

The Disappearing Jewish Liberal: disruption and opportunity

Daryl Fenton

The Church's Ministry among Jewish People

CMJ America, P.O. Box 443, Ambridge PA 15003

Daryl.Fenton@cmj-usa.org

Abstract

Current changes in Jewish religious life and demographics portend a future in which liberal or secular Jewish people in the West become a shadow of their current demographic selves. In other words, the visible presence of a Jewish culture will be limited to the Orthodox community in the West. In countries with dangerously rising anti-Semitism, Aliyah may reduce that visibility to virtually nothing. In more moderately anti-Semitic countries, like the United States, assimilation is more likely. That future will align with the passing of the current millennial generation. After that point, most remaining, self-identifying Jewish people outside of Israel will be Orthodox. The consequences of these changes mean: 1. there is a window of opportunity to reach the current generation of liberal/secular Jewish people with the gospel, 2. unless there is a change in mission society strategies very large numbers of Jewish people now living will be an ‘unreached people group’, and 3. Only outreach to Orthodox streams of Judaism will remain.

Introduction

The rush to nominal/secular Jewish identity currently underway will not be evenly distributed across the communities of those countries broadly defined as Western. The rise of anti-Semitism in most European countries will probably heighten Jewish identity. It is also likely to accelerate emigration to Israel. In the United States and Canada, the generally more muted anti-Semitism has not as yet greatly increased talk of mass emigration by Jewish people.

This paper will focus on the changes in North America that are shaping the future of Jewish people. There is some reason to believe its general conclusions may also apply to other places in the West, but in varying degrees. The changes in Jewish life point to missiological and practical consequences. These, with reasonable probability, could be applied in other Western nations where Jewish people live. They will not apply to Jews living in Israel.

Part I: The Broad Changes in Western Jewish Life

The rapid decline in the practice of faith among Americans, Canadians, and other Western countries is most easily seen in declining attendance at churches and synagogues. The effect of that decline on Jewish minorities threatens to undermine the size of the population that identifies itself as Jewish in either a cultural or religious sense. A cluster of studies emerging since the turn of the millennium point to several trends: 1. the declining attachment to Judaism and Jewish institutions (at least in the USA, Canada, and the UK), 2. the steep rise in Jewish/Gentile dating/ married/ cohabiting couples, and 3. the privatization and hi-jacking of historic Jewish observance to suit individualistic needs. Together these trends are steadily reducing the sense a large majority of Jewish people always had and treasured, that they are a people apart. Put another way, commitment to the distinctive practices that made one a Jew are fading.

The now familiar study by Pew Research, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, chronicles the weakening attachment of Jewish people to Judaism in the United States.

Dr. Tuvya Zaretsky, in his work on Jewish/Gentile couples describes the cultural/spiritual complexity and conflict this rapidly accelerating trend creates and its impact on Jewish identity.

Dr. Jack Wertheimer, in his new book *The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice Their Religion Today*, published in March 2018, devotes a majority of his book to describing what this sea change in non-Orthodox Jewish people and practice looks like.

The Pew study and a related survey by the Barna Group give the broad shape of the decline in Jewish observance, but also notes the still clear, if un-anchored, sense of being Jewish. These studies defined the larger numbers of those changes, *i.e.* those who define their Jewishness primarily in terms of religion and those who do not. Wertheim illustrates them. A further result

from the Pew study found significant generational differences among the three generations polled.

All of these trends are well known and widely studied in the Jewish religious community and also by those organizations working with Jewish people.

These trends, accelerating Aliyah in some nations, and a Jewish birth rate far below the replacement rate (except among the Orthodox) will result in significant future decline in Western Jewry. With the most numerous Jewish population outside Israel, the largest decline will occur in North America. This trend is already observable.

A demographic/spiritual development of this magnitude will prove either a portent or an opportunity for the community of ministries that share the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth with Jewish people. Whichever it is, further missiological changes are inevitable.

