

## Baby Boomers

### *Trends:*

- Greater Portland population of this age demographic will continue to grow
- Longer productivity, desire to stay involved leads to more “encore” careers and opportunity to use skilled volunteers
- Many Jewish boomers not finding options in the Jewish community so using their skills elsewhere
- With longer life spans, adults 60+ will be/are caring for older parents (80+)
- Desire life-long learning opportunities
- Jewish connectedness is most important factor in legacy giving

### *Needs:*

- Services to ensure care, wellness, and connection to our community
- Opportunities for continued learning, growth and travel
- Offer “encore” career and volunteer options for high level, meaningful participation
- Help families cope with care for aging parents
- Educational and cultural opportunities that meet their interests – must be geographically convenient and less expensive

### *New/Expanded:*

- Peer and interest-group trips to Israel and Jewish heritage communities
- Philanthropic engagement based on Jewish communal past and current involvement
- Develop a “Mature Adult Learners Program” with ongoing educational opportunities
- Cultural program center to create and implement activities for this cohort

### *Impact/Outcomes:*

- Engage an additional 150 Greater Portland boomers in organized Jewish across the entire region within the first three years
- Increase and expand philanthropic engagement to benefit communal funding and programming, including increased endowment to fund key program in perpetuity
- Missions to Israel and other Jewish Heritage communities over the next four years exposing members of the community to a deeper understanding of the Jewish people, history and culture
- Grateful families who see the Jewish community as truly cradle to grave service provider



## 12 Numbers Nonprofits Need To Know About Baby Boomers

We've been talking a lot lately about how nonprofits can [better reach and engage Millennials](#) on this blog. In fact, much of the recent demographic chatter in the nonprofit industry has focused on this generation. While it's not intentional, we may be overshadowing and ignoring the single most important generation for nonprofits in the process.

**A new study reveals baby boomers have become the dominant source of individual donations to nonprofits.** So just how important are boomers to your organization? And how can your nonprofit work to better engage and connect with this essential generation? In today's blog post, we delve into some statistics that will help provide answers to those questions.

### ***About The Next Generation of American Giving Study***

*This report reveals multichannel preferences and charitable habits of Generation X, Generation Y, Baby Boomers, and Matures. The online study of 1,014 U.S. donors was published by Edge Research, Sea Change Strategies and Target Analytics . [Learn more about the study results.](#)*

### **Power and Prominence of Baby Boomer Donations**

[The Chronicle of Philanthropy recently reported on a new online study](#) that looked at the charitable habits of donors across generations. The study revealed the prominence of baby boomers in supporting nonprofit organizations. Here are some key stats:

- **34% of all donors fall into the category of baby boomers (defined as those born between 1946-1964)**
- **43% of all donations contributed to nonprofits by individuals come from baby boomers**
- **70% of total individual giving to charities comes from baby boomers and seniors (those born before 1946)**
- **75% of baby boomers say they will support the same number of charities in 2013 as they did last year**
- **42% of baby boomers said they have made an online donation to a nonprofit (more boomers give online than through the mail)**

### **Surprising Rise of Active Internet Baby Boomers**

That last stat above is of particular interest and importance to fundraisers. *Why?* Because while most nonprofits are targeting their online efforts mainly at Millennials, they may not be taking full advantage of the channel when it comes to baby boomers.

### ***About the Reaching Today's Boomers & Seniors Online Study***

*In a custom research study, Google and Ipsos explore how Baby Boomers and Seniors behave online and what influences their decisions related to societal causes and issues. [View the full report.](#)*

The common misconception is that boomers are not nearly as active on the Web as younger generations. While in the past that may have been true, the gap is closing. In fact, baby boomers are actually online a lot more than you might think. [A recent study from Google and Ipsos](#) revealed just how active this generation is on the Internet:

- **19.6 hours a week is the average time boomers spend online (compared to 15.3 hours a week watching TV)**
- **83% of boomers and seniors use the Internet to learn more about topics of interest**
- **54% of boomers/seniors watch online videos (compared with 65% of the general population)**
- **71% of baby boomers use social networking sites**
- **Boomers/seniors use social networks to:**
  - **55% follow groups/organizations**
  - **40% post/watch videos**
  - **26% support causes**
  - **23% join groups**
- **29% of boomers and seniors use a smartphone regularly (compared with 48% of the general population)**
- **19% regularly use a tablet (compared with 25% of the general population)**

### **Lost Generation of Nonprofit Marketing Strategy?**

So the question for nonprofits arises: With all the focus on hooking Millennials and maintaining elderly supporters (long the bread and butter of the nonprofit world), are baby boomers—a central demographic when it comes to nonprofit income—slipping through the marketing cracks? It's a good question for every nonprofit to ask.

**You want to make sure reaching, engaging and maintaining relationships with baby boomer supporters is a part of your marketing strategy moving forward.** You also may find that initiating more Internet efforts targeted toward baby boomers—like promoting and encouraging online fundraising—will make a much larger impact than you may have initially thought possible.

# Engagement of baby boomers crucial to Jewish future

LEISAH WOLDOFF | Managing Editor | Posted: Wednesday, July 2, 2014 10:00 am

Although the results of last year's Pew Survey on American Jewish identity led many Jewish communities to shift their focus to developing programming for Millennials, one nonprofit says there's another age group that also requires attention: baby boomers.

B3/The Jewish Boomer Platform, a nonprofit based in New York, was created in 2011 by David M. Elcott and Stuart Himmelfarb to engage – or re-engage – Jewish baby boomers in Jewish life in an intergenerational context.

The impetus for the project stemmed from a 2009 study about Jewish baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) by Elcott, a professor of practice in public service and leadership at New York University's Wagner School of Public Service.

The study showed that 90 percent of the respondents affirmed “a significant degree of importance to finding greater meaning in their lives and feeling a sense of accomplishment,” but “the majority of Jewish baby boomers do not at this time see either volunteer or paid encore careers as a way to express their Jewish identity.”

An encore career combines personal fulfillment, social impact and continued income and comes between a person's midlife career and retirement.

The idea that the majority of Jewish boomers would conduct their search for meaning – as well as any public service work – outside the Jewish community, caught the attention of Elcott and Himmelfarb, a former chief marketing officer at UJA Federation of Northern New Jersey.

“The Jewish community is woefully lagging behind other groups, whether secular or governmental, in terms of offering baby boomers resources for figuring out what to do next,” Himmelfarb said.

“We have lots of answers and responses to the problems you might encounter when you get older, but what we ironically don't have is answers for the upbeat side of aging.” Where do boomers turn if they are happy with what they've done in their lives and are now looking forward, wanting to explore the world, do something meaningful and give something back? “What we see is that in the secular and governmental agencies, [there is] an awareness that boomers are a huge demographic cohort and boomers are going through these changes and looking for something meaningful.”

Some Jewish communities are starting to address this issue, Himmelfarb noted, citing Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills as an example. The California congregation organized “The Next Stage:

The Boomer and Beyond Initiative” and is planning a community conversation “The Next Stage: Looking Forward and Giving Back,” in November, featuring Marc Freedman, the creator of Encore.org, a nonprofit that is building a movement to make it easier for people to pursue encore careers.

“We’re seeing the beginnings of recognition that not only [are boomers] a population that’s worth engaging but [they also] are a population that might just drift away,” Himmelfarb said. It’s not necessarily a mass exodus of boomers running from the Jewish community, he explained, but more of a subtle drift away as they look for interesting things to do with their newly available time and desire to establish their legacy.

B3/The Jewish Boomer Platform works with Jewish communities to help them find new ways to engage people in Jewish life.

Boomers are very similar in many important ways to Millennials, Himmelfarb said. Millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996) are going through a major life change, seeking to find meaning in life, discovering who they’re going to spend their life with, examining their Jewish identity and figuring out how to use their skills.

“The interesting thing is that those same choices are confronting boomers,” Himmelfarb said.

“If we look at boomers and we say it’s similar to Millennials, it’s just 30 years later, then maybe we can change the conversation about aging.”

*Learn more at [b3platform.org](http://b3platform.org).*

# **Generations** **&** **Re-Generation**

Engagement and Fidelity  
in 21st Century  
American Jewish Life



[B3PLATFORM.ORG](http://B3PLATFORM.ORG)

David Elcott • Stuart Himmelfarb

# Executive Summary

In the spring of 2013, B3/The Jewish Boomer Platform initiated a survey of engaged American Jews, exploring the demographics, beliefs, activities, and behaviors of those who have some degree of affiliation or connection with a Jewish institution (members, donors, and/or email subscribers). This study continues the work we have been doing for five years to better understand the views, attitudes, and behaviors of engaged Jews as a subset of the United States Jewish community. Since it arose out of our previous research into the Baby Boomer generation of American Jews (born 1946-1964), we placed special emphasis on generational issues in our analysis. Yet, while generational distinction is often apparent, we found many similarities among the four active adult generations of American Jews. These findings can inform how the American Jewish community conceives of its tasks and challenges in fostering a vibrant community in the future for Jews of all ages.

Our work is grounded in decades of involvement in and commitment to a vital and vibrant Jewish community of Jews engaged in meaningful and compelling Jewish lives and institutions. We are not neutral, an important caveat that all researchers and analysts must share with their readers. As participants in the Jewish community, we are aware of its discontents. As Americans, we note the vast research detailing the diminution of civic engagement across the American landscape. As Baby Boomers ourselves, we remain engaged in significant professional and volunteer roles in the Jewish community and observe the paralyzing tensions of generational transitions in foundations and synagogues, federations and national organizations, universities and social service agencies as we face an array of daunting challenges. Committed as we are to the community that sustains us and our families, we are more than observers. We seek and will offer possible solutions to the problems and issues we identify in this study. What we believe is that there are Jews out there drifting away from older forms of Jewish life and institutions, who could be connected or reconnected via new, more compelling and inviting models of engagement arising from new understandings of a rapidly shifting and ever challenging landscape.

More than 12,500 questionnaires were completed by an online panel created using the email lists of more than 50 Jewish organizations across the United States, including federations, denominational bodies, activism and advocacy organizations, and fellowships. This study presents results of that survey, and places them within the context of other research and analysis regarding the continuity and vitality of

American Jewry, and of other minority ethnic and religious communities. The core question behind the study, and behind our focus on Baby Boomers and intergenerational connections, is: how can we sustain a thriving American Jewish community? This focus parallels an increased concern about the place and vitality of minority communities in the inviting embrace of the twenty-first century United States. Key factors surrounding this question involve the ways in which Jewish identity, engagement, belief, opinion, and practice intersect with many rapid changes affecting the overall American landscape: generational change, technological advances, and changes in American family life, civic culture, and religion.

It is critical to remember, when approaching these results, that this sample was designed to skew toward those more engaged in Jewish communal life. This must affect our reading of figures which would have been entirely different if the population had included everyone who calls herself/himself Jewish, as was the case in *A Portrait of Jewish Americans: Findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews* and other such population studies. Thus, this study's population belongs to, gives to, and participates in Jewish life at a much higher rate than would be found in other studies. At the same time, we expected a commensurately high degree of satisfaction and a strong sense of Jewish obligation among such a highly identified and engaged population. So there was some surprise when, for example, we surveyed whether Jews see living out their Jewish lives as a motivation for civic engagement in the form of volunteering. A glance at the table of results for this question might prompt some readers to focus on the fact that strong majorities of all age groups (66%-78%) cited living out a Jewish life as either "somewhat important" or "very important" as a motivation for volunteering. Among the whole Jewish population, of course, this number might seem reassuringly large; in this context it is lukewarm (especially compared to the response rates for more universalistic motivations). It is only when we consider the nature of this sample that we may realize that the one in five engaged Jews who find this reason "not important" at all represent a real issue that Jewish communities must address. That conclusion is a matter of emphasis, and (as is always true of quantitative research) different observers will learn different lessons from the same numbers. But make no mistake about the denominator behind the percentages: this is a study of Jews who are connected to the Jewish community. The sampling method has its thumb on the scale, in favor of existing institutions, so if we see discomfiting news for them it is all the more significant.

