*Last Friday I shared the following message with our congregation as part of my Shabbat sermon. I feel that the subject of this message is so important for our community that it was worth sharing more broadly. I welcome you comments and partnership in addressing the issues raised by the Pew Study and their impact on our Jewish community. Please join me in a previously schedule community Town Hall conversation on Thursday, October 24, 2013 at 7:30pm where we can discuss this survey and the Canadian survey results in more detail.*

*--Rabbi Dan Moskovitz*

**JEWS THE EVER DYING PEOPLE:**
***A REFORM PERSPECTIVE ON THE PEW SURVEY ON JEWISH AMERICANS***

Rabbi Dan Moskovitz, Temple Sholom
April 2, 25

The historian Simon Rawidowicz wrote a famous essay in which he described Jews, with our constant fear of extinction as the "ever-dying" people.

It does seem that, every few years, a major Jewish leader or study proclaims the "disappearance of the Jews," arguing that assimilation and intermarriage place the future of the Jewish community--Jewish continuity--in serious danger.

Such was the case this week with the publication of the Pew Survey on Jewish Americans. A study that quickly rang the alarm bells of the 'ever-dying Judaism in crisis contingent'. Amidst this 200-page report, the most complete survey of the American Jewish community in more than a decade headlines blared with shocking though not surprising numbers.

The intermarried rate among Jews who married in the last 10 years is 58%.

Two-thirds of all Jews don't belong to a synagogue.

The fastest growing cohort in the Jewish community is the 22% of all Jews who define themselves as Jewish but not religious.

This statistic led to the other major headline of the study which was that while 93% of Jews 60 and older define themselves as Jewish by religion, only 68% of Jews born after 1980 identify as Jews by religion, while 32% describe themselves as having no religion and identify as Jewish on the basis of ancestry, ethnicity or culture. Alan Cooperman, deputy director of the Pew religion project, said in an interview. "Older Jews are Jews by religion. Younger Jews are Jews of no religion."

This last category, young people who define themselves as Jews of no religion, what we would call cultural Jews are by an overwhelming majority, two-thirds also not raising their children in any religion.

The survey also found that approximately one-quarter of people who were raised Orthodox have since become Conservative or Reform Jews, while 30% of those raised Conservative have become Reform Jews, and 28% of those raised Reform have left the ranks of Jews by religion entirely. Much less switching is reported in the opposite direction.

The upshot of these two last data points: 'Cultural Jews not raising their kids without religion' and 'the steady decline in Jewish practice from one generation to the next' led to a

disturbing conclusion. Once a Jew no longer defines themselves as Jewish through religion it is highly unlikely that they or their children ever will again. In short, when Jews walk away from shul they don't come back.

We are still waiting on the Canadian results of a similar population study conducted by Canadian Jewish Federations; we should have them in the next few weeks. We don't know what it will show, but we can make an educated guess – it's going to look very similar to the PEW study.

One of the PEW study's major findings is that Jews in the US are not statistically unique with regard to belief, assimilation, affiliation and practice from non-Jews in the US. In short the challenges confronting religion in general are also confronting Judaism in particular.

We could hold out hope that somehow these challenges don't have a NEXUS card and can't cross the 49th parallel but I think that's a pipe dream. Rather I think that as we look south in our rearview mirror at the challenges facing the US Jewish population we should notice the warning message, 'objects in the mirror may be closer than they appear." If its not happening here yet, its not far behind.

So what are we to do with this information? If the sky is falling how do we hold it up?

One response is to go back to Rawidowicz' thesis, 'Jews - an ever-dying people;" and see there in the looming demise of the Jewish people a silver-lining. His premise was that crisis is 'good for the Jews'. That seems ironic, I know but a close look at Jewish history ancient and modern shows that we are good in a crisis, as bad as they are for us in the short term. As Jews we thrive from crisis to crisis; we are in large part defined by our crises.

We should embrace this survey as the canary in the coal mine that it is, and redouble our efforts to right the sinking ship. In the same way that the Yom Kippur war united Jews across denominational lines, that the cause of soviet *refusenicks* – empowered the Jewish federation movement, that a halt of Jewish teens travelling to Israel during the first and second intifada gave birth to birthright and the overwhelming statistic also found in the PEW study that 70% of the Jewish population of the US has travelled to Israel. We could not only make lemonade out of lemons – but with good crisis management we could open a Juice bar.

We should do that **AND** we should do something else. As Reform Jews we are in a unique position – we are both the exit and entry point for Jewish religious identity. Most Jews try us before they leave all together. So we have an opportunity to save them before they leave and never come back. Conversely, Reform Judaism is also the lowest threshold to entry or re-entry in to a Jewish religious life. We are literally in the best position to meet them 'coming and going'.

The metric for an active, committed and engaged Reform Jew is not religious practice as it is commonly defined and understood. How often you come to *shul* to prayer is not a measure of how important Judaism is to you in your daily life. Rather in Reform Judaism we proudly teach that you can be Jewish in a myriad of meaningful ways that are not 'religious' in the way that organized religion is off-putting to Millennials. Through study, social action, social Justice, connection to Israel, Jewish music, art and culture - experiences that are open to any

kind of family – Reform Judaism takes Judaism beyond the walls of the synagogue and into the 21st century of modern life.

When asked about activities or beliefs that are "essential" to their Judaism, the most common answer in the PEW survey was "remembering the Holocaust" (73%); "leading a moral and ethical life" (69%), "working for justice and equality" (56%) and "Caring about Israel" (43%). Just 19% of the Jewish adults surveyed said observing Jewish law *(halachah)* was essential to what being Jewish means to them. This is not only who we are as Reform Jews it is also who the vast majority of the Jewish people are. Our Reform Jewish priorities are in alignment with their modern Jewish values.

There are challenges for sure:

- Synagogue membership is declining overall. Roughly four-in-ten U.S. Jewish adults (39%) say they live in a household where at least one person is a member of a synagogue. Fifty percent of Conservative Jews belong to a synagogue, and only 34% of Reform Jews belong to a synagogue.

- Intermarriage is increasing and leading to generations of religiously disconnected Jews, especially among the Reform population. Half of Reform Jews who are married have a Jewish spouse and that intermarriage is much more common among Jews who are themselves the children of intermarriage. Which is why our principled and strategic response must be to embrace these families with open arms not shun or ignore them.

- Reform Jews are generally less Involved in Jewish life than Conservative or Orthodox Jews. We must deepen engagement in the richness of Jewish life, not just for school children but also for every Jew. And we can't wait for them to walk in our doors we have to go out and meet them where they are.

It is said – though not entirely accurately that when asked why he robbed banks, the notorious prohibition era bank robber Willie Sutton replied, "That's where the money is."

There are many reasons to be a Reform Jew – but one can be, Reform Judaism is where the battle to save the soul and identity of the Jewish people is being fought. We are the front line in the fight for a Jewish future. What Reform Judaism does at this time in history will tell the tale of what became of the 'Jew's - the ever-dying people'. So that we are here to face *the next crisis* – we must confront this one with everything we have.