

'Jews Not by Religion': How to Respond to American Jewry's New Challenge

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- Jews "not by religion" are much less likely to pass on Jewishness to the next generation
- Jews "not by religion" are not "cultural" Jews, they are disconnected Jews
- The Jewish community must decide how much to invest in them vs. other priorities
- The alternatives for action are basically three:
 1. Write them off (but this means a problematic abandonment of many Jews)
 2. "Convert" them back to Jews "by religion" (but why would they want to transform)
 3. Develop new expressions of Judaism to fit their needs (but it's not clear if needs exist)

In early October, the comprehensive Pew Research Center survey revealed the changing face of American Jewry.¹ Among its main findings: Jews in America are proud of their Jewishness, but the way in which some of them define it is different than in the past. This is made especially clear by the fact that about a quarter of those defined by the survey as "Jews" responded in the negative to the question about their religious affiliation:² that is, they answered that they do not consider themselves as belonging to the Jewish religion.³ Their responses, as JPPI's Shlomo Fischer explains in his article,⁴ does not necessarily reflect their place on the secular-religious continuum, but rather reflects their disconnection from the Jewish community (what Fischer describes as the transition from "sacred ethnicity" to "descriptive ethnicity"). In fact, these Jews – "Jews not by religion" – were included within the count of the Jewish community as a result of an arbitrary decision by those conducting the survey.⁵ They determined that a person who has no religion but who declares him/herself to be Jewish for another reason and who has a Jewish parent should be included and counted as Jews. Selecting other characteristics would, of course, have yielded different results in the survey, as described at length in the Pew report.⁶

What the survey's editors describe as a dramatic increase in the number of "Jews not by religion" in recent decades⁷ has been interpreted in several, sometimes contradictory, ways, Pew researchers were "struck"⁸ by parallels between the rising share of "Jews of no religion" in the Jewish population and the increase of "religious nones" in the broader U.S. population. Theodore Sasson interpreted the numbers as being mainly the result of an increase in the number of Jewish children of interfaith

marriages.⁹ According to his findings (which were based on Pew data),¹⁰ "the growing rate of intermarriage in the 1970s and 1980s gave rise to the growing religiously unaffiliated population today."

Clearly, such a "religiously unaffiliated" choice by individuals does not only touch on the individual definition of "Jewishness" by various Jews. As the Pew survey shows, this is a phenomenon that has far-reaching implications for the Jews as a community. In almost every aspect examined, it turns out that "Jews not by religion" demonstrate a weaker connection to the Jewish people. "Jews not by religion" not only perform far fewer Jewish religious rituals, but they are also "much less connected to Jewish organizations and much less likely to be raising their children Jewish."¹¹ "Jews not by religion" marry non-Jews at a much higher rate than Jews by religion (79% compared to 36%), are much less likely to know the Hebrew alphabet, and are less connected to Israel than other Jews. The debate over the correct way of defining a "Jew" is fascinating and fitting,¹² and several of those who have reacted to the survey raised probing questions over such a definition.¹³ At the same time, it is hard to argue with the fact that the Pew report and previous studies too have shown a clear relationship between all of the parameters examined and the likelihood of transmitting Jewish heritage – whatever its meaning – to the next generation. There can be no doubt that the data point to the possibility that about a quarter of American Jews will find it much harder to pass on their Jewishness to the next generation (and the one after that). Those who reacted to the Pew survey have taken care – and rightly so – to emphasize that there are many exceptions in the Jewish story, and that among "Jews not by religion," too, there are those strongly committed to the Jewish people. The statistical picture, though, does not change because of anecdotal exceptions. The value of a comprehensive quantitative study is precisely that it allows us to adapt policy to large groups. Pondering policy options that stem from the new data on "Jews not by religion," we can reach one of three possible policy conclusions:

1. **Do nothing:** "Jews not by religion" are Jews whose connection to Judaism is too thin to make it worth investing significant resources in drawing them into the community. These are Jews on their way out, who already do not consider their Jewishness to be a strong enough identity component to latch onto in order to "bring them back" or to "hold onto them" in the current frameworks of the Jewish community.
2. **Change the Jews:** This would require finding a way to return the "Jews not by religion" to being "Jews by religion." This does not mean "bringing them back to Torah" in the religious sense since, as we have shown,¹⁴ the question of "religion" in this case is not a matter of observance versus non-observance, but rather entails identification with the ethnic group

(most "Jews by religion" are not certain about the existence of God and do not consider keeping *mitzvot* to be a central tenet of their Jewishness). Nevertheless, this would be an attempt to change the values, consciousness and priorities of a large group of Jews who are quite far removed from the Jewish group (Fischer writes that the process of bringing them back "would seem to involve some kind of conversion experience").

- 3. Change Judaism:** This would require identifying new and distinct forms of expression for "Jews not by religion." According to this approach, Judaism-not-by-religion is a new Jewish form (possibly a direct result of the growing sector of Jews born to interfaith couples) for which an updated Jewish framework must be built. "Jews not by religion" do not wish to give up their Jewishness (hence, their reported pride) but have not found suitable forms of expression enough to preserve it.

We will examine the advantages and disadvantages of each of the approaches:

Doing Nothing: A Policy of Giving Up

According to this approach, "Jews not by religion" are simply Jews on their way out of the community, either in this generation or in the next. They are Jews still proud of their Jewishness who do not see anything unacceptable about it and don't believe they will encounter any difficulty resulting from their ethnic connection to the Jewish people. At the same time, they do not see sufficient benefit or reason to transmit their Jewishness to the next generation.¹⁵ Almost 80%¹⁶ of "Jews not by religion" marry non-Jews. Later, almost 85% of children from these marriages will themselves marry non-Jews.¹⁷ Furthermore, almost 70% of "Jews not by religion" raise their children as "non-Jews."¹⁸ Sasson's findings paint a somewhat more encouraging picture. He points to the fact that there is a growing tendency among children of interfaith couples to identify as Jewish.¹⁹ Still, based on the Pew findings it would be premature to assume that the rate of retention of "Jews not by religion" has the potential to be very high. It is easier to speculate that within a generation or two only a handful of them can be expected to remain Jews. That is, unless policy can be created to change the current trend dramatically.

Why a Do Nothing policy could be the correct choice:

- As the Pew report describes at length, the transition to the "Jews not by religion" group is not unique to the Jewish community. This is a general trend in American society,²⁰ one that is difficult to assume the Jewish community – as strong as it is – can change. Perhaps we should come to terms with the fact that the Jewish community will also fall victim to this trend, if and until it changes direction.²¹

- b. It is difficult to find "anchor points" to reach this group. "Jews not by religion" express relatively little interest in any aspect of Jewish life – not in religious-ritual, not in national identification, and not in communal engagement. A concerted attempt to create special programs for them would mean investing resources in a initiatives with scant prospects of success. And since the community's resources are not unlimited, it may be more efficacious to invest them in those for whom there is a greater chance of retaining within the community framework.
- c. Even if there is a way to retain "Jews not by religion" and keep them from taking the final step out of the community, their contribution to the community is not great. They do not participate in community activities, do not share in maintaining the community and, in effect, are a group for whom invested resources would likely have negligible return.

Why we should not give up on the "Jews not by religion":

- a. This is too large a group – and larger still among the young – for the Jewish community to write off without first seriously attempting to ascertain retention potentials.
- b. The battle "for every Jew" has moral and educational value and also sends a message to those both inside and outside the community. Namely, that there is a benefit to making the effort to attract drifting away Jews and in finding channels of Jewish expression to engage them, even if the effort fails.
- c. Sasson's numbers point to the possibility that the comparative success the community has had in retaining the children of interfaith couples in recent years (and possibly, by extension, Jews "not by religion") could contribute to an expansion of the Jewish community.
- d. Jews "not by religion" still choose to identify as Jews, and few of them partake in non-Jewish worship (although 51% have had Christmas trees – many more than Jews "by religion", their level of participation in non-Jewish religious services is very low, at 12%).²² This might mean that they are still open to having Jewish connections, and have not yet adopted other types of ethnicity-faith affiliations.
- e. Socially, Jews "not by religion" share many beliefs with Jews "by religion." For example, high percentages in both groups believe in "acceptance" of homosexuals (91% and 80% respectively) and the value both groups place on leading an "ethical and moral life" is high (46% and 60%). Possibly, shared activities stemming from social values and sensitivities

could be a basis for forming a Jewish "community" of sorts.