Part II: Summary and Examples of Supporting Data

As with church attendance among Gentile Christians, declining synagogue attendance is a trailing indicator of the deeper spiritual malaise affecting Judaism and Jewish people. The often cited Pew Foundation's *A Portrait of Jewish Americans* (2013) provided the grist for other research and reams of analysis. Some of the summary numbers are useful for the purpose of this paper. According to the poll, which conformed to recognized polling methodology, of the 5.2 million population Jewish population in the USA (the most conservative estimate) "...a quarter of Jews say they attend religious services at least once or twice a month, compared with 50% among the general population."¹

As with most such polls, the numbers reflect what people say about themselves not necessarily what they actually do. Therefore, the stated response may be accurate, may articulate

an aspiration, or may be deceptive due to shame or guilt. That said, the best outcome still indicates decline. Another result further amplifies that result: only 26% of American Jewish people consider religion very important, with 29% considering it somewhat important.

Gross numbers, like these, give a general sense of attitudes. More granular numbers clarify those generalities. Several examples of these changes should bring the reality into clearer focus.

First, the report identifies that 10% of the US Jewish population describes themselves as Orthodox.² This category includes the sub-categories of Modern Orthodox, Ultra-Orthodox, and Hasidim.

Because each of these Orthodox communities are formed around faithful observance of the practices of rabbinic Judaism, including synagogue attendance, they adjust the numbers of committed religionists among the balance of the Jewish population. 86% of the Orthodox attend synagogue weekly.³ If one removes the Orthodox numbers, the percentage of participation in religious Jewish life for the remaining 90% of American Jewry is lower, *i.e.* if 26% of all American Jewish people consider religion very important, then only 17% the remaining Jewish population consider synagogue attendance very important.

Second, the Pew poll identified 18% (936,000) American Jewish people who consider themselves part of the Conservative stream of Judaism. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency in an article date November 10, 2015, reported that Conservative synagogue membership totaled just 570,000 in the previous year, just 60% of those who say they are Conservative.⁴ The gap between a real synagogue connection and the self-reported data is telling.

Part of this decline is the generational impact of the 'down and out' movement of religious Jewish people whose progeny become less and less religious as generations unfold. The Pew Report summarizes the trend this way.

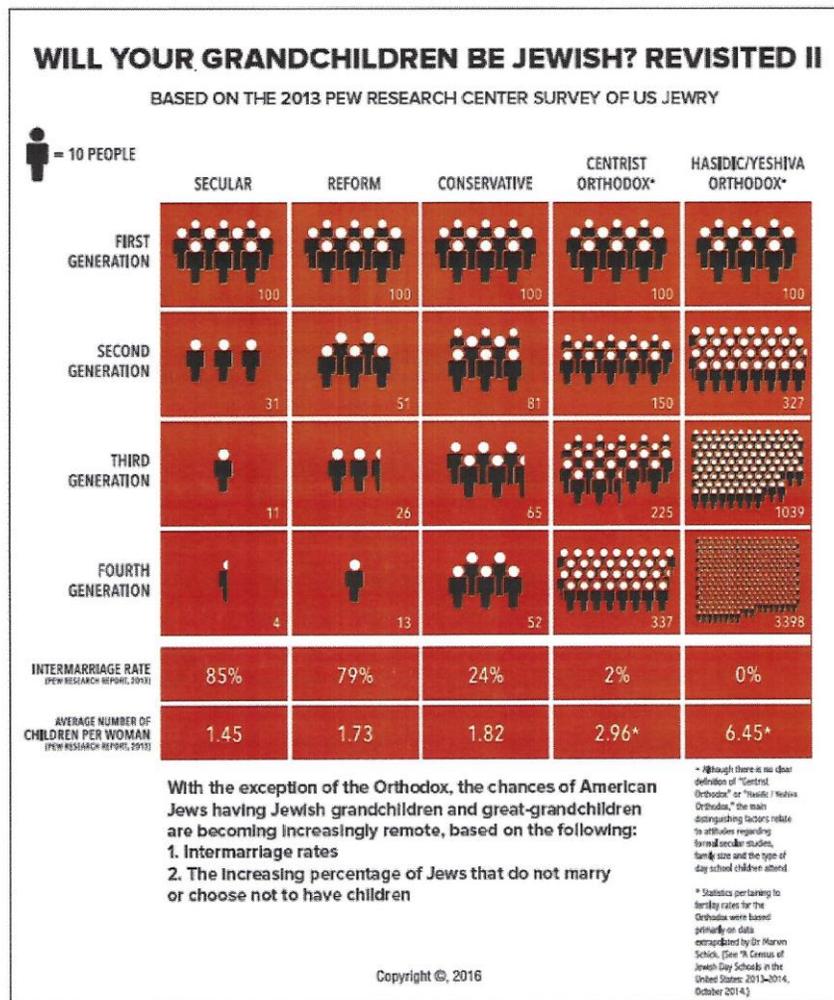
“Within all three denominational movements, most of the switching is in the direction of less traditional Judaism. The survey finds that approximately one-quarter of people who were raised Orthodox have since become Conservative or Reform Jews, while 30% of those raised Conservative have become Reform 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. For example, just 7% of Jews raised in the Reform movement have become Conservative or Orthodox, and just 4% of those raised in Conservative Judaism have become Orthodox”⁵

