

The American Jewish Identity Survey

I am neither a sociologist nor a demographer, and so cannot adequately evaluate the new and profoundly saddening survey. I will leave it to those who deal with such matters to offer their criticism.

But whether or not the figures are correct or incorrect, the general trend of the Past years makes the conclusion inevitable: the majority of the Jewish people in this country are abandoning their faith and their folk in alarming numbers.

I regard it as tragic that a great and vigorous community has come to such a crisis, with so many Jews forsaking their historic people, a people who have contributed so much to the world, and renouncing their religion which is the fountain of all Western religions and civilization, which has been the bedrock of morality, and which has contributed so much to humanity at large.

I am ashamed of the difference between Jews and non-Jews in their professed belief in God, and in the agonizing numbers of those who have opted to join other religious communities. In the past, if an individual apostate announced his intention to convert, his family would go into formal mourning—rending their garments and “sitting *shivah*”—exactly as one does for a close relative who has died. What shall we do, and how shall we express our grief at the *shemad* of nearly one and one half million American Jews who have abandoned Judaism in favor of a variety of other faiths? Nothing less than establishing a new day of grief in the Jewish calendar—another *Tisha Be'av*—will do for this mss disaffection.

I take no pleasure in offering this “I told you so.” I have been involved in the Jewish community for over 50 years, both as pulpit rabbi and as educational administrator—and have never ceased to warn my fellow Jews that their neglect of the Jewish education of their children, both formal (in the school) and informal (in the home) will inevitable lead to a new Holocaust. Now ignorance of the classics of Judaism—the Bible and the Talmud, Jewish history and the Land of Israel, Hebrew and Yiddish or Ladino—combined with indifference to Jewish law and tradition and to homes empty of any Jewish content, have taken their toll. I think back to all those people in the communities I served who considered such warnings as the propaganda of self-serving alarmists, who convinced themselves that Sunday Schools were a panacea, that an attenuated Hebrew School education was adequate, that Day Schools and Yeshivot were “segregationist” and “un-American,” that a Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony in a discotheque and devoid of Torah or piety was enough it ensure the Jewishness of their progeny, that dance and music were the equivalent of the study of texts and the observance of *mitzvot* in the home—what would these people think if they could see the horrid consequences of their neglect and, in some cases, their arrogant refusal to perceive clearly the inevitable consequences of their narrowness of vision?

In a word, our past communal strategies have proven to be colossal failures, and our leaders spiritually bankrupt. *Avinu Malkenu, chatanu lefanekha*—"our Father, our King, we have sinned against You." And now we reap the whirlwind.

We will survive despite these ominous reports. The world will not be *Judenrein* despite the gargantuan mistakes of past leadership who thought that philanthropy alone will save us, that Jewish health clubs are more important than synagogues, that Jewish novelists have more to offer the Jewish future than teachers of Torah.

Yes, we will survive--but what kind of community will we be? Orthodox Jews who choose to live in neighborhoods that can supply the religious needs of the community will manage to increase their numbers, but with the disappearance wholesale of so many others, we will lose political and economic clout, and become ghettoized because of decreasing demography and reaction against what is perceived to be a hostile environment.

It is still not too late. But we must be truthful to each other. We must openly defy the secularizing and de-Judaizing elements in the community and yet, with all other Jews who wish to remain Jews however they may choose to do so, to cooperate in advancing the agenda of all that is positive and that we hold in common.

Whatever we do to stem the tide of defection will be very very difficult. But it will be worthwhile. It is morally impermissible to think otherwise, to sit by idly, and to even imagine the massive loss to our people without the maximum effort at communal self-preservation.