Changing the Jews – From "Jews not by Religion" to "Jews by religion"

If the choice is to do "something," two possibilities emerge. That of "changing the Jews" relies on the clear picture that the latest survey describes: the Jewish survival prospects of "Jews not by religion" are low and fundamentally differ from the situation of "Jews by religion." In almost every parameter examined – life-cycle rituals, sense of Jewish peoplehood, contribution to the community, choosing a Jewish partner, raising children as Jews – there is a gap (in many cases a dramatic gap) between these two groups. An obvious conclusion is to attempt to encourage Jews to transition from the status of "not by religion" to that of "by religion."

Of course, in order to examine this possibility we must first understand why Jews shed their affiliation to religion. Studies that deal with the phenomenon generally in America point to a number of possible reasons for this, not all of which are applicable to the Jewish group:²³ a counter-movement to the religious-political connection (this connection is clear in the case of Christian groups, but does not seem to fit the Jewish context); delaying the marriage age – a marked phenomenon among Jews (the Pew researchers are not persuaded that this provides a convincing explanation for the "no religion" trend); a growing tendency to disengage from communal life in general – according to this theory, "the growth of the religion 'nones' is just one manifestation of much broader social disengagement."²⁴; secularization – a theory that links the rise in the number of people without religion in America to the phenomenon of secularization in other parts of the world. Usually, "gradual secularization is to be expected in a generally healthy, wealthy, orderly society"²⁵ (here, and as we have already mentioned, we do not mean secularization in terms of faith and observance, since most "Jews by religion" are not particularly religiously observant. in many ways). As mentioned above, Sasson casts a strong shadow of doubt on these points and focuses instead on the sharp rise of Jewish intermarriage.²⁶ Ascribing the cause to interfaith marriages gets us closer to a possible answer to the "why" question: the offspring of two religions hesitate to "choose" between parents and so opt for "no religion."

Why there is no point in adopting a policy of "conversion":

- a. If we are indeed talking about a process with an equivalent intensity to conversion, the investment required would be considerable and the probability of success among a sizeable population is small. A cost-benefit analysis suggests that this amounts to an unwise allocation of resources.
- b. The attempt to "proselytize" Jews "not by religion" must start with identifying a reason they

would want to "convert." Identifying such a reason is difficult. It can't be found on the "negative" side, since choosing to live as a Jew "not by religion" carries no social cost today, and no opprobrium. It doesn't exist on the "positive" side either, since the survey shows that Jews belonging to this group do not ascribe a particularly high value to their Jewishness. 54% say that "being Jewish" is not at all important to their lives, and only 12% say that it is "very" important (compared to 56% among "Jews by religion").²⁷

- c. It is difficult to find access points that would allow the Jewish community to engage in coordinated, continuous and efficient activity aimed at the "Jews not by religion". The vast majority of these Jews do not belong to synagogues or to any other Jewish organizations (4% and 4%), and their number of Jewish friends is also relatively small (a third of them, 34%, have "hardly any or none").²⁸

Why we should try to "bring back" "Jews not by religion":