Fourth, compelling evidence for acceleration of the wave of change that lies ahead is the widely discussed impact of Jewish/Gentile Couples. The Jewish Action website published an article the chart depicting the future impact of this trend.⁶

5/29/2019

American Jewry: Where Are We Now? Where Are We Heading? Two Views

Somewhat surprisingly, Dr. Schick and Gordon/Horowitz arrive at different conclusions. We invite you, our readers, to submit your own thoughts and perspectives about this vitally important question concerning the future of American Jewry.



The chart above illustrates the effects of intermarriage and birthrates in the American Jewish community. According to the chart, based on the raw data of the Pew Research Center's 2013 survey of US Jewry, after four generations, secular Jews will produce 4 Jewish great-grandchildren while "Hasidic/Yeshiva Orthodox Jews" will produce nearly 3,400 Jewish great-grandchildren.

After the 2013 Pew report was issued, a chart originally published by Antony Gordon and Richard Horowitz was updated. The Jewish Action Website reported on the update in an article entitled. “American Jewry: Where Are We Now? Where Are We Heading” by Dr. Marvin Schick. It includes the chart above along with two previous charts for which it provides an update from the Pew Report. The chart is self-explanatory, illustrating the demographic dissolving of Jewish religious identity into the larger secular population. It must be noted, however, that although the chart was broadly accurate as a predictor of Jewish practice, the earlier versions overstated the impact on self-declared Jewish cultural identity during the intervening years from the first version in 1990.

Fifth, the previous over stating of impact has given hope to some leaders within the Jewish community that the decline in synagogue participation will not necessarily mean a decline in Jewish identity. Dr. Wertheimer’s recent book articulates that hope but provides abundant detail that it is not likely to be realized. In one hour interviews he quizzed 160 rabbis of all types in every region of the country.⁷ His findings draw a picture of the views and practice of those Jewish people who are involved in synagogue life in some way. A few examples of current practice from these interviews give quite vivid shape to the trends mentioned above.

- “When asked, Reform rabbis are the most direct about the problem God poses for many of their congregants. A Silicon Valley rabbi quotes an oft-voiced plea she hears: ‘I am a rational person and God does not make sense to me. Don’t talk to me about that.’⁸ ...the same issues preoccupy Reform congregants in other regions of the country. The rabbi of a Mid-Atlantic congregation recalled her amazement upon hearing her synagogue president describe herself as an openly avowed atheist.⁹

- “A conservative rabbi reports that when same-sex marriage was on the ballot in his state it “...galvanized the Jewish community more than anything else. The last year and a half has been taken up by social justice work far more than *Halacha*. Indeed, the role assumed by a good many rabbis in our time is to sanctify the preexisting and ideological commitments of their congregants....”¹⁰