## Key Findings And Recommendations:

### ► Personal change and communal engagement potential are not limited to the young.

Although many funders and organizations focus large shares of their efforts on one cohort (“next gen,” Millennials, etc.), this study finds that significant numbers of connected Jews of all ages experience their Jewish lives and affiliations as evolving over time. Organizations may reap significant benefits from expanding their engagement efforts to include older age cohorts, and, correspondingly, if communal institutions maintain a focus almost exclusively on the young, they should not expect that all older Jews now connected to the community will necessarily remain so. In terms of policies and practices, this means that organizations should eliminate age as a criterion in programs, including the kinds of learning and leadership training programs usually offered to “young leaders.”

### ► A significant minority of connected Jews are leaning away from long-term commitments and toward episodic participation.

About four in ten affirm that they prefer to “just get involved when or if I am interested.” Importantly, this minority is just as large among Baby Boomers as it is among the younger age cohorts. But even among those who prefer episodic participation, more than half have served on a board or committee of some kind, and many report interest in doing so in the future.

### ► Damning with faint praise: Although highly connected to Jewish communal institutions, this population is only tepidly satisfied with them.

Among the three post-war generations, well under 20% are “very satisfied” with JCCs and federations. Only a third or less of each cohort expresses great satisfaction with synagogue life. As Robert Putnam and David Campbell noted in *American Grace*, a person who is “somewhat satisfied” is on the lookout for something else.

### ► Belonging to the Jewish people is very important to strong majorities of all four age cohorts, but its importance does decline among younger respondents.

Frequency of attending Jewish cultural events (museums, films, plays, concerts) also decreases for the younger generations. The decline in the importance of identity for the young extends to American identity as well. Overwhelming majorities of all age groups ascribe some level of importance to being an American, but while 90% of the World War II generation and 78% of Boomers feel being an American is very important, only 61% of Generation X and 41% of Millennials feel that way. It is unclear whether these are generational differences that will endure over time or life-stage differences through which cohorts will progress.

### ► American Jews are without a compelling narrative to bind them.

The Holocaust, while remaining the lead story for an overwhelming number of Jews, does not describe the experience of Jews in the U.S. This population expresses a clear pessimism about the future of Israel, America, and the world, a situation not helped by the organized Jewish community’s continual focus on antisemitism, Jewish suffering, and death. The powerful Zionist story with which many Jews grew up is waning as an effective unifying narrative.

### ► Engaged Jews are strongly identified both with universal values (making the world better for everyone) and with being Jewish (and addressing Jewish needs), but their levels of motivation and enthusiasm for universal values are significantly stronger and more consistent than their Jewish ones. This gap is especially apparent in responses to questions about motivations for volunteering.

These results confirm for engaged Jews (regardless of age) what Repair the World’s study *Volunteering + Values* revealed of young Jews (regardless of engagement level): universal values are more strongly and consistently affirmed than Jewish values as personal motivations to volunteer. Jewish organizations must do more than just continue to assert that Jewish and universal concerns go naturally together (*tikkun olam*); they must create new approaches, programs, activities, and initiatives that will actually bridge that gap on the level of compelling emotion in the lives of the Jewish public.

### ► Online media are important for reaching all age groups.

Although social media is less prevalent among the very oldest of connected Jews, online Jewish content and social media are a part of the lives of strong majorities of all age groups. Reading Jewish print media declines somewhat among younger generations. The competitive flood of media saturation is daunting and will challenge Jewish organizations. Organizations will need to use ever more sophisticated methods in both print and online media to deliver messages to their audiences.

### ► New language and new approaches are needed to attract (and describe) people’s attention, interest, and participation.

The ways many Jews describe themselves and how they feel about their Jewish lives and activities are changing. Traditional terms and statements are no longer relevant for many. For some, traditional denominational labels no longer apply, so appeals using that language might not attract their interest. For others, connections and participation in an activity might be possible, but should not be interpreted as interest in formal membership. Mission statements and program goals will gain or lose relevance based on how they are described: do they address community-wide or universal issues, or are they focused only on the Jewish community or Jewish needs?

### ► Jewish institutions need to replace hierarchical and authoritarian structures with more fluid, flat, and open democratic systems of engaging people in non-authoritarian and even non-authoritative processes.

Successful synagogues and other organizations will become platforms for engagement in which Jews can collaboratively choose activities and behaviors that they consider Jewish, highlighting volition and creative collaboration as opposed to top-down programmatic offerings by the professionals and their volunteer boards. This shift in the way we organize applies powerfully to the ways synagogues and other institutions organize their membership fees—the more rigid and fixed their structure, the less likely they are to fit people’s needs or expectations. In a landscape in which personalization and customization are routine, a system that does not offer flexibility will be less attractive.

# Generations & Re-Generation

## Implications for a Minority Community in 21st Century America

### Introduction

**T**his monograph is part of a surge in the study of minority communities and how they sustain themselves, or how, sometimes, they falter, fail, and die. In large part, it is a study of change: undirected trends already changing the Jewish community, and intentional changes that the community's organized and organizing structures must make if their priority is to foster continuity and vitality in the American Jewish future.

The research below includes results from a survey of over 12,500 active American Jews, a literature review, conversations, and analyses. It also includes—in fact, is animated by—two biases we are glad to own. First, we do not approach the question of whether and how the Jewish community can sustain itself with dispassion. This work is not primarily addressed to the audience (and it is not a small or insignificant one) that sees the assimilation and disappearance of minority communities as a positive goal. We examine (and, in fact, advocate) certain forms of change not only out of scholarly interest, but also out of a desire to see American Jewry grow and thrive as a distinct identity and community in the future.

Second, since our research and advocacy are focused on the goal of how the Jewish community can sustain itself and thrive, we necessarily and happily leave it to others to decide what beliefs and practices may be acceptably or “authentically” Jewish. (Indeed, we will advocate a less protectionist stance regarding the borders of Jewish identity and practice than past generations of communal leaders have embraced.) Therefore, perforce, our approach will seem at least incomplete to those—whether on the Orthodox right or the social justice-oriented left—who prioritize particular elements of Jewish content over the overall continuity and vitality of the Jewish community, whether that preferred content is Orthodox halakha, gender egalitarianism, or a primary focus on tikkun olam. Jews have always argued over what is optional and what is nonnegotiable in Judaism, and it is not our present task to take a side in these arguments. Rather, our research agenda places the survival of American Jewish identity before any other of these concerns; if the Jewish community ceases to exist as such, then anyone's opinion about what is at the core of being Jewish will cease to matter.

### What We Need To Know (And Do) About Sustaining The American Jewish Community

To be a Jewish decision maker today demands immersion in field and literature research well beyond the confines of the Jewish world. Meeting that expectation—leading based on evidence rather than wishful thinking, and achieving (or even seeking) deep expertise on identity and minority community mobilization and affiliation—has proven to be a weak link for Jewish organizations and funders, with unfortunate consequences for policy formation and evaluation.

As heirs to a venerable tradition that has weathered dramatic and wrenching storms, Jewish decision-makers, organizational leaders, and funders often seem to evince a sense of both vulnerability and immortality. They tend to lead from the heart, from what they most passionately hope and wish will be, as if desire and faith alone will produce changes they wish to see. Yet inevitably they fall back on how things have been done in the past, adhering to a rigid set of boundaries that confirm a self-assuredness bred of Jewish exceptionalism and based on past success. We would argue that, historically, the most effective leaders and those responsible for the most enduring and sustainable transformations are those who were adept at reading all the evidence—evidence of successful and unsuccessful approaches to sustaining ethnic and

minority religious communities that they gathered from within and far beyond the limiting walls of the Jewish community they inherited. We seek to encourage the same farsighted and open thinking today, wherever it takes us.

We need to set a context. Concern about the Jewish future is paralleled by many other minority communities fearful of the impact of twenty-first century developments on their institutions, their traditions, and, most notably, on the identities and future fidelity of their constituents. That is why for decades there have been increased attempts to understand the socialization processes by which national, ethnic, cultural identities evolve, and how we can explain the intensity or failure of commitment to these identities. Here we are speaking of a “doctrine that a people who see themselves as distinct in their culture, history, institutions, or principles should rule themselves [with] in a political

***J**ewish decision-makers tend to lead from the heart, as if desire and faith alone will produce changes they wish to see.*

system that expresses and protects those distinctive characteristics" (Snyder 23). Although some theorists (Posner) claim that identities are ultimately utilitarian, arguing that individuals choose the identity most salient to them though a rational cost-benefit analysis, our experience, particularly in looking at Jewish identity, is quite different. We see multiple examples of how ethnic, religious, geographic, or national identities make deep and enduring emotional claims on people long after any material value has evaporated. There is an emotional response to one's identity (Petersen) that heightens the saliency of issues that threaten—or exult—that identity. For Jews in 1945 and born since to choose voluntarily to identify as "covenanted" Jews is perhaps the most potent example of the deep and emotional claims of an identity in spite of the painful reality that any material value had evaporated.<sup>1</sup>

*Few of us will live our lives within one community and one identity. Changes in personal identity come with ease and frequency.*

At the same time, we live in an age with so many opportunities. How individuals navigate multiple possible identities that stake claims on them increasingly occupies our research focus, especially when an identity is not directly tied to one's nationality, to the patriotism and physical reality of geographic location. It is clear that members of a minority community can see themselves as distinct in their culture, history, institutions, and principles, even as part of a larger political entity. Examples abound throughout the world, from Russians in Crimea or Muslims in Burma/Myanmar to Basques in Spain and Kurds across the Middle East. In so many cases communal collective identities do not match national borders, often leading to conflicts or even genocidal assaults against minority groups. That is not the case for the Jewish community in the United States. Liberal democracies such as the United States have, on the whole, found places for minority communities within the larger national identity. As Will Kymlicka writes in *Multicultural Citizenship*, "A comprehensive theory of justice in a multicultural state will include both universal rights, assigned to individuals regardless of group membership, and certain group-differentiated rights or 'special status' for minority cultures." (6). Certainly, in the United States, racial, national origin, religious, and ethnic identities play a significant role for individuals, their communities, and for the nation itself. Positive affirmation of a unique Jewish identity, both personal and corporate, in America is possible. Yet this and other surveys of the Jewish community remind us that sustaining that unique identity as a minority community in America today is still extraordinarily difficult, and increasingly so.

As an introduction to understanding the issues facing minority communities today—and since we are believers in evidenced-based decision making—it is critical to explore some of the reasons why socializing individuals into a community that compels a strong, enduring identity and deep allegiance, and then retaining that allegiance, is so hard.

Our community of study and personal involvement has been mainly the Jewish community, particularly in the United States. We are joined by fellow researchers for whom the process whereby Jews are socialized into an organic and authoritative community is a matter of passionate concern. As researchers, we have been both analysts and decision makers in the Jewish community, although our interactions with and study of religious, national, and ethnic communities have allowed us ample opportunity for comparative reflection. From this vantage point, we have found compelling evidence that in contemporary North America, no culture and identity—not even the "all-American" white, Christian, and hetero-male dominant identity—

retains the monolithic control it may formerly have held in shaping values and allegiances, nor can any social construct demand absolute fealty. The myriad life options available invest each individual with a radical sense of autonomy and a dizzying array of choices. Few of us will live our lives within one community, one religion, and one group identity, for even those who seem the most isolated are quite aware of the options available—even if they do not act on them. Facilitated by social media and online resources, changes in personal identity can come with astonishing ease and frequency.

Marshall Berman, in his classic 1988 meditation on modernity, points out that the revolutionary overthrow of traditions is a symptom of our age, not its cause. The fundamental changes in social relations, means of production, technological advances, methods of communication, and communal organization produce perpetual uncertainty. The rate of change is so rapid that change itself becomes the only reliable tradition. Berman then cites a vision projected more than a century ago by Karl Marx, the ultimate rootless man:

All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face . . . the real conditions of their lives and their relationships with their fellow men. (Marx and Engels qtd. in Berman 21).