- a. Because giving up on them isn't appropriate morally and sends the wrong message to the community (about writing off other Jews).
- b. Because according to the survey results, keeping them as Jews will be successful only if we "bring them back" to the "by religion" camp. "Jews by religion" are not only more involved as Jews personally and communally, they also transmit their Jewishness to the next generation at a much higher rate.
- c. "Jews not by religion" are not an organized or coherent group, but rather consist of sub groups with different characteristics. A focused effort could identify specifically tailored intervention points for different subgroups. For example, 42% of the "Jews not by religion" have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people. This is a fact to which it is possible to find an anchor for action. Further: 83% of them are proud of being Jewish. Someone who is proud to be Jewish might also want to be proud of another generation of Jews (if properly nudged in this direction). And here's one more example: over a quarter of them, even though they do not identify with "religion," describe themselves as being close to one of the recognized Jewish-religious streams (20% Reform, 6% Conservative, 1% orthodox).²⁹

Changing Judaism: Identifying and Creating "Religion-less" Forms of Expression

Many of the initial responses to the Pew study focused on the way in which Judaism should adapt itself to the new reality in which about a quarter of Jews are "Jews not by religion." Many of these responses relied on analogues made between Jews "not by religion" and Jews who are "secular," "cultural," or "non-believing".³⁰ For example, Shira Fishman proposed "to focus on how to engage

young adults as cultural Jews."³¹ In her analysis, Fishman relies on a certain blurring of terms that exists within the study itself in which "Jews not by religion" are sometimes referred to as "secular" or "cultural Jews."³²

A precise examination of the significance of these terms does not support the conclusion that "Jews not by religion" are "cultural Jews" (and not "civilizational Jews" either³³). These are Jews who attach low importance to their Jewishness, who engage in "Jewish" practices less than other Jews and who do not maintain ties to the community, and it is therefore not entirely clear why it is appropriate to define them as "cultural Jews" (unless the data related to political views or the lone number pointing to Jewish humor as a central component of Judaism are factors in making such a determination).³⁴ In this regard, and in the absence of additional evidence of a significant "cultural" connection, Fischer's analysis that claims that "Jews not by religion" are those who lean towards "descriptive ethnicity" seems to be more appropriate than identifying them as "cultural Jews." If this is the case, several of the steps suggested by various writers that are based on the putative "cultural identity" of the Jews "not by religion" are offering solutions to a reality that does not accord with the evidence described in the Pew survey.

Nevertheless – and since the survey did not necessarily delve sufficiently into the ways in which the Jewishness of the "Jews not by religion" is expressed – it could be claimed that this group requires a new Jewish "language" that is tailored to its needs. According to this way of thinking, part of the difficulty that "Jews not by religion" have in maintaining their Jewishness and transmitting it to their children lies not in their lack of interest in "Judaism" but from their lack of interest in the institutional Judaism on offer. If the Jewish community, in the broad sense, were to offer fitting avenues of engagement that are "not by religion" and were to adopt a Jewish language that is "not by religion," it could bring "Jews not by religion" closer and give it reason and motivation to widen the range and intensity of its Jewish activity.

Why there is no point in trying to adopt such a policy:

- a. As noted, the survey is not convincing in its assertion that "Jews not by religion" are "cultural Jews." So before such a policy is adopted, a further study should be conducted to identify the alternative forms of Jewish expression that, if offered to this group of Jews, have a chance of being adopted by them. The existing study seems to eliminate from consideration all activities related to religion, to nationality, to Israel or to community activity – at least in the way that such activity is currently available.
- b. To date, Jewish history has not recorded a case of a Jewish community that has survived for an extended period without a religious identity, and/or a solid, unifying national framework.

A common "culture" does not create a connection that is strong enough to be passed to coming generations, and certainly not when it exists within another cultural context (the broader American culture), which has much sway over the population, Jewish and non-Jewish, and that erodes Jewish characteristics.