To illustrate a third trend, Wertheimer quotes an individual he considers an ‘ordinary contemporary (non-Orthodox) Jew’. Here is how she characterized herself. “I’m not interested in who my God is or how (s)he is different from yours. I’m not invested in rules and scriptures and commandments. My religion is pretty much to be a good person, to treat people with compassion and respect, and to act in ways that are honorable and will not make me regret my behavior the next day.”¹¹ Wertheimer notes that this appears to be the majority view among non-Orthodox: ‘good person’ or ‘Golden Rule’ Jews.

The celebration of Jewish milestones of life, thanks to books and films, have made their way into Western popular culture. Real Jewish life today tells a story quite different from the traditional image. Wertheimer’s interviewees paint a rapidly changing pattern here, as well, among non-Orthodox Jewish families.

This following paragraph is telling, and particularly important in its missiological implications. “Any survey of Jewish life cycle events involving religious rituals ought to include a discussion of weddings. In recent decades, these joyous occasions have raised complex questions for clergy and families alike. Judging from marriage announcements in newspapers, it is not a foregone conclusion that a wedding of two Jews will be sanctified by an ordained rabbi or cantor, that it will include the traditional wedding blessings, or that it will incorporate anything of Jewish content. **Among the majority of non-Orthodox Jews marrying non-Jews,**

it is even less likely for the wedding to include Jewish elements: the nature of the ceremony is subject to negotiation and DIY creativity.”¹²

And, in a longer commentary on the changing trends in the rite of passage Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies, Wertheimer quotes a Chicago study’s summary, these changes “represent a shift towards a more personalized, customized Judaism...reflecting...radical individualism, a trend towards consumerism in Judaism or a generation that wants what...it wants and needs to customize everything.”¹²

A common lament of Reform rabbis is that their congregants are unprepared to invest much time in Jewish living. “The soccer god,” said one rabbi, “is a jealous god. Missing soccer is punishable, absence from temple service is not.”¹³

Even the ‘Modern Orthodox movement is starting to feel the pressure of the acids of secularism. Wertheimer quotes the head of a Modern Orthodox day school:

“In my experience, many, if not most, 20 to 40-year olds in the modern Orthodox World struggle with the issue of homosexuality and the divinity of the Torah. They believe in a kind and just God and they want to believe in the divinity of the Torah. But at the same time they feel fairly certain that being gay is not a matter of choice. ...This generation, by and large, views this particular challenge to faith as irreconcilable.”¹⁴

A final analysis comes from Wertheimer himself. Referring to how important Jewish lay people consider the theological positions of the various streams he writes, “As one observer of the Modern Orthodox put it to me, ‘religion is not as important to your average congregant as it is to the rabbis....in the Orthodox (streams), it is even more the case for the non-orthodox. ... In the case of Conservative Judaism, the ideology of the movement portrays it as committed to Halacha even though no one seriously argues that most members of Conservative synagogues act upon such a commitment.... And as for Reform, the motto of the movement is ‘informed

choice,' yet it is universally understood that with few exceptions Reform congregants are neither well-informed nor even aware they are making choices.”¹⁵

The final declining trend is the non-Orthodox birthrate. The Jewish population as a whole is reproducing at a rate of 1.9% below the replacement rate. Within that percentage, the variation, reflected in the number of children is wide. Generally, the more religious, the most children. So, Jewish people of no religion have 1.5 children per couple, Reform Jews 1.7, Conservative Jews 1.8, and the Orthodox Jewish communities average 4.1 children per couple.¹⁶ Three out of four groups are reproducing below the replacement rate. We can conclude that these basic demographic trends reinforce the impact, or may even be caused by, the spiritual trend.

Part III: The Missiological Implications

What are the missiological conclusions that can be safely drawn from these data?