Marx may not have been an accurate predictor of world revolution, but he did prophesy the challenge to identity and community which the modern age heralded. In particular, when we look at how communities try to promote civic engagement and socialize their members into their unique political and cultural systems, we are acutely aware that the traditional agents for such socialization—the family, religious institutions, local media, schools, government itself—no longer are afforded the allegiance or authority that once made them so effective. In the United States, confidence in these classic values-generating institutions has been diminishing for decades and may now be at an all-time low (*Millennials: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends*). We will come back to this point later.

Kenneth Gergen addresses a parallel awareness in *The Saturated Self*. With no commanding personal or communal identity, it is difficult for individuals to develop a commitment to the past, to form binding ties to any particular worldview, to find a grounding in any particular culture. Gergen pinpoints the openness that makes cultural allegiance and identity so difficult:

As we begin to incorporate the dispositions of the varied others to whom we are exposed, we become capable of taking their positions, adopting their attitudes, talking their language, playing their roles. In effect, one's self becomes populated by others. The result is a steadily accumulating sense of doubt in the objectivity of any position one holds . . . In the face of continuous point and counterpoint—both in public and private spheres—one slowly approaches the awareness that perhaps the monument of objectivity is hollow. (85).

The problem for those attempting to foster allegiance to a particular community—to any community or singular identity—is that the norms and values, the behaviors and attitudes of the past, and the political and social systems they generated are often undermined and discredited by the radical openness and critical analysis of the past decades. The narrative of meaning handed down from generations past no longer compels, its authenticity challenged. Even as some may envy the comforting clarity of their great-grandparents' world, there is no return to an earlier era. Given the strong postmodern critiques of patriarchal,

<sup>1</sup> See the work of, among others, Irving Greenberg.

class, and racial institutional power that asserts control over cultural transmission, most Americans correctly celebrate the new possibilities that allow individuals to adopt identities they choose rather than those they inherit. Yet we also must admit a significant cost; as Berger, Berger, and Kellner assert, "Modern man is afflicted with a permanent identity crisis, a condition conducive to considerable nervousness." (qtd. in Gergen 73). Nervousness is a gentle word to describe the anxieties felt by so many leaders of minority communities today, and certainly most accurately defines many of those attempting to ensure the future of a Jewish community in the United States.

We are struck in speaking, whether to retirees in Florida, lawyers and bankers in a Jewish leadership program here in New York, or college students in Portland, by the unanimous response we get to a simple question: "How many of you see yourselves, man or woman, child or spouse, partner or parents, just like your parents and grandparent are or were?" There are seldom more than a few hands raised; even in this most basic feature, what it means to be a woman or a man, few of us are willing to inherit a sense of identity from our parents and grandparents.

Perhaps the rupture of tradition is best expressed in the most rigidly Orthodox section of Meah She'arim in Jerusalem, where a sign is posted: "Daughters of Israel, dress modestly." While some see the rigid enforcement of a traditional dress code as continuity with the past, the critical eye sees a clear-eyed awareness by the controlling rabbis that at any moment, a teenage girl who has secretly explored the world on the internet, on TV, or just looking discreetly on the streets of Jerusalem, can throw off the old, put on a halter top and shorts, and walk out. Two challenges face this community: it has no absolute authority over her, and she is open to alternative cultures and socialization processes that are not her inheritance. It is tough to sustain communal coherence without coercion, and most would agree that ending coercion is not a bad thing. But it is a serious challenge for communal leaders, and for those who are taught, trained, and coached in the hopes that they will voluntarily associate themselves with and cherish their place in the Jewish community.

This contemporary reality also poses problems for the researcher and analyst. In what may be a strained analogy to Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, many social scientists have accepted the axiom that one cannot determine an object's position when it is in motion. So if we try to measure social change, we cannot locate the present position of the social group that is changing. Those who best understand the existing political and social systems, the leaders and social scientists deeply vested in the existing structures, often find it difficult to see the changes that are occurring, for they are not yet manifest. Those who can predict revolutions—the outsiders, the disaffected, those who launch start-ups that challenge the status quo—have a hard time seeing value in the existing structures of authority. If the Jewish community once lived in a stable world of enduring patterns of authority—rabbis and organizational presidents, generous philanthropists and institutional heads—we are now aware that we live in a fractured world in which our analyses of the political, religious, social, and cultural "systems" may not be predictive of changes taking place, while the changes that are taking place simply confound our analyses.

Social scientists are used to looking at variables such as family influence, religious affiliation and ritual behaviors, or age cohort experience to determine effective socialization processes. Minority communal leaders trust the institutions they have built as bulwarks against assimilation into the general American society. We will see some credible examples below. But how effective can any socialization process be today when individuals can and do ignore the once authoritative socializing agents we all claim are so critical to identity formation—school, family, youth groups, summer camps, the synagogue,

rabbis, and teachers? As we learn by analogy from physics, if we try to explain the trajectory of the change we can observe among globalized and wired Americans, then all those unique socializing agents upon which minority communities have depended lose their reliability. If we try to track age cohorts, authoritative institutions, educational systems, and even family values, we may not see the dynamic of transformation and demands for serious reevaluation of our programmatic and institutional priorities.

This study focuses on change and transformation. Both in the questions that ground the research and in the choice of population, we seek to understand the movement, the trajectory of change taking place within the Jewish community, since change and not stasis most describes the age in which we live. We do recognize and appreciate the remarkable successes that reflect both the Jewish past and so much of contemporary Jewish communal and institutional life. But we are not satisfied with present policies and communal foci. These analytic tensions—trusting that we know what needs to be done—are why we challenge the easy answers, quick fixes, and heuristic devices that tend to dominate decision-making conversations about Jewish continuity.

Let us consider four key variables central to some of our assumptions about sustaining minority communities in American society, Jewish or otherwise: faith, residential patterns, assimilation indices, and family. A closer look may confound accepted truths.

Historically, monotheist religions often spoke the language of absolute truths: the universal Church, the one God, the only path to salvation. Non-believers were (and still are) often described as satanic or sub-human. Today, we are witness to remarkable shifts. In

a survey by the Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, to the affirmation, "My religion is the one, true faith leading to eternal life," only 24% of Americans agreed. Further complicating the situation is that 64% of Protestants, 77% of Catholics, 89% of Jews, and 60% of Muslims agreed that, "There is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of my religion ("Religious Landscape Survey—Comparisons"). To whatever degree it was ever assumed that Jewish religious institutions or organizations mold the identities and viewpoints of their adherents, offering Judaism as singular, we certainly see now that Jewish institutions and leaders cannot rely on any monolithic or exclusively defined faith from their constituents.

Ethnic communities have depended, historically, on residential proximity, on identity formed on the streets, in local ethnic restaurants and community centers, and in religious institutions. In New York City, Little Italy, Harlem, Chinatown, or the Lower East Side kept each group separated and reinforced internal cohesion. So it is no surprise that Jewish social scientists examining Jewish residential patterns bemoan the loss of Jewish neighborhoods. But there is a surprise: in a study entitled, "Bend it Like Beckham: Identity, Socialization, and Assimilation," Alberto Bisin et al. conclude that "identity and socialization to an ethnic minority are more intense in mixed neighborhoods than in segregated neighborhoods." (27). The article adds that "integration may fail due to the perverse effects of integration policies which might induce more intense ethnic identities and stronger ethnic socialization efforts on the part of the parents." The irony is that if Jewish leaders, in the role of policy makers, try to promote Jews living with, and associating mainly with, other Jews for all the good reasons we understand, they could receive a painful shock when such segregation actually diminishes ethnic and religious identity and exacerbates cultural pluralism. This is not a prescription, but a reminder that correlations—Jewish kids should go to Jewish camps and day schools and live in Jewish neighborhoods because then they will remain affiliated—are not obviously

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causal. We know that such experiences correlate with stronger identity, not that they are the reasons why young Jews later become strongly identified and affiliated Jewish adults. There is a great deal we simply do not know about identity in America.

Bethamie Horowitz, whose demographic analyses of American Jewry are groundbreaking, challenges our notions of what constitutes assimilation. She notes wryly that Jewish men married to Christians with Christian children read more about Judaism and speak about it with friends and colleagues at a higher rate than endogamous Jews. She questions the passionate focus of Jewish leaders who promote exclusive Jewish settings for teenagers and young adults:

Is it really a communal goal to have “all Jewish friends,” as news reports about the correlates of strong Jewish identity typically imply? While this may be one feature of living in an environment where Jewishness is taken seriously, the religion of your friends says nothing about the values and beliefs you hold dear. A person can just as easily go shopping or chill out in front of the television with one’s Jewish buddies as with non-Jewish pals. The overly simplified approach to counting the Jewish blessings threatens to dumb down the profound challenges of being Jewish in America. What we need most is a picture of how people connect the multiple aspects of themselves—being a Jew, being an American, being a human being. Our ideal should be to create a community that is particular without being parochial.

This critique, that identity markers (endogamous marriage, Jewish friends, visiting Israel) have replaced meaningful Jewish content, demarcates the battle lines drawn on how to program and spend money on building a minority community. Rokhl Kafirissen writes:

Indeed, not inculcation of Jewish patterns of life, nor transmission of Jewish culture and history, but measurement and management of identity became the constitutive act of the modern Jewish communal apparatus. It’s no coincidence that the most lavishly funded communal project of our generation has not been universal comprehensive Jewish education, but rather, an identity making vacation whose goals are no more controversial than encouraging passive Zionism and getting young Jews near each other. This is the insidiousness of the identity ideology.

The insidiousness of identity ideology plays out at the family level as well, in the traditional ethnic or religious family raising children within American society. The family, both anecdotally and in terms of socialization research, has been regarded as a major force in molding a meaningful Jewish identity. Presumptions underlying that ideal usually included intact families that spent time interacting. This reality is challenged on many fronts. The nature of family life has altered significantly in the past decades with the cultural normalization of divorce, blended families, single-parent families, and single-sex families. And shared family bonding is rarer as family members scatter to their personal forms of entertainment and information gathering, the modern family’s ubiquitous technological partners. As for meaningful interaction, an activist practitioner in the field, Harold Schulweis, writes about the Jewish family:

Jewish idealism and altruism and respect for the complexity of life and the need to find meaning beyond narcissism are threatened from within . . . The internal threat of the vacuous Jewish family is more prosaic than the challenges from alien ideologies but they are

more dangerous precisely because they are the constant gnawing away at the Jewish moral and spiritual fiber within the family.

Added to these four examples that confound a researcher’s ability to analyze—shifts in religious authority, the role of residential patterns, assimilation patterns and the tension between parochial and particular, and the realities of American families—are the studies, of which *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam was the most popular, that civic engagement is diminishing, at least in the classic ways we understood civic involvement: membership in formal organizations, willingness to serve on traditional boards and attend meetings, voting, and involvement in public activity such as demonstrations, signing petitions, or being present at public hearings.

Alan Mittleman makes this point in the final page of *Jewish Polity and American Civil Society*:

If . . . we live in an age of “porous” institutions, which people occasionally use rather than join, membership-based organizations most constantly work at replacing their aging bases. Sociological studies point to an erosion of interest and loyalty among Jews toward nonsynagogal institutions. Jewish organizations are perceived to be remote and disconnected from the Judaism of many contemporary American Jews. (390).

And there is increasing evidence, as shown in this survey and others, that synagogues now face a similar erosion as empty-nesters leave and younger generations, having children later in life, are slow to join. The early-warning indicators of declining membership in the various Jewish denominations confirm the challenges facing institutional affiliation of American Jews.

