Jews in the Pew: Why Organized Jewry Should Finally Start to Accentuate the Positive

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by George Wielechowski

If you’ve been listening carefully in recent weeks, you may have heard hands wringing and teeth gnashing among the American Jewish cognoscenti. When the Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project released *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, the first survey in a decade about American Jews and their relationship to Jewish identity, the reaction was, well, eerily familiar – and disappointingly short sighted.

American Jewish leaders quoted in major national papers bemoaned the survey’s “depressing outlook for the future of any continuation of Jewish affiliation outside of Orthodoxy,” and characterized it as “a very grim portrait of the health of the American Jewish population in terms of their Jewish identification.”

Besides sounding like a Greek-chorus reprise of the organized Jewish world’s completely ineffectual reaction to assimilation over the last 60 years, these and many other comments featured in national media coverage on this issue focus solely on the continuity of Jewish religion and completely ignore the growing pride in Jewish peoplehood. This study has effectively and officially introduced the New American Jew who stands at the door of the institutionalized Jewish world. It’s about time, and I should know. I’m a proud New American Jew. I’m knocking on the door. And I am not a threat to the survival of Jewish religion and culture in America.

I grew up in suburban Baltimore as a good, first-generation Latino American kid (and a very Christian one, thanks to my Guatemalan mother). Went to church every Sunday; ate a lot of tortillas. And then my hard-working single mom saved enough money to move our family from government-subsidized housing into our first single home – in a majority-Jewish neighborhood. Now, more than 20 years later, I am a convert to Judaism who is four semesters shy of becoming a rabbi. I speak fluent Spanish and mostly-fluent Hebrew. And I’m not afraid to say that I’m one of the many Jewish agnostics in the world. That even as a rabbinical student, I often struggle to connect to Jewish “religious life” but feel very much at home in the polity of Jewish peoplehood. As a New American Jew, I express my Judaism most strongly through my passion for Jewish history, art,
literature, music and intellectual pursuits, and through a firm Jewish connection to social justice.

And as a future rabbi, I think the Pew study is the best news yet. The way I read it, Jews are not only proud to be Jewish; they’ve organically expanded on what it means to be Jewish. Today the American Jew expresses identity through culture, ethnic origin, social values, civic participation and, yes, religious observance – as well as through the behaviors associated with all of these. This hybrid identity is becoming the face of the 21st-century American Jew.

There is a place where the “Jew without religion” is already flourishing while facing similar challenges from those who insist on seeing “religious” Jews as somehow more valuable to continuity.

That secularist holy land is Israel, of course.

My family and I lived in Tel Aviv this past summer. And let me tell you, if you want to know what American Jews will look like in the next 50 years, look no further than Tel Aviv. There you’ll find the kibbutznik who has brought his neo-socialist culture and work ethic to the chic, beachfront city. You’ll find the Jew who expresses her proud MOT (member of the tribe) identity through her artistic and literary passions. You’ll also find the non-religious, yet loud-and-proud Jew who sees his sunset yoga class as a Jewish spiritual practice. And then there’s the modern Israeli rabbi who teaches her constituents in cafes and virtual classrooms. All of these represent the new, self-reconstructed Jew.

It’s easy for traditionalists to write off the quality and depth of the new Jew’s engagement based on how often he attends services, whether he belongs to a synagogue, and who he marries – or doesn’t marry. But it’s hard work – and, I would argue, authentically Jewish work – to see opportunity where everyone else sees doom. It’s characteristically Jewish to reject fear when facing an unclear future, and to embrace with love, support and, most important, acceptance all those who wish to enter our tent.

Our forefathers and foremothers were famous for their tents that were open on all sides. Perhaps it’s finally time for the American Jewish juggernaut to rethink the closed-entry mentality.

Because if our doors aren’t open to the many faces of the New American Jew, these Pew stats warn us, we can bet this population will close the door on Judaism writ large. And if that happens, then we will face a doomsday that Jews in America won’t recover from.

We’ve long measured who’s in and who’s out by how much they pray and practice, by how much they seem Jewish because they came through the right synagogue door, at the right time on the Jewish calendar.

My advice to the worry-weary Jewish world: Why not develop more and different paths to fully welcome New American Jews into our polity?

At the very least, more open doors might mean more people walking through them.

George Wielechowski is in his fifth year of study at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in the Philadelphia area. He is director of communications at the Institute for Christian & Jewish Studies in Baltimore.