

## Creating Our Jewish Future

When I was younger, one of my favorite movies was Back to the Future, and the sequel Back to the Future 2 when the character travelled forward in time to try to repair some of the brokenness in their lives. I definitely thought the Delorean was cool, and while I figured that time travel was not likely to be in my future, I do remember wondering if we would ever communicate using voice activated technology or be able to make phone calls where we could see each other, and of course I definitely wanted to get around town in a hoverboard! As a young teen watching the movie, the year 2015 (which was only 26 years away at the time the movie was released) felt lightyears away.

By the time we hit the real 2015, it was clear that some of the movie's predictions did indeed come true -- thank you facetime and zoom -- and others are still yet to be reality. Of course, that is not surprising, because predicting the future is tricky business. That is true in general, and it is certainly true when it comes to our Jewish future.

The Talmud<sup>1</sup> has its own Back to the Future trip, without a Delorean or video calling, but with Moshe getting a glimpse into life long after his own time. In this story, we find Moses ascending to heaven before the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. Standing next to God, he sees that God is preparing the Torah with all sorts of crowns and decorations over some of the letters. When Moses asks what God is doing, God replies that in the future, there will be a man named Akiva who will derive law after law from these very crowns. Immediately Moses is transported through time to Rabbi Akiva's classroom where he has no idea what was being taught. When a student asks Rabbi Akiva how he knows the particular point he is teaching, Akiva replies: Because it was the law given to us at Mount Sinai directly from God and Moshe!

God, being God, added the crowns to those letters because God knew the future. And then God gave Moses a glimpse into the long-term impact these actions would have. Obviously we cannot ourselves predict the future clearly, and we are unlikely to see the ways the letters we write today are interpreted by those in future generations. But while we cannot know exactly what the future will hold, we can work towards a future that we hope to create.

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<sup>1</sup> Menachot 29b

There is another story you may know from the Talmud that involves future planning by someone who was far less certain. Honi HaM'aagel, Honi the Circle Drawer, was walking along the road when he came across a certain individual planting a carob tree. Honi said to the person: "How many years will it take for this tree to bear fruit?" The planter responded: "It will not bear fruit for another seventy years." Honi responded: "Do you think that you will still be alive in seventy years? How do you think that you will gain any benefit at all from this tree?!" To which the planter replied: "Just as I found a world full of carob trees that my ancestors planted for me, so too do I plant these trees for my descendants."

In other words, while the story of Moses and Akiva teaches us that we cannot always predict the impact our actions today will have on the future, the story of the man planting the carob tree reminds us that we CAN plan for the future, we CAN plant seeds now that will influence and shape the future.

**The question, as we begin this New Year together is this: What seeds do we want to plant?** Exactly what the future of Judaism and the Jewish people in America will look

like is far from clear. But each one of us here today has the ability to plant, for ourselves, for our people, and for our future. Each one of us here today has been given the gift of the freedom to be Jewish in this country, by previous generations, who worked hard to give us so very much. **What are we doing with that gift?** How are we spending that capitol, how are we using our precious time? **How, if at all, are we investing in our community, our individual and communal spiritual health, and in the future we hope to see for the next generation?**

In 2020, the Pew Research Center conducted an updated study of Jewish Americans that can serve as an important tool for us to understand our Jewish present, and to consider how our choices today will shape the Jewish future.<sup>2</sup>

Here are some exciting, or if not exciting at least interesting, things found by this study:

- **The American Jewish community is growing.** There are 7.5 million Jews in America, up from 6.7 million in 2013, and more than the entire Jewish population

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/05/11/10-key-findings-about-jewish-americans/> and <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/reflections-on-the-2020-pew-study> by Steven Windmueller

of Israel.

- **The American Jewish community is increasingly diverse.** Nine in 10 Jewish American adults identify as “non-Hispanic White,” and about 8% identify with other racial categories. But among young Jewish adults aged 18 to 29, that percentage almost doubles: around 15% identify a race or ethnicity other than White. And, while the overwhelming majority of American Jewish adults identify as Ashkenazi, among those under 30, 28% do not.
- **The American Jewish community remains largely educated and affluent.**
- Virtually all couples made up of two Jewish spouses are raising Jewish children, and more than two-thirds of children with one Jewish parent and one non-Jewish parent are being raised with some Jewish identity.
- More than 80% of American Jews say that caring about Israel is an important or essential part of being Jewish. Nearly half of American Jewish adults have been to Israel, and a quarter have been there more than once.