It would be proper to be cautious before asserting quick-fix, simple policy solutions based on traditional variables like faith, residential patterns, assimilation indices, and family—solutions such as promoting in-marriage, underwriting Jewish pre-schools and camps, and offering free Israel experiences. Even if there is a rising sense of panic, we must explore a wider range of variables that could be influencing socialization patterns and communal identity. And we must listen to a wider audience, certainly beyond the young people Jewish organizations try to engage with enticements of free trips to Israel and highly subsidized events in Las Vegas, Park City, or Miami. This caution should not paralyze decision-making among Jews and Jewish organizations. Rather, effective leaders should not only act from the heart, from what we wish reality to be, but seek out the research that should undergird and guide decision-making. Imaginative research and analysis can help us to discover effective innovations, to question long held assumptions, and to challenge funding patterns and quick “solutions” which may not lead to their advertised results.

### **Defining A Minority Community In A Pluralist And Open Society**

We well understand now that the success of minority communities to sustain strong ethnic or religious identities and communal connections while engaging as vital participants in American society has proven difficult, especially for white ethnic minorities. In the United States we often mistakenly assume identity by noting commonly accepted markers of difference—one is Black or Latino, Catholic or Jewish or Muslim. The U.S. Census and polling organizations try to bring clarity by isolating particular identities that conform to what, for historical reasons, are the ways Americans are thought to self-identify. But not all those with Latino surnames identify as Latino and not all those born Catholic or Muslim will assert that identity. And certainly membership or other forms of affiliation cannot be taken for granted. As we have noted, America is a land of choice, except perhaps for some aspects of the painful legacy of slavery and race.

**We must listen to a wider audience, certainly beyond the young people that Jewish organizations try to entice with free trips.**

While we recognize that prejudice and discrimination can force an identity even upon those who would opt to escape that identity, minority communities are sustained by those most engaged, understood as those willing to take on institutional roles and who embrace and maintain institutional connections and networks linking them to those who share their identity. These are the individuals who do not fit in with the trends observed in Putnam's *Bowling Alone*. If we seek to understand the vitality, sustainability, and normative views and values of the Jewish community, seeking out those most involved and committed (rather than the larger, self-identifying population that has been targeted by demographers) is a critical step. And to identify the ways they do not conform to or agree with common normative images of an ideal member of the Jewish community would help us better evaluate and anticipate potential fractures and losses facing the Jewish community.

This definition of the relevant population is even more significant when seeking to understand Jews as a minority community in the United States. Simply determining who is to be included causes great disagreement. The recent Pew Research Center study, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, is an example of the complexity of linking identity to community. While noting the antiquity of the question, the researchers made a strategic decision to

cast the net widely, seeking to interview all adults who answer an initial set of questions (the "screener") by saying (a) that their religion is Jewish, or (b) that aside from religion they consider themselves to be Jewish or partially Jewish, or (c) that they were raised Jewish or had at least one Jewish parent, even if they do not consider themselves Jewish today. Anyone who said "yes" to any of these questions was eligible for the main interview (18).

While this decision may inform us about Jews, or at least those who locate some linkage to the moniker "Jewish," it gives little direction to the question of how to sustain a minority community or even what community means in twenty-first century America. By explicitly making Jewish identity a matter of personal choice disconnected from communal institutions, networks, and participation, we learn a great deal about complex and competitive identities. We now know the very personalized wide range of what various Jews do, including syncretic pagan practices and belief that Jesus is the messiah. We know little about what a living Jewish community is like.

This point is made cogently by Kafri in her scathing critique of how Jewish institutional and thought leaders have used the Pew study:

As sociologist Rogers Brubaker has argued, groups don't just exist, but are called into being in a variety of ways. Think of how an event like the latest Pew survey calls the group "American Jews" into being. Without the survey, Jews in America are a diverse bunch, and, as we see by the numbers, the majority are only minimally engaged with the acts and beliefs of traditional Judaism, and are not much more involved with other Jews than they are with lots of other kinds of people. But the act of surveying brings those Jews together, bounds them within the inquiry, gives them the appearance of unified agency and purpose: being Jewish. Jewish identity is invoked in the very act of studying it.

The Pew survey is what Brubaker would call a project of group-making. Group-making is a "social, cultural, political project aimed at turning categories into groups or increasing levels of groupness . . ." The Pew survey is an event that reifies the idea of an American

Jewish group, "groupness as an event." But it is a "groupness" that reflects the values of the people constructing it. Those acting as consultants to the survey believe in a Jewishness bounded by Synagogue, Israel, Denomination and Federation. Those being surveyed, by and large, have a very different set of concerns.

As Brubaker points out, if groupness is something that needs to be cultivated and evoked, it can also fail to materialize. The 'groupness' the Pew survey (like all the previous N[ational] J[ewish] P[opulation] Surveys) sought to invoke has consistently failed to materialize, or only weakly. Thus the talk of crisis from the Jewish institutional world and calls to action, or at least accountability.

We decided to examine those Jews who, through institutional connections (however minimal, including one-time online donations) are most engaged. In this choice, we attempt to understand better the lived identity of the Jewish community rather than the idiosyncratic behaviors of those who, in a random survey, identify themselves as Jews.

Daniel Elazar, whose analysis of American Jewry in the modern era is formative of the ways Jewish community has been understood these past decades, explains that

Jewish thinkers in the United States who understood that Jews could not . . . abandon all aspects of Judaism other than those associated with formal worship, and who certainly did not want to . . . define themselves out of the American body politic and into a segregated existence, developed the idea of peoplehood. By advocating peoplehood they argued that Jews (and other ethnic groups) did not need to seek the full expression of autonomy implicit in the modern conception of nationalism to maintain their character as something more than a church. (41-42.)

If peoplehood is the binding concept that unites Jews or other minority groups in a free and pluralist America, then moving beyond self-proclaimed identity to understanding those most connected in terms of affiliation and multiple forms of voluntary engagement, and actual, purposive activities, allows us to see the strengths and fault lines of communal vitality and viability.

As Kafri notes, this is not the focus funders and decision-makers seem to use when testing collective communal sustainability. Anxious attention is paid to loss, to those who have moved beyond the orbit of the minority community into which they were born. Minority communities, certainly ethnic white communities that more easily assimilate into the unmarked position associated with privileged Caucasians in America, are often deeply concerned about signs of assimilation that would reduce or end minority identity. American Jewry has focused on loss for many decades—studies and reports either assess rates of intermarriage, exit, and diminution of engagement, or else panic over how to keep Jews as Jews, especially younger Jews. The underlying assumption of this study is that we may better understand what is happening to the American Jewish community by observing those for whom allegiance and fidelity to Jewish communal life is most (or at least more) pronounced. Understanding the terms of affiliation, the connections made between Jewish identity and Jewish and American civic engagement, and the values that underlie certain behaviors in this subset of American Jewry—including weak or weakening ties—may help us both provide an assessment of Jewish communal potential and indicate policies that may help fortify communal life. This survey seeks to fill that niche in the highly researched subject of Jewish life and the future of Jews in the United States.

### **The Subjects Of This Study**

Locating potential subjects for a national survey of Jews who are most engaged poses a logistical research problem and a challenge in terms

of resources. Such Jews represent a small percentage of the already relatively small Jewish population. Rather than seek to locate and validate a sample in the larger society/population, this research project threw a wide net that included forty Jewish federations, umbrella bodies that have access to the greatest number of connected Jews in any community, as well as each of the three large synagogue movements and a number of national Jewish organizations. (A full listing of participating organizations and institutions is found on page 74). Utilizing email addresses and online and print postings that would be read by those most connected to Jewish organizations, we were able to reach over 20,000 Jews who connect to these organizations in some way, from subscribing to their email list to being active participants and supporters. Just over 12,500 completed the survey (see pages 75-89 for the full survey questionnaire).

While our central research focus has been on Baby Boomers (those born 1946-1964), this survey reached The War Generation (born before 1946), Generation X (born 1965-1980), and Millennials (born 1981-1995). Fig.1 (page 24) gives the breakdown of respondents by generation. Interest in generational cohorts is in vogue, and has become even more central to our concerns about the impact of institutional and cultural transformations in the contemporary Jewish community. One hypothesis we entertain is that generational cohort responses will be less disparate than imagined by those who claim that each generation is a new and unique world, quite independent from the others, with distinct needs and expectations. We certainly recognize patterns that distinguish the four generational cohorts that make up adult Jewry. Yet as we examine the research on generational cohorts, as well as this survey, we believe that the interconnection and (potentially positive) impact of generational cohorts on each other cannot be ignored. We will address issues of generational cohorts below.

### Authority, Leaders, And Joiners: Who Speaks For Me?

The use of the term leadership creates a confounding tension when addressing the Jewish community. An element of the anachronisms we seek to uncover in this research is the unwillingness of the central agencies of the Jewish community in the United States to respond to certain shifts in the ways American Jews make decisions about being Jewish. There is a strong history and tradition of authoritative spokespeople whose words and collective decisions were both representative of and accepted by the Jewish community. Rabbis rendered decisions and opinions, and centralized organizational bodies offered well-crafted proclamations on behalf of the Jews. That is what leaders did, and there are individuals and organizations that continue that tradition. The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the American Jewish Committee, Anti-Defamation League, AIPAC, Jewish Federations of North America, and the Jewish Council of Public Affairs, as well as the various denominational entities, often pass resolutions that purport, to varying degrees, to speak for "the Jews." They and others have done this for many decades, and their resolutions, at one time, may well have been reflective of most Jews' attitudes. These organizations produced research and lobbied Congress and presidents. Before the internet, their public pronouncements and white papers, along with Jewish newspapers that often were owned by or influenced by the major organizations, were the only sources of Jewish information. They, along with rabbinical associations, could and did speak for what was understood to be "the Jewish community."

Hayim Herring, an astute observer of how faith communities are transforming, offers significant and compelling critiques that reflect the failure of major Jewish organizations to practice the adaptive changes critical to twenty-first century organizational life. His first assessment, based on his observation of successful twenty-first century institutions, is that institutions need to replace hierarchical and authoritarian structures, the products of hoary tradition and the

rise of post-World War II corporate life, with more fluid, flat, and open democratic systems of engaging people in non-authoritarian and even non-authoritative processes. He sees the synagogue, JCC, or Federation as a platform for engagement in which Jews can collaboratively choose activities and behaviors that they consider Jewish. (Herring ch. 1). This highlights volition and creative collaboration as opposed to top-down programmatic offerings by the professionals and their volunteer boards. We have observed that increasingly, in place of affiliations or memberships, social networks that are consensual, easily created, and as easily left, are becoming the norm.

Lest we see this as a liberal phenomenon, perhaps the most successful model of adaptive leadership in the Jewish world is the Orthodox Chabad movement. While, on one hand, Chabad formally has great clarity about who is a Jew and what rituals and behaviors are acceptable for those committed to its teachings, on the other hand, in many Chabad houses one does not join, there are no mandatory membership fees, and involvement is volitional and episodic. Chabad communities are loosely connected to a controlling central authority with high-quality online communication, and there is no attempt to muzzle or censor those who walk in the door. Of course, those who would commit their Jewish lives to Chabad will, we assume, ultimately accept its standards and norms. Yet how different is Chabad, a very healthy twenty-first century movement, from staid institutions with orchestrated meetings and presentations, issuing statements on behalf of "the community" that alienate and distance rather than fostering association and fidelity.