Why this approach should be attempted nevertheless:

- a. Because of demographic considerations, keeping Jews "not by religion" within the Jewish tent is essential to having a larger Jewish community. If bringing them back into the "Jewish by religion" tent can't be achieved, meeting them where they are is the only option short of paying the heavy price of writing them off.
- b. Because of the moral and educational reasons mentioned earlier (we do not abandon any group of Jews).
- c. Because engaging "them" is really engaging not just the sector of "Jews not by religion" but rather the entire population of Jews born to mixed marriages – and one should keep in mind that of "non-Orthodox Jews who have married since 2000, 28% have a Jewish spouse and fully 72% are intermarried." In other words: the attempt should focus on developing a Jewish language suited to a generation of intermarried Jews, whether "by religion" or "not by religion."
- d. Because it is good for the Jews and good for Judaism itself: it is clear that Judaism in its current form is struggling to offer a sufficiently broad religious framework, and the need to find other forms of Jewish expression exists in any case. Meeting this need in the form of "culture" or, in its wider iteration, "civilization,"³⁵ could lead to a new kind of connection for those for whom the existing research is not sufficiently precise to identify "anchors" for connecting them to Judaism.

The data presented in the Pew survey raise a new series of questions about the character of North American Jewry in the current age. These questions arise from the fact that about a quarter of US Jews currently meet the definition of "Jews not by religion."

These Jews present the Jewish community with a complicated challenge which gives rise to two parallel debates: One – about the tools and methods by which it is possible, if it is possible, to strengthen the connection of Jews "not by religion" to the majority of Jews "by religion." The other – over the costs and benefits of investing in this group, even assuming that we have the tools needed to retrieve them.

In other words, the community must first determine whether it has the ability to find paths to the "not

by religion" group, and then it must decide whether the investment in these paths justifies the benefit – or whether it is better to invest in groups with whom the connection is easier and in whom investing would yield better results (possibly, investment in "Jews by religion" might ultimately also have impact on "Jews not by religion"). This is a question that obviously has practical implications, but it also has an important moral dimension concerning the strength of the community's persistence in keeping all of its branches, even the most distant, within the Jewish fold.

¹ A Portrait of Jewish Americans, Findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2013/10/jewish-american-full-report-for-web.pdf>

² What is your present religion, if any? Are you Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, atheist, agnostic, something else, or nothing in particular?

³ Recent study by Brandeis University identified this group similarly as Jewish not by Religion. See: American Jewish Population Estimates: 2012 (<http://www.brandeis.edu/ssri/pdfs/AmJewishPopEst2012.pdf>)

⁴ Shlomo Fischer: Who are the "Jews by religion" in the Pew report? See: <http://jppi.org.il/news/146/58/Who-are-the-%EF%BF%BDJews-by-Religion-%EF%BF%BD-in-the-Pew-Report/>

⁵ *Arbitrary but common. See: AMERICAN JEWISH POPULATION ESTIMATES: 2012, Elizabeth Tiahe, Leonard Saxe, Raquel Maqidin de Kramer, Daniel Parmer, Sep 2013.*

⁶ See Pew, Who is a Jew, page 18.

⁷ Journalist JJ Goldberg of the Forward argued in a series of articles that there was no increase in the number of JNBR, and that the presentation by PEW was erroneous. See: <http://blogs.forward.com/jj-goldberg/185887/dear-pew-i-was-right-heres-why/>. The editors of the study defended their findings.

⁸ See: The Pew Research Center Responds to Tablet, Nov 13, 2013 (<http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/152697/the-pew-research-center-responds-to-tablet>)

⁹ New Analysis of Pew Data: Children of Inter-marriage Increasingly Identify as Jews, Theodor Sasson, Tablet Magazine, 11.11.2013

¹⁰ See also: What happens when Jews intermarry? Pew, 11.12.2013 (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/11/12/what-happens-when-jews-intermarry/>)

¹¹ Compared with Jews by religion, however, Jews of no religion (also commonly called secular or cultural Jews) are not only less religious but also much less connected to Jewish organizations and much less likely to be raising their children Jewish., Pew, page 8.

¹² Don Seeman pointed out that the only "high overall numbers for Jews is that 94 percent say they are "proud to be Jewish," without, however, being able to agree on what precisely that might entail. Even "leading an ethical life" and "remembering the Holocaust" are considered "essential to being Jewish" by only 69 and 73 percent of Jewish respondents, respectively". Jewish Review of Books, Fall 2013.