- 85% of American Jews say they feel a great deal or some sense of belonging to the Jewish people. And eight-in-ten say they feel at least some responsibility to help Jews in need around the world.

But of course the survey found some complicated and challenging things as well:

- **About 4 - in - 10 married Jews have a non-Jewish spouse, but there has been a clear shift in the past 40 years.** 18% of Jewish adults who got married before 1980 have a non-Jewish spouse, compared to 61% of Jewish adults who got married since 2010.
- In terms of denominational affiliation: among Jews aged 65 and older, 25% are Conservative, 44% are Reform, while just 3% are Orthodox. But among adults 18-29, the percentage of Conservative and Reform affiliated Jews are much smaller, while the percentage of Orthodox Jews goes up. Of Jewish young adults, just 8% identify as Conservative, 29% identify as Reform, and 17% are Orthodox. And, whereas 22% of adults over 65 consider themselves “unaffiliated,” the percentage jumps to 41% when looking at Adult Jews under the age of 30. **I know this is a lot of numbers, but the bottom line is: Reform and Conservative Judaism are shrinking, there is a rise in Orthodox affiliation**

among young Jews, and the biggest jump is in people who just don't affiliate with any movement or denomination at all.

- **71% of Jewish adults are Democrats or independents who lean toward the Democratic party.** But among Orthodox Jews, three-quarters say they are Republican or lean that way, up from 57% in 2013. And across all age groups, respondents said it was more important that their grandchildren share their political convictions than that they have a Jewish partner.
- For Jews under 30, only one in three felt support of Israel was essential, and one in four said that Israel is “not important to what being Jewish means to them.” Additionally, among younger Jews, nearly 40% of Jews feel that US policy is “too supportive of Israel.
- **More than three-quarters of Jewish adults say remembering the Holocaust is essential to being Jewish.** Although among the adults under 30 the numbers drop, and only 61% regard this as essential.
- **Most Jews have experienced recent anti-Semitism.** The survey found that, in the year before the survey was taken, 51% of Jews had experienced some type of

anti-Semitism, ranging from seeing anti-Jewish graffiti, being harassed online, to being physically attacked. Most Jewish adults believe that anti-Semitism in America has increased in recent years, and 53% say that, as a Jewish person in the US, they feel personally less safe than they did five years ago. It is, however, interesting to note that this feeling has not seemed to have much of an impact on people's lives, as only 5% have chosen not to take part in a Jewish observance or event out of concern for their safety.

- While over fifty percent of Jews say that working for justice and equality, being intellectually curious, and maintaining family ties define their Jewish identity, only 15% of adult Jews consider observing Jewish law or engaging in traditional Jewish practices as essential to being Jewish.
- And finally, some statistics that are particularly relevant to us as a synagogue and a congregation:
  - American Jews are less religiously observant than American adults overall. Just 12% of Jewish Americans say they attend religious services at least once per week, compared with 27% of American adults overall who say they attend religious services at least once a week.



- And only 33% of Jewish American adults see being part of a Jewish community as essential.

OK, so I know that is a lot of numbers and statistics (and I'm happy to share the written version and links to the original study with anyone who is interested after the holiday). Some of these numbers may be surprising, and others are probably quite predictable. It's not all good, it's not all bad, and some information collected may even just see as not so important.

But back to the conversation about the future -- it's good to understand who we are as American Jews are today, but what does all of this mean for the future of the American Jewish community?

A few takeaways:

- It is clear that the massive institutional growth of the American Jewish community in the 50's, 60's, and 70's has not retained its importance for a younger generation of Jews. Synagogues, JCC's and Federations are generally all seeing a decline in participation. Day schools are shrinking, although Jewish

summer camps are on an upswing.

- Affiliation is shrinking, intermarriage rates continue to rise, and only the Orthodox community seems to be growing and getting stronger, especially among young Jews.
- American Jews have become more diverse, most claim to be deeply spiritual but not ritually observant, the fear of anti-Semitism is high, and the connection to Israel is low.

So, what is going to happen to the American Jewish community? *Lo Navi ani v'lo ben*

*Navi*. I am not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet. So, sorry to disappoint, but I will not make any predictions.

The one thing that I do know for certain is that this is not just about facts and figures, statistics and percentages. This is your story, and it is my story. This is our heritage, our people, our Torah, and our future to continue writing.

I have often shared Elie Weisel's story of what the great rabbi known as the Baal Shem Tov did when he was facing a challenging situation. He would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire, and meditate in prayer. And then he was able to tackle the challenge.