Herring provides a schema (31) that reflects a general move we have noted in both for-profit and not-for-profit organizational life, away from authority to open and democratic settings:

Yesterday's Organizational Values	Contemporary Organizational Values
Authoritarian	Democratic, egalitarian
Hierarchical	Fluid, improvised, (flattened)
Authority determined by degree and professional training	Influence determined by expertise, passion and experience
Honor tradition	Respect innovation
Membership based	Community driven
Commitment to institution	Commitment driven
Self-sufficiency	Interdependent and collaborative
Denominational	Post-denominational (eclectic)
Limited local orientation	Expansive global orientation
Exclusive	Inclusive
Closely-held knowledge	Distributed knowledge

While our survey shows great fidelity to Jewish life and (though diminishing) to Israel, the rise of Open Hillels, J Street, Jewish film festivals that offer a wide array of Jewish creativity, and the controversy at an Orthodox day school over a Palestinian speaker should serve as a warning about how obedience and fidelity will be understood and maintained in the Jewish community. Students who join Hillel are, by definition, the more Jewishly affiliated college students, as are day school students and individuals who participate in J Street (which describes itself as "pro-Israel [and] pro-peace," and as an organization "redefining what it means to be pro-Israel in America.") Jewish film festivals are meant to be Jewish venues for communal engagement about tough issues. It is unlikely that, in an America of choice and open access, attempts at what critics deem censorship could ever play well to most American Jews. Narrowing the terms of Jewish identity by

those who seek to control the organizations and institutions of the Jewish community may provide some consolation that comes from being a part of the communal core, yet it is hard to imagine silencing or ostracizing as a strategy for building a vibrant and inclusive Jewish community. And it is surely hard to imagine such a core attracting significant numbers of Jews who instead are voting with their feet—or at least their time—to explore connections elsewhere, in places that are more appealing, open, non-judgmental, and relevant to them.

### What We Mean When We Think About Identity

The impulse of the Jewish community, when focusing on viability and vitality, to narrow and control the terms of Jewish identity should not be dismissed lightly, at least when we think beyond identity alone to the content of Jewish identity.

Seth Chalmer, this monograph's editor, commented on its first draft:

If we put the question, "How do we survive as a group identity" first and foremost, without first deciding what the group is for, and what the group's indispensable values are, then we tacitly endorse a vision for Judaism which Leonard Fein (no right-wing traditionalist) summarized as the slogan, "Come Survive With Us!" Speaking at least for myself, I need Jewish identity to mean more than *survival qua survival*. I need a Jewish identity that has indispensable substance, and if it doesn't have any—if all the norms, rules, beliefs, and practices are eligible for the chopping block, every one, just so long as our group keeps on being a group—then I firmly believe our group identity deserves to fail. I'd rather see Judaism disappear than continue on as groupness with no content in particular.

This critique must be addressed, as it contains a values claim with deep historical roots. Judaism is a venerable, ancient religion of a specific people whose behaviors, beliefs, values, and world-views have served both as identity markers and as expectations (if not absolute obligations) to those who choose to call themselves Jews. There has always been real content to being Jewish—behaviors and rituals, beliefs that include a commanding God and an expectation of obedience. For Orthodox Jews in particular, the "indispensable content" of Judaism is derived from Orthodox norms and law, and identified with two claims: to demographic success, and to "authenticity."

In a number of communities in the United States, Orthodox life is flourishing. While the New York metropolitan area is not indicative of the country as a whole, it is worth exploring the fact that nearly half a million Jewish people (493,000) live in Orthodox households—about one third of that city's Jewish population. In a 2011 study of New York Jewry, three features of the two fervently Orthodox groups—Yeshivish and Hassidic, often collectively known as the Haredim—were cited as having significant implications for the future of New York Jewry:

First, the high birthrate of *Haredi* Jews (at least three times that associated with non-Orthodox Jewish New Yorkers) suggests that this population is likely to grow even larger in the future. Second, the *Haredim* are known to be self-segregated and relatively disconnected from the rest of the Jewish community. Third, relatively high poverty combined with large and growing families suggests that their economic stress is likely to increase in the future. (Cohen, Ukeles, and Miller 22).

The study also reflects on Modern Orthodox Jews, those who adhere to traditional ritual life even as they embrace American society. The study notes that, while birthrates are not as high as those of the Haredim, "they are higher than those of non-Orthodox families, sug-

gesting continuing growth for this group as well." As we described above, the Chabad Orthodox movement has proven to be a highly successful worldwide model of Jewish engagement. With a higher birthrate and, perhaps, a greater retention of Orthodox Millennials, a significant part of the Jewish future may well be found in a return of American Jews to traditional forms of Judaism and a Jewish community with far more strictly-drawn lines to demarcate Jews from their fellow Americans.

Yet the picture of Orthodox demographic triumph is far from complete. Pew's *Portrait* revealed that only 48% of American Jews raised Orthodox currently remain so, with only scant influx from other denominations.

Orthodox triumphalists point to the decline of that attrition by generation: from a 22% Orthodox retention rate among Jews raised Orthodox who are 65 and older to an 83% retention rate among those aged 18-29. Critics could just as easily maintain that young Orthodox adults simply haven't had enough time to become alienated yet; the retention rate for the 30-49 age group is only 57%, only by small margin a majority.<sup>6</sup> We are neither prophets nor the children of prophets, and we do not believe that predictions are possible beyond educated guesses. But we find it hard to imagine (or desire) that the future of the Jewish community in the United States will reside in a community whose behaviors and values are grounded in forms inherited from pre-modern texts and traditions.

Even more questionable is the common Orthodox claim that non-Orthodox Jews who engage deeply in Jewish life in its many variations lack some kind of authenticity or continuity which the Orthodox have, and which can protect the Orthodox from the erosions and evolutions of modernity. Any attempt to claim an authentic Judaism by searching either the ancient or Medieval world will leave us empty-handed. What was "Jewish" (sic) in biblical Israel was Temple ritual, priests, and tribal affiliation in the Land of Israel. Rabbinic Judaism and its great texts, the Mishnah and Talmuds, represent a revolutionary rejection of the authority of the priesthood, as well as literal readings of the Bible. Without this rabbinic revolution, it is unlikely that Judaism would have survived the destruction of the Temple and exile from the Land of Israel. Even in the modern age, had Jews listened to traditional Eastern European rabbis and remained in Europe (the rabbis forbade Jews to go to North America and told them that Zionism was heresy), the Holocaust would have taken even more lives than it did. Medieval rabbis would not easily recognize today's Orthodox Israeli soldiers, just as Maimonides would have little understanding of Lubavitcher Hassidim who welcome Jewish travelers in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

One additional point: our analysis, based on research concerning Jewish engagement over the centuries, indicates that, in the heyday of Jewish scholarship in Eastern Europe around the turn to the nineteenth century, under three percent of Jews were engaged in any form of Jewish study as adults. In other words, what most Jews practiced were the traditions of food, dress, social norms, and communal engagement that they inherited, just as any traditional society transmitted its shared behaviors. These were not choices made by a literate, educated, and informed Jewish community. Today, more adult Jews study some form of Jewish text or tradition, read Jewish literature, and see other forms of Jewish media, than in any age in history. This fact is attested by the responses in this and other surveys of Jews. In that sense, even the most traditional Jew today, cognizant of the full range of life choices available, is a Jew by choice—choosing how, when, and what to do as a Jew.

**E***ven the most traditional Jew today is a Jew by choice—choosing how, when, and what to do as a Jew.*

<sup>6</sup> See Jerome Chanes, "Orthodox 'Retention' and *Kiruv*" for an analysis of these rates.

We see a trajectory of transformation over millennia as to what constitutes Judaism and Jewish life, and, in every generation, there have been critics who claimed that the essence of Judaism and its traditions were being eviscerated. Some change did, indeed, bring on great losses as whole communities vanished through assimilation and loss of identity. Other radical transformations in what constituted authentic Judaism would be unrecognizable to earlier generations, yet these changes were integral to assuring the health and vitality of Judaism and the Jewish people.

The great twentieth century Jewish thinker Mordecai Kaplan claimed that, in any age, Jewish is what Jews do; look at how Jews live their lives and you will know what Jewish is. That may be too facile, and the critique may prove true that Jews, like other white ethnic groups, will soon be left with little but a culinary and linguistic repertoire that will be enjoyed by all Americans. As the billboard ad of a Chinese gentleman eating a huge pastrami sandwich boldly stated: "You don't need to be Jewish to love Levy's rye bread." We agree that group identity for its own sake—to call oneself a Jew or to claim that being Jewish is important bereft of shared unique behaviors, rituals and values—will quickly fade. Providing personal meaning from within the uniqueness of Judaism and a Jewish community in America, compelling reasons to be part of the group, is one goal for the debates and experiments that need to flourish.

But the debate should not be over religious authenticity or demographic triumphalism. It is clear that the Jewish community will need valued, shared, and meaningful Jewish content to allow those so identified to see themselves as unique, but we cannot say whether this means a core, of nonnegotiable principles or a rich, ongoing, and fundamentally unresolved debate about such principles.

That debate is already underway even within the Orthodox community. Steven Bayme, a thought leader from within the Orthodox tradition, notes that Orthodoxy has a role to play in American Jewish life that must take into account the wider world in which it must function:

[A]n Orthodoxy governed so narrowly will only prove alienating to so many who stand to learn from it . . . Modern Orthodoxy treads a far more difficult path of seeking both to preserve rabbinic authority yet constrain that authority so as to allow for intellectual freedom and expression of diverse viewpoints. Modern Orthodox leaders today may choose to engage modern culture and thereby exercise leadership on the critical questions of gender equality, conversion to Judaism, Jewish education, intra-Jewish relations, and the challenges of contemporary biblical scholarship to traditional faith, to say nothing of Israel's future as a Jewish state.

Nor are the Orthodox exempt from the same seismic shifts that have changed the social landscape in America more generally. As Jack Wertheimer observes,

Rabbinic authority is waning. Rabbis across the spectrum of Modern Orthodoxy, resisters and accommodators alike, point to a community that has absorbed American understandings of the sovereign self . . . Accelerating these trends is the new reality of the Internet. Thanks to it, states one rabbi, "everybody has a right to have a position; everyone has a de'ah [opinion] about everything." Educated Jews can look up answers to their own questions and choose from the answers available online. Many feel empowered in this role simply by dint of their day-school education and by

the time they have spent studying in Israel, even as they are also encouraged by modern culture's stress on individual autonomy to act according to the dictates of their conscience.

If it is true that the twenty-first century United States has raised personal choice over the authoritative voices of religious or organizational leaders, opinion over evidence, and innovation over tradition, then no faith community is immune from the access Americans have to alternatives. And the ubiquitous internet offers the full menu—a multiplicity of diverse voices, ideas and information available to all. As one sees

from the survey, the unrestricted use of the internet and social media crosses all generations (see tables for Q.37) and affects all kinds of connections. Where once we needed institutions and leaders to bring us information and connect us, now all we need is to go online and find what, and whom, we want.

There is certainly frustration and sadness in this new reality. Imagine having honed your skills as a talented scriptwriter only to see reality shows push well-crafted television shows aside, or as a president only to be called a liar by someone convinced that he knows more. So it is with the Jewish community. Rabbis who spent years training to teach and preach the faith and texts that they love and communal professionals who passionately work on behalf of the Jewish community every day are now told that they are but one voice among many, that they cannot expect the respect and authority once assumed. And this shift in attitudes is experienced by volunteers who offer time, commitment, and skill to communal institutions and organizations only to see a diminution in membership paralleled by complaints that the organization is not satisfying a wide enough range of needs and expectations. (Elcott 20-21).

It is a time of painful reevaluation for those who have dedicated their lives to sustaining the Jewish community and ensure its vitality. Yet it is hard to imagine a return to a prior age of authoritative leadership. The days when someone "spoke" for the Jewish community ended with the twentieth century. The command-control model of Jewish life that perhaps functioned in a more rigidly defined society is seen, by its intended audience, as having rapidly decreasing value in contemporary life—and so it has rapidly decreasing impact.

### **What We Mean By Engaged**

As our survey shows, even highly affiliated American Jews who join—or at least are on the email lists of—the very institutions we see as increasingly anachronistic, rely on multiple sources for information and for voluntary associative activities. This should come as no surprise. Diana Searce reports that:

As open communications technologies—from blogs to wikis, tags, texts and tweets—become increasingly widespread, a network-centric stance toward leadership that favors decentralization and transparency is being engendered. At the same time, technologies for visualizing collections of relationships are making the abstract concept of networks visible and more easily understood. And the tools are only part of the story. (5).

