies (Los Angeles), the Academy for Jewish Religion (one in New York and one in Los Angeles), Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (New York), the Rabbinical School at Hebrew College (Boston), and the Aleph Rabbinic Program (Philadelphia).

A comparison of the curricula of these schools with the more established seminaries shows a shift away from graduate-style academic rigor in favor of training that might better meet the spiritual needs of a changing marketplace and a changed market. The graduates of these alternative seminaries are also more inclined to think of ways to pursue the rabbinate beyond the realm of conventional congregations.

Yet there is both risk and reward inherent in this fact. Some rabbis of talent, with the right mentorship, a creative idea, and a little bit of good fortune, will create innovative models that will succeed in engaging next-generation Jews. Many more will fail. The majority of the graduates of American rabbinical seminaries will find employment in the synagogues and Jewish communal institutions that were established by the generations that preceded their ordination. They will enter those positions filled with idealism and passion for Jewish life. Yet, for the most part, they will be frustrated.

The constituency of those institutions is graying at an alarming rate, and it will telegraph to these freshly minted rabbis a bleak future. Even if they have the self-confidence not to take this fact as a signal of their personal failure, few will have the ability to see the forest for the trees. The institutions they serve are part of the larger established Jewish community that has not understood well enough the changes taking place in the American marketplace and in the American Jewish market (e.g., the tastes and predilections of the millennials). Until or unless the community “gets it,” it will squander the talents of the next generation of Jewish spiritual leaders, and no community can thrive unless it positions its leadership for success.

American society has caught the spiritual bug. Wherever they turn Americans can now find their spiritual interests indulged—yoga centers, organic diets, meditation training, personal gurus, ashrams, holistic healing centers, and dozens of organizations that sponsor multiday retreats with the latest big names in the field of spirituality. American Jews no longer need synagogues or rabbis to feed their spiritual hunger, and synagogue affiliation numbers are proof of that fact. Yet within Judaism is spiritual wisdom and spiritual practice that can compete more than favorably with what is available in the general American marketplace. And there is a growing cadre of rabbis and Jewish teachers who can deliver this

wisdom and practice. Yet this phenomenon is still happening only on the margins of the American Jewish community.

Have all Americans become seekers? Hardly. Similarly, not every American Jew wants to chant and meditate. Yet what I know to be true is that if you show Jews how Judaism can offer a glimpse of a life of sacred purpose, they will come in droves. The programs of most synagogues are not yet geared to do this in an effective way, and most rabbis, even when they have the interest, do not have the skill sets to re-engineer their institutions in ways that will challenge the status quo.

I once heard Rabbi Harold Schulweis (the longtime rabbi of Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California, and one of the most respected rabbis of his time) offer an observation that has stayed with me for more than thirty years. In many ways, it has shaped my own approach to the rabbinate. He said, “Most rabbis have answers to the questions that Jews no longer ask.” I did not take this to be a criticism of rabbinical schools. Most Jewish seminaries in the United States are engaged

in constant reassessment of their curricula, and they have the unenviable task of conveying a vast body of knowledge in five or six years. Rather, I took Schulweis to mean that the issues that differentiate good rabbis from great rabbis have little to do with the knowledge they have of Jewish tradition. It has to do with their ability to read the market (the Jews they want to reach) and the marketplace (the social context in which the Jews live). Rabbis who can do that will quickly understand that synagogues have to be radically transformed. They then need to have the ability to put out an alternate vision and the political savvy to implement that vision, bringing along the many lay stakeholders of the congregation.

Within Judaism is spiritual wisdom and spiritual practice that can compete more than favorably with what is available in the general American marketplace. And there is a growing cadre of rabbis and Jewish teachers who can deliver this wisdom and practice. Yet this phenomenon is still happening only on the margins of the American Jewish community.

The community needs to invest resources in postgraduate training for rabbis to give them the training and support not only to be effective spiritual leaders but also to become agents of institutional transformation. Compared with other fields in American society (e.g., teachers, doctors, lawyers), the American rabbinate is sorely lacking in the kind of practical professional training that is needed to give rabbis the tools to offer compelling models of Jewish engagement for Jews. It makes no sense for American synagogues to remain empty while American Jews spend millions of dollars to travel to generic spiritual retreat centers to feed their souls.

If the American Jewish community wants to capture the next generation of American Jews, it needs to get into the *kedushah* business—helping Jews live lives of sacred purpose.

## The Future

The Talmud says that since the end of the period of the biblical prophets, the business of predicting the future falls to fools. We are thus engaged here in a risky endeavor. Yet we are not entering into uncharted waters. Each of the trends outlined above and framed by a proposition that suggests a clear direction for the future already enjoys the benefits of some pioneering innovators and nascent institutions that are showing the way. Leaders of vision, often with limited resources and the skepticism of a community that is slow to change, are nevertheless charting the course for a vibrant Jewish future. The challenge, of course, is whether the major institutions of Jewish life and those that fund them will pick up on these trends fast enough to stem the tide of Jews who are voting with their feet in ways that threaten Jewish life and culture.

In the pages that follow you will meet some of these leaders. Each of them is working in a different sector of the Jewish community, and each of them is deeply engaged with efforts to advance the kind of changes that I have outlined above. Their perspectives help provide a fuller picture of the shape of the American Jewish future, because no one person can possibly be aware of all the challenges and opportunities that exist in a community as multifaceted as ours. Their responses to this lead essay also offer a healthy debate on the analysis that I have offered.

The good news is that each of the trends that I have outlined in this lead essay represents pockets of Jewish renaissance. They tell us that Jews are in fact seekers of wisdom (*dorshei chochmah*), seekers of social justice (*dorshei tzedek*), seekers of community (*dorshei kehillah*), and seekers of lives of sacred purpose (*dorshei kedushah*). A handful of rabbis and Jewish communal leaders are demonstrating that they understand the dynamic social trends that have already changed American society and the changing needs and interests of the next generation. Instead of focusing on what is wrong with Jewish life, they are reinventing it.

It is just such spiritual leaders who will help usher in a new and vibrant era of American Jewish life. They will redefine the terms of Jewish identity and the structures of the institutions that guide the Jewish community. Their success will determine how well an ancient Jewish heritage can navigate the dizzying social changes that are destined to characterize the twenty-first century.