¹³ Prof. Ari Kelman argued that the research suffers from "a religious bias" by way of revealing "just how rich the vocabulary is for discussing Jewish religious life and how poor it is for understanding other expressions of Jewishness". <http://www.stanford.edu/group/edjs/cgi-bin/wordpress/2013/10/04/the-hegemony-of-religion/>

¹⁴ See Fischer, JPPI, 2013

¹⁵ ("two-thirds of Jews of no religion say they are not raising their children Jewish or partially Jewish – either by religion or aside from religion")

¹⁶ Page 36: "just 21% of married Jews of no religion are married to a Jewish spouse, while 79% are married to a non-Jewish spouse".

¹⁷ "Among married Jews who report that only one of their parents was Jewish, fully 83% are married to a non-Jewish spouse".

¹⁸ "Among Jews of no religion, by contrast, two-thirds (67%) say they are not raising their children Jewish in any way".

¹⁹ The propensity of adults with intermarried parents to identify as Jewish steadily increased, from 25 percent in the 65-and-older group, to 37 percent in the 50-64 age group, to 39 percent in the 30-49 group, to 59 percent the 18-29 group.

²⁰ Page 7: "This shift in Jewish self-identification reflects broader changes in the U.S. public. Americans as a whole – not just Jews – increasingly eschew any religious affiliation".

²¹ Sasson makes a strong case against the "nones" comparison: The problem with this analysis is that the Jews are not like everyone else. As we have seen, the increase in the population of Jews of no religion derives from the high rate of intermarriage in the 1970s and 1980s and the tendency of children of intermarriage to identify as Jewish. The increase is not a result of backlash against the mixing of religion and conservative politics, delayed marriage and parenting, or any of the other trends identified by Cooperman and Smith as explanations for religious disaffiliation in America.

²² Pew, page 80.

²³ See: The Rise of the "Nones", page 29, Pew (<http://www.pewforum.org/files/2012/10/NonesOnTheRise-full.pdf>)

²⁴ "The growth of the religious "nones" is just one manifestation of much broader social disengagement". Page 30.

²⁵ "Gradual secularization is to be expected in a generally healthy, wealthy, orderly society." Page 31.

²⁶ Interfaith marriages are growing among other Americans as well. Possibly a reason for the growth of "nones" among all Americans. See 'Til Faith Do Us Part: How Interfaith Marriage is Transforming America, Naomi Schaefer Riley, Oxford University Press, 2013.

27See table, page 51.

28 Page 62: "Jews by religion are far more likely than Jews of no religion to say that most or all of their close friends are Jewish (38% vs. 14%)".

29Page 48: "one-in-five Jews of no religion describe themselves as Reform Jews (20%), while 6% identify with Conservative Judaism and 1% say they are Orthodox Jews".

30See, for example, the interpretation Nathan Diament of the Orthodox Union gives to Jews of no Religion at a Pew event: "The covenant of fate is the Jews [of] no religion, is the Jews who are linked to Jewish destiny whether they choose to be or not choose to be, but they are part of the Jewish camp in one form or another because we're not only a people of faith". <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/10/event-transcript-changing-identity-of-jewish-americans-implications-for-social-and-political-engagement/>

31"Perhaps the discussion needs to focus on how to engage young adults as cultural Jews – strengthening and supporting their cultural identity so they continue to engage with Judaism as they age". See: <http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/did-we-get-it-wrong-reframing-the-pew-discussion/#sthash.x6JwI5PD.dpuf>

32See page 23 for example: "If one includes secular or cultural Jews – those who say they have no religion but who were raised Jewish or have a Jewish parent and who still consider themselves Jewish aside from religion".

³³Seeman made a similar point but focused on the false assumption that Jews "not by religion" are secular Jews: "Pew's "Jews of no religion" should not be described as "secular Jews," rather they are that part of the Jewish community that is increasingly alienated, impatient, or in many cases simply uninterested in Jewishness in any of its forms.

34See table on page 55: "Having good sense of humor", JBR 43%, JONR 40%.

35See: Why call Judaism a "Civilization"?, Shalom Salomon Wald, JPPI, to be published 2013.