While this study uses the descriptors of joiner, leader, activist, and those highly engaged as Jews with thick associational bonds, today's research undermines the very ways we once would have described organized Jewish life. This research does not subscribe to the traditional claims of leadership as imagined by those who seek to sustain and retain positions of authority by virtue of title. As we noted, American Jews, from Boomers to Millennials, are avid users of network technologies to decide where they will turn for information, and when and how they will participate in Jewish life—and to whom they will listen. One

core hypothesis is that successful models of engagement and mobilization will reflect and utilize the multiple sources of information and invitation readily available to American Jews.

The analyst most credited with creating a framework to understand the communal artifice and features of American Jewry was Daniel Elazar, whose writing four decades ago developed the image of concentric circles of engagement with those closest to the core being the very leaders and joiners this study sought out. Even as we challenge this model, the impact of his writing still dominates Jewish demographic and sociological analysis. He explains that

The American Jewish community is built upon an associational base to a far greater extent than any other in Jewish history. In other words, not only is there no external or internal compulsion to affiliate with organized Jewry, but there is no automatic way to become a member of the Jewish community. Nor is there even a clear way to affiliate with the community as a whole. To participate in any organized Jewish life in America one must make a voluntary association with some particular organization or institution, whether in the form of synagogue membership, contribution to the local Federation (which is generally considered to be an act of joining as well as contributing), or affiliation with a B'nai B'rith lodge or Hadassah chapter. (20).

Jews who share thick social capital bonding and deep Jewish voluntary associations constitute a very narrow demographic of Americans. Such Jews, such as those found in our study as well as previous studies (including *Baby Boomers, Public Service and Minority Communities: A Case Study of the Jewish Community in the United States*), tend to be highly educated and wealthier by far than the average American. Most actively engage in American civic affairs, including philanthropic giving, while affiliating with a wide array of Jewish institutions, organizations, and causes. They give money to support Jewish communal life and care deeply about many of the core issues that seem to concern Jews in America. This conforms to similar studies that see the most engaged as those who indicate behaviors that are empirically related to one another. According to one recent study, these features include:

- 1) family status (in-married, non-married, and intermarried)
  - 2) proportion of close friends who are Jewish (four levels from few or none to all or almost all);
  - 3) attendance at Jewish religious services (four levels from never to every week); and
  - 4) whether one volunteers for a charitable or religious organization.
- As such, the index draws upon four domains of social interaction, from most to least intimate: self, family, friends, and community. (Gerstein, Cohen, and Landres).

These general features of affiliation of course distinguish them from the general patterns of how Americans engage in civic life. And while we understand that such predictors as family influence, Jewish friends, religious service attendance, and volunteering are tenuous—so we should not infer causation—we do recognize that the subjects we studied are also a unique subset of those who identify in some fashion as Jews. They are the ones who fit the predictions, especially when asked if there are non-Jews living in their home. Counter to national trends, endogamy seems to be well entrenched in the Jewish population of this survey. A survey of engaged Jews, including highly engaged leaders and joiners, allows us to better grasp what is motivating and compelling about Jewish communal life and Jewish identity today. The concerns

they voice also will help us locate the fault lines and danger points facing a Jewish community that seeks to include those far less committed.

### Generational Issues

As noted above, an additional feature of this survey is its multi-generational focus. While our previous research has focused mainly on Boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964, we have become increasingly aware of the need to assess generational cohort distinctions and similarities, and their implications for Jewish communal life in the twenty-first century. How does an immigrant minority community maintain cohesion and fealty generations after establishing itself in the United States? This question is even more significant for those most active—those who are playing, or will play, roles in Jewish communal institutions or, at the very least, maintain some kind of connection with these institutions.

Jews came to what became the United States long before independence in 1776 and were awarded full citizenship rights in every state by 1828. Yet the numbers were quite small, growing from some 15,000 in 1840 to under 150,000 by 1860. (*Encyclopedia Judaica* vol. 15 1596).

The great immigration occurred between 1880 and 1920 when over two million Jews arrived along with some twenty million new immigrants to America. Jews, as with other immigrant communities, were over-represented in youth—70% were under the age of 44. (Gurock 97).

We are now in the fourth (and entering the fifth generation) of adult Jewish Americans, and distinguishing generational cohorts in terms of allegiance and communal involvement is crucial to anticipating future Jewish life.<sup>3</sup> The generational divides have been historically important. With quick

brushstrokes, we can provide a sense of the first three generations following immigration, focusing especially on their Jewish identity.

The great Eastern European immigrant generation from which most American Jews descend often left behind parents and the wider circles of Jewish communal life into which they had been inducted. They took manual labor jobs and established fraternal organizations that linked them to their prior homes. They lived mainly in dense urban settings and maintained strong Jewish ties with many of the traditional identity markers they carried from Europe: Yiddish language, shared ritual behaviors, and engagement with Jewish communal institutions.

Their children, raised in America, lived through pivotal defining events: the Great Depression, World War II and the Holocaust, and the establishment of the State of Israel. They in-married, built synagogues, and joined other Jewish communal institutions, albeit more suburban and less identified with the traditional world of their parents.

The Baby Boomer generation achieved the American dream of their grandparents: they became the most educated generation of Jews in history, and they moved into professions or owned their own businesses. Their generational cohort experiences were radically different from their parents; as children they were wealthier and more comfortable, and in their youth they lived through the victorious Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War and peace movement, the Zionist thrill of the Six Day War of 1967, and activism (political, sexual, and gender-related) that challenged many of the allegiances of their parents, not entirely unlike their parents had challenged their own immigrant parents. Boomers were also the first generation of Jews in the twentieth

<sup>3</sup> *The American Jewish community, of course, is much more complex than its majority genealogy from European immigrants during 1880-1920. Sephardic Jews and Jews from Arab lands, post-World War II refugees, and, of course, Russian and Israeli immigrants complicate that simple narrative. That said, from an institutional standpoint, the founders and sustainers of organized Jewish life in the United States reflect the values imposed by European immigrants who reached this continent prior to World War II.*

century to suffer little antisemitism while comfortably integrating into the privileged white elite of the United States.

What we see in the first three Jewish generations that populated America in the twentieth century is great generational distinctiveness, a sense of difference in core beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that identified them as Jews. Rituals were abandoned or revised, the experience of antisemitism diminished by the third generation, populations dispersed to the west and south, and affiliation rates dropped in patterns that matched the diminution of civic engagement in America at large. Yet one area showed resistance to change: endogamy remained the norm for Jews.

Among the questions that arise as we consider the fourth and fifth generations is whether the comfortable integration into American society by the Jewish Baby Boomer generation, supported by Jewish institutions and shared communal norms, is a unique generational transient phenomenon that will be followed by further distinctive cohorts—Generation X and Millennials—or whether we will see, for the first time in the United States, a greater continuity in the ways Jews experience their identity and communal engagement as Jews. If the former, then the institutional changes, if any, that may be necessary to sustain Baby Boomer fidelity to Jewish communal life will be a one-generation phenomenon. If the latter, this may be the central question for those committed to sustain Jewish communal life in America: Are the institutions, behavioral norms, and values that have served Jewish life in the United States over the past century adequate and appropriate for Jewish Baby Boomers and the generations that succeed them?

A working hypothesis that undergirds this survey and the research surrounding it is that we are observing, at least in some crucial arenas, a flattening of the generational distinctiveness that separated the first three generations following the great immigration. Jews born following World War II, now amounting to three generations of adults (Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials), share an experience of greater integration and comfort in the United States than prior generations. They also share a cultural, social, educational, economic, and technological landscape that, in many, ways links them in related experiences to an extent not known in previous times. Therefore they will identify as Jews in ways more similar to each other than to prior generations. If this hypothesis proves accurate, then two correlates will result:

1. Communal institutions, along with normative values and behaviors that mark Jews in America, should evolve to better reflect the experiences of post-World War II generations, starting with Baby Boomers, and
2. The transformations necessary to ensure Jewish communal vitality as a minority in America, if nimble and accepting of the loss of traditional forms of authority and control, will prove to be durable and sustaining for diverse Jewish life in America.

A recent Pew Research Center study is entitled *Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends* (March 2014). The study offers a long list of traditional institutions and normative behaviors from which Millennials are distancing themselves, from political affiliation and marriage equality to legalizing marijuana. Pew confirms, for example, that 29% of Millennials consider themselves religiously unaffiliated, a figure somewhat less than what Pew found among Jewish Millennials (32% no religion). (*A Portrait of Jewish Americans* 7). And they are solidly progressive on social and economic issues, voting overwhelmingly Democratic even

though they claim to be independents. The study generalizes:

The Millennial generation is forging a distinctive path into adulthood ... (T)hey are relatively unattached to organized politics and religions, linked by social media, burdened by debt, distrustful of people, in no rush to marry—and optimistic about the future. (*Millennials* 4).

Yet what is striking is that these trends—distrust of those in power, strongly liberal voting, not identifying as religious, being optimistic about their future and supportive of individual rights—are values already seen among Jewish Boomers, who were almost half as likely to identify with a religion than the prior generation, who vote solidly Democratic (especially on social justice issues), and who displayed a healthy distrust of those in power when they were the same age as Millennials are today. When it comes to faith, Jews in general parallel Millennials in their religious views and behaviors, not only in affiliation and religious service attendance, but also in beliefs about God—sharing a skepticism that distinguishes both groups from older Christian Americans. (13). Only one in three Millennials see themselves as religious (14), a striking parallel to American Jews, of whom 62% claim that being Jewish is more about culture and ancestry than religion (*Portrait* 8).

While we certainly would not claim that there are no generational cohort differences, and recognize the unique historical experiences of each group, Jewish Boomers and the generations that follow show greater similarities than prior generations did to each other.

Then there is that complicating variable we have discussed: the diminution in America of voluntary associations that began with Boomers. A staggering 40% of this survey's participants prefer to avoid committing themselves long-term to any organization; again, even these highly and passionately engaged Jews prefer episodic, personally tailored, and short-term involvements that do not place too demanding a claim on their time or money, even if they still are willing to sit on committees and boards (see question 15).

Charles M. Blow summarizes the Pew Millennials study in words worth noting when speaking about Jewish Americans, even those who join, lead, and serve:

All in all, we seem to be experiencing a wave of liberal-minded detach-ees, a generation in which institutions are subordinate to the individual and social networks are digitally generated rather than interpersonally accrued.

What we see is a trend that perhaps began with the immigrant communities, but blossomed in the Jewish Boomer generation that came of age in the late '60s and '70s as activist Jews, both in the Jewish community and in America at large, confronted inherited forms of tradition and historical patterns of authority, and demanded change.

In many ways, we understand that Jewish leaders and institutions, and the values and normative behaviors they support, prioritize preserving these inherited structures. Yet it seems to us that, in doing this, they may well be undermining the community's vitality, for this approach seems to ignore this assessment of modernity. Even the more civics-oriented organizations accept the public view that Judaism is an ancient, venerable tradition of ritual and belief that must remain counter-cultural in its adherence to the past. In spite of a voiced sentiment that change is necessary, institutional leaders still claim that the types of institutions built more than a century ago—from synagogues and communal service organizations to self-help and self-protection agencies—that have sustained and empowered the Jewish community meet the true present-day needs of Jewish life in America. While much evidence offered by researchers over the past decades challenges this

view, the fundamental players in Jewish organizational life have shown resistance to change. These core “legacy” Jewish institutions have reached the landmark age of 120 years. In spite of one quip we have heard that they have reached the Jewish blessing that one should live to be a hundred and twenty years old and then gracefully die, these institutions still largely retain the structures, values, and leadership models of a very successful past.

Looking at the ways our survey population responded to questions concerning their connection to Jewish institutions, we distinguished a paradoxical pattern. Affiliation rates are high, especially synagogue membership, confirming the niche population of the study; they are deeply committed to their Jewish identity, and are at least connected to Jewish institutions and the Jewish community. They are the leaders and joiners upon whom the minority Jewish community depends. They find ways to celebrate the Sabbath with Shabbat dinners and text study, and they read, talk about, and go online to find “Jewish.” (See tables Q.14-3-4, Q.14-6-7). Passionate as they are about the importance of being Jewish, they have a more tepid response than expected to the quality of their synagogue life and to religious services, and value even less the Jewish community centers and federations that once were widely seen as vital to Jewish communal life in the United States.

