

Shabbat Shlach Lecha 5781

"The Survey Says..." - Key Takeaways From the Recent Pew Research Survey on Jewish Americans

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Shabbat Shalom!

Many TV game shows have lasted but a minute, but Family Feud outlives them all. This family competition show has been running almost continuously for about 50 years. Families compete by answering quiz-style questions, but the answers are based on surveys of Americans, paving the way for the iconic phrase, "the survey says...!"

In the frenzied rush to respond before their opponent, some contestants have answered the questions...a little too quickly. For example:

Name a yellow fruit: orange.

Name a kind of bear: papa.

Name something that follows the word 'pork': cue-pine

Name something you wash once a week: yourself.

Give a man's name that begins with the letter K: Kentucky Fried Chicken

The survey says those answers are quite entertaining. But surveys can also be serious.

This morning's Torah portion is located in the Book of Numbers, *Sefer Bamidbar*, which begins with a type of survey - a census. Hence the name "Book of *Numbers*." More verses are dedicated to the census of Israelite men over 20 than to the creation of the world in Genesis! It's that important. The *Pshat*, or simple explanation, for the census's placement here as the Jews begin their desert march, is that it's important to count soldiers before entering battle. But the Rabbis go deeper than that. The Midrash, quoted in the Etz Hayim Humash, compares G-d to a person who has a store of precious jewels. From time to time, this person takes out the jewels and counts them to take pleasure in their beauty and reassurance in their all being safe. This is why the Torah records a census at several points.

Today we continue to count the Jewish community - this time men and women, adults and children. Our purpose in the periodic Jewish community census is to align our community organizations' priorities with the data. In 2013, the Pew Research Center conducted a thorough survey of the Jewish community in America, both quantitative and qualitative. The results of this generated countless conversations and influenced what many nonprofits did and how they spent their dollars. Widely seen as authoritative, that

survey was a very big deal, and its follow-up survey that was just released a few weeks ago should equally be a big deal. As a technical point, the authors caution about making direct comparisons between the two because different methodologies were used. Today I want to share six headlines from this important new survey. My focus today is the general landscape. Maybe another time we can take a deep dive down one of these specific topics.

Let's begin with the big picture. JTA writer Ben Sales, also a friend who grew up nearby, summarized: "The American Jewish community is growing and increasingly diverse. It is largely educated, affluent and leans Democratic [except the Orthodox]. Most of its young people are marrying non-Jews, though many of those families are still raising their kids Jewish. Orthodox Jewry is growing and the Conservative movement is shrinking."

Here are some key takeaways from his analysis and a Pew summary:

First, **there are now 7.5 million American Jews**. We're about 2.5% of the population, and we've grown by almost 1 million since 2013. That's great news! The more of us the better. America has reclaimed the lead from Israel as home to the most Jews. About 3/4 of the adults identify their *religion* as Jewish, while the rest are what Pew calls "Jews of no religion." That is, they identify as Jewish by their people, not their faith. I feel strongly that being Jewish should be about *both*. Rabbis, teachers, and synagogues have work to do here.

Which brings us to our second point: **U.S. Jews are less religious than American adults overall**. About 12% of Jewish Americans say they attend religious services at least weekly, while 27% of US adults do so. US Jews are also half as likely as the American public to say religion is "very important" to them - 21% vs. 41%. I wish this number were much higher because Judaism shines so much light. The lower numbers reflect a general trend where many faiths are seeing less attendance in their houses of worship. This is interesting because so many people, Jews and non-Jews, are searching for meaning, connection, spirituality, and community, which is exactly what religion can deliver.

Which leads us to our third point: **Most young Jews are either Orthodox or unaffiliated**. Sales writes: "The future of American Jewry appears to be one of polarization. The numbers of Orthodox and unaffiliated Jews are growing. The Conservative and Reform movements, which once claimed the bulk of the American Jewish community, are shrinking. Overall, the raw percentages belonging to each denomination haven't changed much since 2013. But religious affiliation by age shows a

changing community. Among Jews aged 65 and older, 69% are either Conservative or Reform. But among adults under 30, 37% are Conservative and Reform. [The Orthodox go from 3% to 17%.] Just 8% of those young adults are Conservative. And 41% of Jews under 30 are unaffiliated, compared to 22% over 65.” For many young people, it seems to be all or nothing. As Conservative Jews who occupy the middle position, we have to work harder to make our case. I won’t go deeper into this because today we’re looking at the overall American Jewish community, not just our movement. I will just say that I am a Conservative Jew because of principles, not polls.