There is a chance that Jewish identity will almost disappear within a generation among the non-Orthodox. There will be collateral impact on Jewish outreach missions. It is possible, that a distinctively Jewish, cross-cultural message will only be needed for Orthodox Jewish streams in most of the West where Jewish people remain. For North American missions this could be a major adjustment. To be sure, Jewish cultural identity may not be entirely wiped out as the most fearful rabbis project, but religiously attached, non-Orthodox and secular Jewish people will have an ever more tenuous connection to their Jewishness and may become culturally indistinguishable from the secular, Gentile cultures in which they will live.

For the Jewish commentators who review these data from a religious perspective (Dr. Wertheimer is among those) the trend is ever more alarming. For those working to see that Jewish people recognize Jesus of Nazareth as the Jewish Messiah, the primary implication of this trend is the window of opportunity that it opens. It is a moment of Golden Opportunity for

sharing the Gospel of Messiah with Jewish people who are far more open to considering it than ever before. In fact, these opportunities already present themselves.

A tribal border', almost invisible to most Gentiles, has always existed around the Jewish minority. Whatever the stream, practice, or belief, the otherness of being Jewish within another culture usually held. It was weakened in Europe by the Enlightenment, but just for a season. In the UK and the USA the legal franchise and protections under law gave some reason to the Jewish community to believe that it might be safe, even welcomed. Then came the Holocaust, and most of the tribal barricades returned, and this in spite of an already strong secularizing stream in non-Orthodox circles. As the memory of the Holocaust becomes more historic and less immediate, a new openness to Gentile relationships and other religious ideas has spread rapidly. A telling detail in the Pew report is the statistic that 34% of Jewish people think that you can believe in Jesus and still be Jewish.¹⁷ It is a significant marker of change, and perhaps an equally significant achievement begun by those early colleagues of Moshe Rosen at Jews for Jesus.

That said, rising anti-Semitism could once more throw up the tribal border. They are already up in most of Europe. The USA and Canada, at least, still seem mostly welcoming and safe at the moment. As America's anti-Semitism rises as well, the border could be restored here, but so far that is not the case. North American mission societies must take note whichever outcome occurs.

A second result is the fading influence of Yiddishkeit. No longer is Judaism in the West the romanticized Ashkenazi community celebrated by authors and film makers. Older Gentiles sometimes know more about those practices than a contemporary young Jewish person. And, a larger and more vocal Sephardic community further diminishes a uniform Jewish culture. Finally, the non-Orthodox community's long romance with a national secular agenda that made

Jewish people feel safer in 'Christian' countries has come back upon them in the form of a looser attachment to Judaism itself.

And, Wertheimer uncovered a familiar replacement to religious commitment, a passion for social justice issues as a priority indicate an aspect of Western life almost indistinguishable from the surrounding culture. Therefore, even with Jewish cultural identity still fairly clear, the points of common understanding are greater and the difference between Gentiles and Jews in some Western cultures far less pronounced. This clearly makes friendships and conversations more accessible.

A further missional benefit of this weakening tie to rabbinic Judaism can often be a new, seeking attitude as regards alternatives. The idea that Messiah has already come and a trustworthy record about him exists is far more likely in someone who is seeking.

Finally, and by far the most important to this writer, are the several paths to witness created by these changes. The Jewish/Gentile couple phenomenon could be, perhaps, the most fruitful. This development, already growing since the 1990's, is now an explosion of Jewish/Gentile couples in the ascendant millennial generation. The Pew Research Project results for intermarriage (not including co-habitation without marriage) reported that 44% of all Jewish people are married to Gentiles. For marriages after 2005, the percentage rises to 58%.¹⁷ There are several implications from this rolling, accelerating change.

The gentile partner in a Jewish/Gentile couple offers a path of relationship to/with the couple and the Jewish person. The fact that the relationship exists means the Jewish person has not cut themselves off from deeper relationships with Gentile people and even Jewish believers in Jesus. Out of relationship with a disciple of Yeshua comes the opportunity to bear witness.