In fact, among the three post-war generations, well under 20% claim that they are very satisfied with JCCs and federations. Only a third or less of each cohort expresses great satisfaction with synagogue life (see table Q.38.1). And, as Robert Putnam and David Campbell have noted, clergy should not be complacent about the very large contingent of congregants who claim that they are merely moderately satisfied (rather than very satisfied) with their religious institution: “Someone who is moderately satisfied sounds to us like someone who is willing to shop around.” (168). And 21% of these highly committed Boomers have already quit their synagogues or never joined in the first place, an alarming figure for synagogues that can ill afford losses among dues-paying members (see Table Q.33-1). The future does not augur well for synagogue viability if congregations cannot remain compelling at least to the more connected population in this study.

In a sense, perhaps inadvertently, many Jewish institutions communicate an all-or-nothing message: once you are no longer considered young, then you are either for or against us, either in or out—and you are unlikely to change or grow. Quite concerning, then, is the institutional expectation that once a Jew reaches adulthood, he or she will either be committed to or estranged from her Jewish identity and fidelity to the Jewish community. With this attitude held rigidly in place, it is no surprise that investment in those over forty is viewed as neither feasible nor worthwhile. (Elcott 8).

This message has translated into a focus on youth, or “Next Gen”—Generation X and Millennials, those believed to be the only vulnerable age cohorts—with little desire to focus on, or even to explore, efforts to engage, mobilize, and serve older Jews, especially Baby Boomers. (Elcott 28). This seems faulty in two directions: it presumes that those who are affiliated today will, like the War Generation, faithfully retain their affiliations as they age, while also assuming that those who have never affiliated, or have left Jewish institutions, are beyond reach. We find both these presumptions, which dominate how Jewish organizations function and how funders direct their philanthropic dollars, to be questionable. If these presumptions are proven false, the policies that have resulted and continue to result from such misconceptions will prove counter-productive; rather than sustaining and invigorating, they may well undermine and hurt future Jewish life in America.

Here we meet the competitive viewpoints that dominate the ways in which one could imagine a successful minority community. By examin-

ing the attitudes and values of those most affiliated, from among those most likely to belong to and participate in Jewish life in America, we sought to test our hypothesis that the future of Jewish communal life in the United States demands institutional transformation, and that the changes necessary will offer an enduring model that reflects the nature of minority identity and communal life in an open, inviting, rapidly changing American culture. The challenge is determining how to sustain a minority community that weds itself to tradition and distinctiveness in a world in which change is the only constant.

### ***Emunah: The Jewish Term For Faith***

Jewish, historically, has been inextricably linked to Judaism, at least in the ways it presented to the world. It would have been hard in any era to imagine an individual identifying as a Jew without Judaism, replete with its rituals and beliefs. The religion of the Jewish people would seem to be at the core of its identity. In fact, this may be less true than is imagined. A culture is constructed of many elements; it is possible that one could have participated in a Jewish community, sustained a Jewish identity, and lived within the orbit of the Jewish culture without faith, without believing in (what we now call) Judaism as (what we now call) a religion. We have little on record to indicate that such individuals once existed but, of course, the Jewish story was not told by those on the periphery, by the non-believers—at least until the modern era. While the content and meanings given to what constitutes religious faith and right behavior have been debated

and contradicted over the past millennia, Judaism is replete with faith statements that begin with, “I believe with a true and certain faith...” and continue to affirm such beliefs as faith in an active, creative God who liberates the Israelites from bondage, in the coming of the messiah and in the resurrection of the dead. Most Jewish religious education affirms most, if not all, of these beliefs. Jewish children receiving a Jewish education read prayers, the Bible, and other ancient texts that remind them not only of what a faithful Jew does, but what he or she believes. The organized American Jewish community historically has been careful to cloak its minority status in terms of religion rather than nationalism, ethnicity, or race, even when many individual Jews experienced these as major components of their being Jewish.

This fit in well with the nature of communal identities in the United States. Immigrants coming to America’s shores faced the task of determining what elements of their collective identities they would bring with them and what needed to be discarded. Elazar, who (as noted above) speaks of Jewish peoplehood with tribal connections, explains that initially what was needed was to establish Judaism as a religion equal to the faith of Protestants and Catholics:

New Americans chose religious affiliation as a vehicle for the preservation of what they wished to preserve of their heritage because they quickly perceived that the United States was a religiously attuned civilization and had been so from the beginning. Consequently, religion became the easiest way to identify with the American way of life while preserving certain customary differences, and to retain an attachment to one’s ancestral connections in a socially acceptable manner.

As the price of entry into American life new immigrants had to give up all their overt native habits except those identified with their religions. Because their religions, being within the Judeo-Christian tradition, fit legitimately within the American schema, they could be retained. Religion became the link with the “other way of life,” and everything that was to be preserved from that way of life had to be fitted into a religious context. (35).

***M***any Jewish institutions communicate an all-or-nothing message: once you are no longer considered young, then you are either in or out.

Yet contemporary faith is quite different, a fact indicated in multiple surveys that show a large percentage of Jews are not believers in the traditional sense and, in fact, do not even identify as Jewish by religion (*Portrait*). If faith in God does not engage Jews, then what, if any, are the faith claims that are binding?

The most engaged Jews in the twenty-first century, like many of those found in our study, find meaning in the Holocaust and in the State of Israel, albeit with the traditional Jewish penchant for arguing over what Israel and the Holocaust should mean for a faithful Jew. Our study parallels others that find Jews across generational cohorts have a strong allegiance to remembering the Holocaust as a central vehicle for Jewish meaning. (*Portrait* 14). Certainly what meaning is derived may be debated, but not the certainty that the Holocaust plays a central role in contemporary Jewish identity, as seen in Table Q.15-6. Opinions on the State of Israel are somewhat more complicated, with greater resistance to Israel as a source of Jewish identity and meaning. The Holocaust, as pure memory of the forces of absolute goodness against evil, of light against darkness, is easier to sustain than patriotic belief in the face of the legitimate daily messiness of a Jewish State, especially one that is powerful and viewed by many as victim and/or occupier. The two seem to be inextricably linked: Israel is often seen as a posthumous victory, making meaningful in some deeply painful way the suffering of the Jewish people that the Holocaust represents. Perhaps faith in the survival of the Jewish people, the endurance of an identity that binds Jews in community, and a willingness of individuals to identify as Jews in spite of such destruction, all lead to Israel. That said, Israel is both less compelling and more questioned by each succeeding generational cohort. (Table Q.15-5.) Given the plethora of Israel programs, missions, and Birthright experiences, capitalized by tens of millions of philanthropic dollars, the endurance of the Holocaust as a source of meaning and the diminution of Israel as a source of Jewish identity and purpose (even among those most affiliated) poses a problem for a community that places fidelity to Israel at its core. And the Holocaust as a vehicle for communal vitality in an open and welcoming America may reflect a deep weakness in what Jews believe, in what binding faith is shared that can prove compelling.

In fact, to the degree that Holocaust memory would be fortified by, and would gain greater meaning and significance because of, antisemitism, the trajectory in America is in the opposite direction. Not only did a 2009 Anti-Defamation League report find “anti-Semitic attitudes equal to the lowest level in all the years of taking the pulse of the American attitudes toward Jews,” (“Press Release”) but, in a separate study, Americans claim to feel warmer toward Jews than toward any other faith community. (Putnam and Campbell 505-506). This trend continues in spite of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as the ADL notes in 2014: “The total number of anti-Semitic incidents in the United States fell by 19% in 2013, continuing a decade-long downward slide and marking one of the lowest levels of incidents reported by the Anti-Defamation League since it started keeping records in 1979.” (“ADL Audit”).

The irony, of course, is that Jews are more likely than others to report being exposed to disparaging or critical comments about their religion, in spite of the warm and positive feelings recorded by non-Jewish Americans in survey after survey (Putnam and Campbell 510). While antisemitism, perhaps linked to its companion, anti-Israel sentiment, remains alive in many parts of the world, this is not so for American Jews. So a reliance on antisemitism as a binding feature of American Jewry may prove to be short lived. If the Holocaust is to be a resource fortifying Jewish identity, it will not be supported by the experience of antisemitism and a sense of Jewish vulnerability in the lived

experience of Jews in the United States. As we move to generations further removed from the Holocaust, its long-term value as a binding identity for Jews is dubious.

Yet faith can be expressed in other ways for American Jews. Baby Boomers and the generations that follow evince great confidence that when they give their time and raise money to address the problems of the world, their actions can make a difference (the War generation shows greater skepticism). This plays itself out in the leading reasons that involved Jews offer for volunteering, skewing heavily toward making a difference in people’s lives and improving one’s local community. (See tables for Q.9.) If transcendence is not found sitting in the synagogue, it is found in civic engagement that allows those volunteering to be part of something larger than themselves. This faith in meaningful, positive, restorative action is not alien to a Jewish

tradition that claims acts are more important than professions of faith in God. The language of traditional Judaism that values doing good as a religious goal is an asset in providing a framework for strong bonds among Jews. The potential weakness is that civic behavior, doing good in the world, is most valuable in sustaining a minority community when it is expressed as a form of committed, and collective, obligation.

This study allows us, then, to reassert Elazar’s claim that faith, in the classic Judeo-Christian religious sense of belief in a present God who rewards and punishes, is not the faith of the vast majority of American Jews. Clearly those most associated with the Jewish community, if one does not consider the most Orthodox members, conform to a different model of faith—or faithlessness—that complicates Jewish as a purely religious identity:

Indeed, the overwhelming majority of today’s Jews are nominally affiliated with a synagogue, at least sometime during their adult lives, but they are like their American counterparts among urban upper-middle-class college graduates in the professions and the big organizations, in that religion is tangential to their lives and relatively insignificant as an influence in most of their affairs. Even their Jewish concerns, where they exist, tend to be “tribal” in character, not motivated by any hope for redemption, individual or collective, traditionally associated with the Jews’ covenant with God, but by the comforts derived from the association of like with like, or, with renewed importance, fears of safety as Jews. (Elazar 24-25).

Social media and other technologies facilitate loosening tribal ties by rendering traditional institutions as less vital and less necessary to these acts of connection to one’s religious group, and even to the religious groups as the conduit for outward activities, like volunteering or learning. Creating uniquely Jewish conduits for engaging the world that are competitive with the multiple alternatives available will certainly be a core goal for American Jewry.

### ***Mitzvah: The Jewish Term For Obligation***

There is a chasm, then, that separates the civic engagement of Jews from traditional forms of Jewish identity, and from meaning taught in religious schools and spoken in formal Jewish communal settings. A diminution of shared religious beliefs in the Jewish community, at least of belief linked to specific religious denominations, parallels what we see in American society, as a growing number of Americans claim no religious affiliation at all. (“Religion” [Gallup]). As seen above, there is a strong case to be made that a range of civic Judaism’s has, over recent decades, replaced traditional religious beliefs as the ways Jews express commitment. While many, if not most, Jews may not feel an obligation to attend synagogue regularly or adhere to the ritual life that regulated the Jewish customs and practices of their ancestors—as indicated, a significant percentage reject the label “Jewish” as a religious identity—

***We need to create uniquely Jewish conduits for engaging the world that are competitive with the multiple alternatives available.***

engagement in Jewish and world civic affairs and philanthropic giving may serve as contemporary forms of Jewish practice. Our research focused heavily on uncovering the meaning that highly engaged Jews place on the many ways in which they actively engage with Jewish communal institutions and organizations.