Our fourth headline: **Some 15% of young Jewish adults are not white.** The survey aimed to measure the racial and ethnic diversity of American Jewry. It shows that while 92% of the Jewish community identifies primarily as non-Hispanic white, young adults are significantly more diverse, with 15% not identifying like this. The American Jewish community will look more like the Israeli Jewish community, with Jews of all skin colors. I think this shift is only positive, and we all have a role to play in embracing this shift and actively making all Jews of color feel welcome at Beth El. I am very proud that our Love Your Neighbor Committee initiated a 4-part class on racial consciousness, meeting now with 33 participants!

Here’s our fifth takeaway: **Most Jews have experienced antisemitism in the past year.** It’s sad but unsurprising that Jews see antisemitism rising annually and feel less safe than they used to. A full 51% have experienced this personally in some way this past year alone. And that doesn’t even include the awful fallout from Israel’s battles with Hamas just last month. Now attacks against Jews seem to be more brazen and out in the open, looking at incidents on the coasts and in Chicago. It’s really scary. On the other hand, it was reassuring to see last week’s virtual rally, A Day of Action Against Antisemitism, feature not just Jewish leaders but top American political leaders and other faith leaders too. We need *everybody* on our side because this urgent crisis is not just a Jewish problem but a global one.

And for our final point: **Most Jews say Israel is essential, but dissenting voices are on the rise.** To quote the Pew recap: “The results provide fodder for Israel’s advocates as well as its critics. On one hand, more than 80% of Jews say that caring about Israel is an important or essential part of being Jewish. Nearly half of American Jews have been to Israel, and a quarter have been there more than once. But the survey also found that the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel, or BDS, has made inroads into the American Jewish community. One in 10 American Jews — and a slightly higher proportion of young adults — said they either ‘strongly support’ or ‘somewhat support’ the BDS movement.’ I urge you to read Rabbi Schwab’s terrific reflection on Israel in last Thursday’s email. All Zionists have work to

do to engage today's Jews- particularly young Jews- with the Israel we know and love. Israel's imperfections do not make me love it any less, just like I love America, which is far from perfect too.

There are many more big topics raised by the survey, but as many game shows quip, "I'm sorry but we're just out of time!" You can read the report yourself online.

In a way, the report's wide-ranging practices reminds me of Tefillin, the black boxes I wear on my arm and head each non-Shabbat and holiday for morning prayers. A quick review: There are four passages in the Torah that describe this Mitzvah. These verses are written on four individual parchments which are placed in four individual compartments on our *Tefillin Shel Rosh*, head Tefillin. On the other side is the *Tefillin Shel Yad*, the arm Tefillin. While it too is a black box, this one on the arm contains all four passages written on a *single* parchment and placed in *one* compartment.

The takeaway is clear: We Jews are a people that believes in different approaches, opinions, understandings about G-d, Torah, what to put on latkes, and everything else. That's why the *head* box is divided. But when it comes to taking action, there are moments when we Jews must respond as one. Hence the *arm* box without division. This is a beautiful idea, but it does not always map out perfectly with the lived reality of Jewish Americans today, as the survey says. That's challenging for me.

The American Jewish community is one in motion. Remember that we care not just about bodies but about *Neshamas*, souls. And each individual soul is an entire world, teaches the Talmud. Today we glanced at the forest, but let's also refocus on the single tree. Each one of us can be a *Dugma*, a Jewish role model, for other Jews - children and adults. Each one of us can model a life of invigorating Jewish communal involvement, meaningful rituals, and a personal relationship with Israel. If we can each influence one person Jewishly, that will make a profound difference in their life. As the author Edward Everett Hale wrote, "I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do."

Shabbat Shalom!