Dr. Zaretsky's study emphasized the disharmony chronic in Jewish/Gentile couple relationships. The underlying reasons have cultural and spiritual roots. These conflicts create the opportunity to create small groups of Jewish/Gentile couples who can, together, understand those conflicts and work to resolve them. Spiritual disharmony is prominent, even if both partners conceive of themselves as secular. This advantage is heightened when the couple leading such a group are themselves a Jewish/Gentile couple. Such couples are not uncommon occurrence among Jewish mission staff.

In addition, Jewish/Gentile couples could find a welcome in Gentile churches or Messianic congregations through one of the partners, if the congregation is prepared to receive them. In the case of a Gentile church, this will be even truer if it knows its own Jewish roots, an increasing area of interest in many churches. Anecdotal evidence suggests, that even when rabbis work hard to be accepting of Gentile spouses, the tighter bonds of shared Jewish culture and history often leave the Gentile partner excluded. (This is also a common occurrence in many of America's ethnic Christian denominations.) Other evidence indicates it is a problem that has a solution. Already, US churches are adapting to provide outreach to Muslims, Africans, Asians, and Hispanics who now comprise ever larger slices of the US and Canadian populations.

The list is longer, but the limits of this paper do not allow a fuller exploration.

Conclusion

The broad mission community has become accustomed to demographic alarms about closing windows of opportunity and the scope and scale of need to complete the task of sharing

Jesus with every people group. Jewish mission is no exception. In light of that fact, and even using the most generous population estimates, the size of the Jewish ‘field’ is relatively small.

Among mission societies it is common, if not universal, to keep good numbers on what has been done and what has been achieved. But thinking tends to focus on mission output, rather than mission outcome. That is, if there are 5.2 million Jewish people in the North America to be reached, metrics are done on how many Jewish people have been contacted, or asked for follow-up, or decided to become a disciple of Yeshua, not how large is the unreached field. That is a quite different question from asking if what the mission community is likely to reach even the whole of this community, despite its relatively small size.

There is deep concern that Jewish people hear a gospel that can be understood in their cultural context. Seldom are there strategy discussions about how to accomplish reaching *the entire Jewish population* with a contextualized gospel message. In Jewish mission, the challenge may be great, but the relatively small size makes the task far easier to assess.

This raises the obvious question. Under current conditions, is the North American Jewish mission community able to reach the Jewish people presented by the great opportunity outlined above? For those Jewish people still living in the West, who are the concern of this paper, the number amounts to approximately six, perhaps seven, million souls if extended beyond North America but excepting Israel.

If the answer is unknown it must be found. Most probably, the answer is no, and the likelihood of recruiting and resourcing enough workers will be deemed impossible. If true, partners in mission must be found or this golden opportunity for expanding Yeshua’s Kingdom will be lost.

End Notes

1. Luis Lugo, Director, *A Portrait of Jewish Life* (Washington D.C., The Pew Research Center 2013): 71.
2. *A Portrait of Jewish Life*, 10.
3. *A Portrait of Jewish Life*, 73.
4. Cohen, Stephen M., Conservative Jewry's numbers plummeting, but core engagement steady, The Jewish Telegraphic Agency, <https://www.jta.org/2015/11/10/united-states/opened-forconservative-jews-smaller-numbers-but-steady-engagement>, (November 10, 2015).
5. *A Portrait of Jewish Life*, 10.
6. Schick, Marvin, *American Jewry: Where are we now? Where are we headed?* , (<https://jewishaction.com/jewish-world/american-jewry-now-heading-two-views/>), 2016.
7. Jack Wertheimer, *The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice Their Religion Today*, (Princeton New Jersey, Princeton University Press 2018), 11.
8. Wertheimer, 28.
9. Wertheimer, 29.
10. Wertheimer, 38.
11. Wertheimer, 64.
12. Wertheimer, 49.
13. Wertheimer, 48.
14. Wertheimer, 53.
15. Wertheimer, 159
16. *A Portrait of Jewish Life*, 10
17. *A Portrait of Jewish Life*, 58