

WHAT INTERFAITH FAMILIES BRING TO OUR CONGREGATION

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Last month, the Pew Research Center's Religion and Public Life Project – a non-profit held in high regard by scholars and laypeople alike -- released a document entitled, A Portrait of Jewish Americans. It was the first major study of the American Jewish population in more than a decade and the first reliable survey in almost 25 years.

Let me tell you: it was the biggest thing to hit the American Jewish community in many years. In its wake came follow-up articles in the secular and Jewish press and constant discussion and often consternation among American Jewish leaders. So what is this report and what makes it so important?

For the Pew Center, what was most significant was the increase in the proportion of the population that describes itself as “atheist, agnostic

or having no particular religion” especially among younger Jews. The study found that some 22% -- almost one-quarter of American Jews – claim to have “no religion.” Do you hear? One-quarter of those who describe themselves as Jews say that have “no religion.”

But this wasn’t the only finding from the report that was so striking.

What it also found was:

*a soaring rate of intermarriage with more than half of current marriages (some 58%) involving a Jew and a non-Jew; and that figure goes up over 70% if you remove the Orthodox population from the numbers!

It found:

*ever-diminishing numbers affiliated with specific congregations and denominations, with the Conservative movement suffering truly

shattering losses over the last years to the point where the very survival of the movement is called into question.

It found:

*a very high birth rate in Orthodox Jewish families, coupled with a very low rate of replenishment in non-Orthodox families suggesting that, at current rates, the Orthodox will soon outnumber the non-Orthodox in this country.

It found:

*a thinning of Jewish knowledge, practice and belief to the point where most Jews in this survey say the most essential element in Jewish identity is “a good sense of humor,” –not study, not prayer, not practice but “a good sense of humor” -- and where a majority of Jews “without religion” admit to having a Christmas tree in the house

These are only a few of the startling conclusions from the report, most of which seem to bode ill for Judaism and Jewish life in America in the coming years.

Still, with all this, there is something here that has mostly been ignored, something we ought not to miss, something that I believe comprises a challenge and a promise of hope for our Jewish future.

Because, with all the bad news, this survey also reveals a significant increase in the total number of Jews in America over the last years, with a rise in the American Jewish population from about 5.5 million in 2000 to approximately 6.7 million today. That's a gain of about one and a quarter million Jews, an increase of over 20%. That's huge and totally unexpected. How did it happen?

Partially it's in the more expansive definition of who is a Jew employed by the study. Included in this 6.7 million figure are those who do not meet the Jewish legal definition of 'who is a Jew,' a person born of a Jewish mother or formally converted to Judaism. A great many are children of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother who consider themselves Jewish, in other words, an intermarried family.

So, in answer to the question: where did all these 'extra' Jews come from, the answer, in large measure, seems to be: from a surprisingly high percentage of Jews from families where parents intermarried in the 70's and 80's who are now adults and who identify chiefly or at least partly as Jews. I think this is ASTOUNDING.

Because, for so long, you see, we assumed that that the great numbers of those being raised in mixed homes were unlikely to identify as Jews. Most of us assumed that there was such stigma attached to being Jewish that, if they had a choice to be Christian or Jewish, they would

not choose Judaism. This survey calls all that into doubt. In fact, what it shows is a trend of young adults raised in non-Jewish or partly Jewish households opting in to Jewish life.

That is not only amazing in and of itself, but it ought to make us completely revise our thinking about the place of intermarried families in Jewish life. It ought to make us reach out to them and draw them into the Jewish community in a wholehearted, genuine and enthusiastic way – because we can do so much for them and they can do so much for us and, it appears, they are just waiting to be asked.

Which brings us to our own congregation, to Shir Ami. This congregation – like most liberal congregations -- has a significant and growing population of families in which parents are intermarried. From the first years of our existence, we made it a priority to reach out to these families, to invite them to be part of our congregational life. We preached a message of inclusion, of welcome and respect and in the

last few years, with the change of this rabbi's policy on officiating at interfaith weddings, I believe our message has been heard, understood and believed more than ever before. And the proof is in the greater numbers and greater participation of interfaith families in this congregation.

What has this brought?

First, I believe it has caused fundamental changes in the lives of these individuals and families. We've provided them an entrée into Jewish life. We've woven them into the fabric of the Jewish community.

We've helped them feel at home with Jewish worship, study and tikkun olam. We've stood by their side as they observed key life cycle moments – brit and babynaming, bar and bat mitzvah, weddings and, yes, funerals. To me it's clear: this congregation – with its sincere welcome of interfaith families – has brought great richness into the lives of so many.

But there is a flip side to this coin. And that is that these same interfaith families have brought so much to our congregational community. They've brought a richness of background, customs, insights and experiences. They've raised the level of tolerance, mutual respect and open-mindedness among us. They've reminded us that there are many paths to God and truth and that we would be wise to be open to them all. They've brought us a degree of enthusiasm and excitement about Jewish traditions and teachings that many of us born Jews take for granted. And they've brought us their children, many of whom have grown up to active, knowledgeable, committed Jewish lives, children who would have been lost to us had we not kept our doors open to them and their families.

My friends, the contributions of interfaith families to this congregation are many, significant and real and they are expanding all the time. They have enriched us, broadened us, shaped us, elevated us and taught us.

That is the essential message of this evening when over 50 congregations throughout the Philadelphia area celebrate Interfaith Family Shabbat. That is what we celebrate tonight. Tonight I want to thank God for these wonderful families. I, for one, appreciate the special blessings they have brought us in the past and I pray they may continue to do so for many, many years to come.

AMEN