

The Pew Study - Good news about Chabad

The 2020 Pew study about Judaism in America was just released. When I first read it, I was quite happy; it declared that 7.5 million Jews live in the United States. The last Pew study, in 2013, said that there were only 6.7 million Jews. Clearly, the Jewish community grew by leaps and bounds!

In my imagination, I saw thousands of new Jews joining synagogues, supporting Israel, dancing on Simchat Torah, and so forth, but then, when I continued reading, I realized that something didn't add up.

In their section about mixed marriages, the study revealed that in the past ten years, 61% of American Jews married a non-Jewish spouse. In the previous decade, from 2000 to 2010, only 45% married non Jewish spouses. Additionally, the birth rate in the Jewish community has shrunk even more than the American average.

So how is it that in seven years, the Jewish community of the United States hasn't shrunk but has actually grown by 800,000 Jews? The past seven years haven't seen a major immigration from Russia or any other country. Something was wrong here.

As always, the secret is in a small print. The true question here is, how do we define who is a Jew? This time, Pew decided that anyone who identifies as a Jew will be counted as such. There is no need to have a Jewish mother or even Jewish parent, or even

Jewish grandparents. Not even a Jewish spouse. As long as you feel Jewish, you are qualified to be included in the Pew study. There is no surprise that the numbers grew...

Finding Meaning

One of the questions in the study was, “What gives you meaning? How do you feel fulfilled?”

People were given several options to respond. The most popular response was, “Spending time with family and friends.” 43% responded that spending time with their pets gives them meaning and fulfillment. Only 20% responded that an active involvement in Judaism gives them that same feeling.

Jewish humor:

In response to the question, “What is more important as part of your Jewish identity,” 34% chose a sense of humor, and only 14% chose the option of observing mitzvot.

Marriage and politics:

More than half of Jewish Americans do not care if their grandchildren will marry Jewish. The vast majority responded that it is more important to them that their grandchildren retain their same political opinions.

Judaism and the Synagogue:

Only 12% of Jews attend synagogue on a weekly basis, in comparison to the non-Jewish population of the United States in which 27% of the population attend religious services. Only 20% of American Jews say that religion is important to them, while

41% of the general population say that religion is important to them.

Birthrate:

20% of American Jewish woman from age 40 to 60 do not have children. In the general population, only 10% of the same bracket don't have children. 55% of Jewish women from age 18 to 40 don't have children, in comparison to 44% of the general population.

However, there is some good news as well:

Chabad:

1 in 5 American Jews said that they participate in Chabad activities. The respondents were from all walks of life, reform, conservative, as well as the unaffiliated — they all responded that they participate in services and events at their local Chabad centers on a regular basis.

What's the Message?

Why am I sharing all of this with you? To depress you?

The first answer is, yes. Why should I carry the yoke myself? The wisest man, King Solomon, says that when a person has worry in his heart, he should share it with others. But there's a better reason.

Let me share with you the following story.

In the 1970s, in a Jerusalem neighborhood called Neve Yaakov, there was an old and decrepit women's Mikvah. Needless to

say, it was rarely used. One ambitious fellow made a campaign to build a new mikvah, garnering the support of the authorities, and he built a beautiful new facility.

A week after the new opening, the Mikvah lady knocked on the door of the chief rabbi of Jerusalem, Rabbi Betzalel Jolti. “Why did you build this new facility,” she asked. “Over the entire week, not a single woman has come to use it. All the effort was a waste!”

The rabbi walked out of his office in the chief rabbinate and entered the office of the Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, and shared what he had just heard from the mikvah lady.

Rabbi Yosef asked him, “What do you want from me?”

“Let’s go together,” Rabbi Jolti responded, “from door to door, and encourage the local women to use the mikvah.”

“It is inappropriate,” Rabbi Yosef protested, “for male rabbis to talk to women about these matters. I’m embarrassed to do that. Why don’t our wives go?”

Rabbi Jolty insisted that only they would have the necessary impact, and ultimately, Rabbi Yosef agreed.

The local religious council made phone calls to all the families in the neighborhood, informing them that the chief rabbi of Israel and the chief rabbi of Jerusalem would be visiting them. And these two dignified rabbis actually went door to door talking to women about the importance of family purity. They were very

well received. They sat in each living room and explained that going to the Mikvah brings blessings to the entire family. Children are more refined; they are more healthy, physically and spiritually.

Some women had never seen a mikvah before, but their response was shocking. Many of them turned to the rabbis and said, Honorable Rabbis, I promise you that I will go to the Mikvah.

On the first day, they visited 30—40 families. On the next day they visited another 30. A week or two later, the same Mikvah lady knocked on their door again. 50 woman had already used the facility. Obviously, people felt that if the chief rabbis themselves went from door to door to encourage its use, it was a very important mitzvah.

Today we celebrate the holiday of Shavuot, when we received the Torah from G-d. Over 3300 years ago, when we stood at the foot of Mount Sinai, we became responsible for each other. Every Jew is no longer responsible for himself alone, rather, he has a responsibility to care for every other Jew. This is true from a physical standpoint — when Jews are suffering in Israel, we need to see what we could do to care for them. But moreover, this is true from a spiritual standpoint. Each one of us has the responsibility to reach out to other Jews, to inspire them and to awaken the true spark within them. You can give another Jew a mezuzah as a gift; you can give them a Shabbat candlestick to encourage them to light Shabbat candles. You can convince parents to send a child to Jewish preschool or invite them for a Shabbat dinner.

Never tell yourself, “Who am I and what impact can I have?” As the Rebbe would always say, “The Jewish heart is always awake.” Every person is searching for his connection to Judaism; we just need to inspire him.

With G-d’s help, the next Pew Research will come back with much better results. Instead of only 20% at Chabad, we will see much more!