A generation later, the Magid of Mazrich was faced with a similar challenge. So he went to the same place in the woods, but he didn't remember exactly how to light the fire as the Baal Shem Tov had done. He exclaimed to God: "Ribono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe, I can no longer light the fire, but I can still speak the prayers." And so he prayed as the Baal Shem Tov had done, and he was able to handle the challenge upon his return.

Another generation later, Rabbi Moshe Lev once again found himself and his community confronting the same type of challenge. He too went into the woods, but by this time he had not only forgotten how to light the fire, he had forgotten the prayers as well. He cried out, "Ribono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe, I can no longer light the fire, nor do I know the secret meditations belonging to the prayer. But I do know my way to this place in the woods, and that must be sufficient." And it was.

Finally, when another generation had passed, Rabbi Israel Salanter was called upon to handle the same challenge. He sat down in his home and said: "I cannot light the fire. I

do not know the words of the prayers. And I no longer know the place in the forest. But I can tell the story of how it was done, and that must be sufficient.” And it was.<sup>3</sup>

As someone who believes in the power and importance of telling our stories, I love the way this tale shows how a story can be passed on and can hold so much value and meaning, even if it has been changed or lost some details along the way. But I struggle with the conclusion that knowing the story is sufficient.

Knowing the history of our people is not sufficient. Remembering the Judaism of your parents or grandparents is not enough. Reminiscing about Shabbat dinners, Passover seders, High Holiday services, or trips to Israel from years past only take us so far. It’s critical that we pass along our history, our experiences, and our memories, but we must also see ourselves as an important link in the chain. We must place ourselves inside the story, by choosing to live Jewish lives, to engage with Jewish community, and to care for the Jewish people of today and tomorrow, not just of the past.

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<sup>3</sup> Wiesel, , The Gates of the Forest

There is so much of life and the world that is beyond our control. But when it comes to our Jewish lives, when it comes to our Jewish community, when it comes to the future of the Jewish people, the power is, quite literally, in our hands. We have the ability, the opportunity, and frankly the responsibility borne of the position of comfort and privilege we hold as American Jews in the 21st century, to create the Jewish future that we wish to see.

It is often said that much of life is about showing up. As we start a new year together, I would ask you to consider the following: How are you showing up? Not just literally how are you showing up, in synagogue, in places of Jewish learning, in moments of Jewish observance. But how are you showing up for your Jewish self and for the Jewish future?

Why share all of this with you on Rosh Hashanah? For that we turn to Rabbi Kalonymous Kalmish Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, who wrote on Rosh Hashanah in 1941:

The time for teshuvah, repentance, is Rosh Hashanah, the time of the creation of the world, because repentance – the essence of which is committing to worship God from now on – is also a form of creating.<sup>4</sup>

On Rosh Hashanah we return. We return to ourselves, to who we have always been, and to who we have yet to become. We return to the synagogue. We return to our Jewish roots. We return home. We return to a fresh start, to an opportunity to begin and to create again.

What do you want your Jewish life to look like and, just like the planter of the carob trees, what do you want the Jewish future to be. *And what are you doing to make any of it happen?*

Because one thing is for certain- change does not happen unless *we work* to make a change. Growth does not happen, unless *we work* to foster growth. While we cannot control every aspect of the future, we hold within us the power to move in a particular direction and to act in a way that will help create the future you want to see.

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<sup>4</sup> Wilkins, Rosh Hashanah Readings, 5-6

As your rabbi, I am kind of like your training partner for the Peloton (or whatever is your exercise of choice). I can't do the work for you, but I am happy to ride alongside you, to guide you, to challenge you, to help your soul grow stronger, and to support you as you journey home, to your authentic Jewish self.

Ask yourself: Am I able to say "Hineni," here I am, ready to show up for myself, for the Jewish people, and for the Jewish future? Your spiritual life today can ground you, give you strong roots, and serve as an *etz hayim*, a tree of life for you to hold onto in this beautiful but also confusing and frightening world. If we are committed and intentional, the seeds we plant and the roots we establish will bear fruit for those who follow, and will sustain and bring joy and meaning to our children, and their children.

But this will only happen if we tend to the roots that are already planted, and choose to sow new seeds every day and every new year. There is no guarantee when it comes to the future of our families, our community, or the Jewish people. But the present is ours to define, and will have a lasting impact on those who follow. Are we willing to do what it takes?

L'Shanah Tovah.