Intense civic engagement and the thick social capital that results from such engagement are rare commodities in contemporary America. In the 1990s researchers began to identify a significant diminution of committed, ongoing voluntary association that weakened the strength of institutions from PTAs to the Kiwanis, and from the League of Women Voters to voting itself. America increasingly has become a nation of episodic volunteers who, as we have discussed, “bowled alone” in the company of friends and family, rather than continuing the pattern of America as a nation of joiners. The results do not augur well for minority communities dependent upon a deep sense of obligation. Instead, as Theda Skocpol notes (inter alia), we find weak ties and personalized, episodic involvement in which volunteers do not form as many reciprocal ties as do members. Such volunteers are normally not elected to responsible organizational leadership posts, and are unlikely to experience the sense of belonging shared by generations past. The result is that, while communal organizations may find people who will show up to events and volunteer activities, the tight bonds of social capital necessary to sustain a minority community are lost.

Many see in these findings a serious challenge for a minority community such as the Jewish community of the United States. As fealty to the Jewish people and its communal manifestations moves from obligation (a moral imperative) to looser voluntary association, binding ties are loosened. Steve M. Cohen notes:

If Judaism is a matter of norms, of right and wrong, one can teach one’s children that Jewish involvement is right, and distancing from Jewish life is wrong. But if to be Jewish is a matter of aesthetics, then one can only teach that Jewish engagement is akin to the love of music and art. Such engagement can lend purpose and meaning and spiritual enrichment, but it is by no means a moral decision. In fact, many Jews now see being Jewish the same way as loving music or art. It is a good thing to do, but for them it is not a matter of right or wrong. They have no sense that for a Jew to be Jewish is the right way to be, akin to one’s patriotic duty as an American or other nationalities. (Gerstenfeld and Cohen).

Our research focuses heavily on unpacking the ways civic Judaism is manifest in the second decade of the twenty-first century—this move from obligation to what Cohen unhappily calls aesthetic choice. The most compelling confirmation of Skocpol’s concerns is found in the very reasons highly engaged and connected Jews give for volunteering, which, affirming the trends we see in America, indeed reflect aesthetic choice and episodic engagement. Whether such engagement can be constructively channeled, of course, remains to be seen and understood.

As we examine the population surveyed, we find very high percentages explaining their engagement in civic life in terms of the universals noted above: doing good in the world, helping their local communities, sharing experiences with family and friends, and working on issues about which they care deeply. (See Tables for Q.9.) These are universal values that do little to support a minority community, unless they are inextricably linked to, and explained in terms of, that community. That Jews do good in the world may not sustain the Jewish community or Jewish identity unless those individuals are consciously acting as Jews, and acting for, or with, the Jewish community. Here our research becomes most intriguing and, we believe, valuable in develop-

ing policies and initiatives geared toward Jewish communal vitality.

When asked if working to make the world a better place—a translation of the Jewish imperative of *tikkun olam*—is a Jewish value, the response was overwhelmingly positive across all generational cohorts (although here Baby Boomers stood out as most affirming). This affirmative response certainly provides an opening for creating experiences that tap into—and reinforce—the linkage between actions and Jewish values. But this affirmation is tempered by two other responses that parallel prior research. When highly affiliated Jews are asked if the civic engagement they clearly value deeply is one way for them to live out their Jewish lives, the response is tepid. If the hope is that public service, service learning, and teaching the value of mitzvah as the Jewish obligation to do good in the world are ways to fortify communal identity and build thick Jewish social capital, then, at least at this moment in history, the critical linkages seem to be lacking. (See Table Q.9-9.)

An alternative could be to focus on the particular, or even parochial, needs of the Jewish community. Certainly many Jewish communal leaders have suggested that the focus and object of Jewish commitment should be Jews and Jewish issues, from antisemitism to Israel, and from Jewish education to Jewish poverty and communal institutional health. There is communal language to support such a focus, that “All Israel is responsible one for another.” (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate

Shevu’ot 39a). Yet even among those most committed, including those who themselves lead the organizations, foundations, and institutions of the Jewish community, there is weak resonance for such a focus. A solid majority rejects parochial interests and believes that it is not important to their volunteer civic engagement whether service is primarily helping Jews. Even the most committed are universalists at heart and eschew what they see as Jewish parochialism. Here Boomers and Millennials share a strong preference for volunteer service that is not specific to, or limited by, the Jewish community. (See Table Q.11.)

### **What A Minority Community Should Sustain: Is It Good For Jews, Or Good For *The* Jews?**

*A father in a suburban community asks his 17 year old son if he’d like to volunteer for an environmental cleanup. The reason, he tells the son, is that Jews have a deep value called tikkun olam, which is interpreted as “repairing the (brokenness of the) world”. The father says he wants the son to learn about this value, and for them to volunteer together. They access a secular volunteer website, type in their ZIP code, and find that the local nature center has a cleanup day the following Saturday, so they sign up. They spend a wonderful day working together to clear a path through the pristine woods. They meet interesting people and end the day feeling a sense of accomplishment. Father and son decide to return the next Saturday. It’s another fun day, so they return a third time a week later.*

*At the end of that day, the son says, “Dad, that was great, and I really enjoyed doing this with you. I like the idea of tikkun olam, and I’m glad it’s something important to Jewish people like us, and I really had fun. I think three times is enough, though.” The father agrees, and they both feel great. They had a terrific shared experience, and the father is proud that he has conveyed a truly important Jewish value to his son in a way that he feels confident will stick with the young man.*

What lens should be used to assess this story? The father and son had peak experiences, and a core Jewish value of repairing the world was conveyed, shared, and realized. The nature center got six full days

of volunteer work, and was improved. The website had another satisfied visitor. What did not occur was linkage to the Jewish community. When the father and son acted on a Jewish value—and maybe even shared with people at the nature center that this value was why they were volunteering—something truly special and meaningful happened. But this act never touched the Jewish community; Jewish networks or voluntary associations were not engaged. Two Jews benefited, a father and a son. But we would pose an additional question: Did “the Jews” benefit too?

From the perspective of those concerned with what is best for an ethnically, religiously, and culturally pluralist nation, some would argue that the cosmopolitan American comfortably integrates multiple cultural inputs, and that any attempt to curtail or structure how individuals participate within America is justifiably doomed to failure. This view is countered by those most committed to minority community status, who claim that minority communities must be privileged as a singular way to ensure that the nation will continue to enjoy the richness of cultural diversity and the benefits that a multicultural society offers. And certainly there are those whose focus is solely on sustaining the integrity and viability of their own minority community for which America is but a host.

While Putnam and Skocpol may bemoan the loss of thick ties that link Americans to their community, the United States will survive even if fraternal organizations and other previous forms of voluntary association atrophy. The United States is a nation with territorial boundaries and conferred citizenship that demands obligation, from paying taxes to obeying the TSA agent at the airport. But the question looms large whether a minority community such as the Jewish community can survive the loss of the religious/tribal/ethnic/cultural bonds, including endogamous marriage, that have sustained it in the past. Many who hear the story of the suburban son’s and father’s good deeds may well despair for the collective, even if they recognize the autonomous choices of the individuals to associate as they see fit, and even if they endorse the pair’s environmental activities as being not only good, but also genuinely motivated by Jewish values.

From the viewpoint of the minority community seeking to retain its members and sustain its vitality, the quest is quite existential: how do we stay alive as a collective? Jews have a long and successful history of maintaining strong bonds and large numbers that maintain their Jewish religious/ethnic/tribal/cultural identity. The irony of the Pew study is that the numbers of those who are proud of their Jewish identity is so much greater than those who participate in Jewish communal life or would even be considered Jews by many within the Jewish community. The anxiety remains that a personalized, and often mostly theoretical, Jewish identity will not be collectively sustainable.

Arnold Eisen, chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, succinctly asks, “Can we motivate larger numbers of Jews to attach themselves to Jewish communities—groups of Jews bound to one another by ties of tangible obligation and engaged in serious dialogue with Jewish history and traditions?” (2). The answer is less clear than the question. In broad strokes, the personal, private, and spiritual features of American Jewish identity seem to be holding their own, while their counterparts—the communal, public, institutional, ritually religious and ethnic dimensions—seem to be in contraction. The debate over remedial steps within the Jewish community rages and plays out in terms of programs offered, and of philanthropic and organizational funds expended, with heartfelt exhortations promoting (or perhaps pleading for) fidelity. The argument is between those seeking to protect the sustainable core and those who see this time as a

creative and enriching opportunity to focus on innovative outreach and expansive, unconventional engagement.<sup>1</sup>

The traditionalist school, those committed to inherited forms of Jewish practice and ritual, anxious and yet energized by their read of recent studies and surveys, offer a clear critique of the direction of Jewish life in America:

Those of us who wish to build a strong and authentic Jewish life dare not communicate to our children that everything is up for grabs, that their Jewish descent is non-binding, and that Jewish living is merely one option among a broad array of lifestyle choices. The post-ethnic Judaism . . . envision[ed] puts us at risk of abandoning a critical aspect of our “thick” Jewish culture, our obligation and familial ties to the Jewish people in Israel and around the world—in effect, trading our Jewish birthright for a thin gruel. (Cohen and Wertheimer 5).

This is not a narrow claim by the most traditional or Orthodox. The analysis offered by Cohen and Wertheimer and others with similar views is that a minority community cannot sustain itself in America on personalized identity, on a self that is saturated with a wide range of associations and perhaps even affiliations that demand no more than self-proclamation.

Yet even if traditionalist concerns accurately describe the diminution of Jewish religious and civic obligation, how does a community respond to evidence that Jewish identity as once understood in America has

shifted dramatically, even as the institutions, organizations, educational programs, and philanthropic investments of those committed to communal sustainability continue to endorse the older forms of obligation and affiliation? Paul Golin takes on those who bemoan the shifting attitudes and behaviors of American Jews when he chastises them as the very people who have, in leading and speaking for the Jewish community over the past decades, failed to alter the ways Jews identify and as they have not effectively stemmed the diminution of thick bonds of fidelity. He argues that

these folks have been at the helm of a ship that they’ve scraped against the iceberg of American society—trends of religious pluralism, increasing secularism, growing intermarriage, full acceptance of Jews and even philo-Semitism, all trends none of them have successfully countered in any measurable way, or even necessarily wanted to. And yet every few years, usually after another study shows just how many fellow passengers have fled their ship, they once again inform us of how to best rearrange the deck chairs.

And who’s to blame for this alleged communal crisis? Those actually steering the ship? Of course not. It’s all those damn passengers who fled.

Our research over the years confirms an acknowledged reality, that even most Orthodox Jews with the thickest ties of allegiance and affiliation live a life of multiple identities, of which Jewish is but one. It has become a cliché that the most communally active or connected Jews hear calls to civic engagement and social action from multiple venues and voices. (see tables for Q.6 on venues of volunteerism). As Leonard Fein writes, “We can be both universalistic and particularistic, both rational and traditional, both sentimental and utilitarian.” (Ch. 9). This is certainly true of the inner life of America’s Jews (cf. Fein’s book title), but resources cannot be allocated quite so expansively as emotions, and so the debate over where to focus communal assets, institutional and financial, is where the disagreements play out. Wertheimer and Cohen are well positioned in the established institutions of Jewish

<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to David Elcott’s student Jason Leivenberg for this insight.

life; they write for, and are compensated by, the venerable core of the American Jewish community. Golin is situated differently. He is the associate executive director of Big Tent Judaism/Jewish Outreach Institute, committed to engage Jews who do not necessarily fall into the scope of this survey—they have episodic and limited, if any, interactions with Jewish communal institutions and life.

Yet we argue that these episodic, seemingly peripheral Jews actually share much more with those more engaged than the traditionalists might want to acknowledge. The freedom to choose at the core of American culture exists even for the leaders and joiners; even those most strongly engaged and those most observant of Jewish traditions are making existential and personalized choices regarding when, where, and how to engage. And their bonds are much more tenuous than the traditionalists may imagine. (Elcott 20-21).

Returning to the reasons the survey participants give for engagement in volunteer activities, we cannot but note that personal choice and existential meaning, the desire to fulfill one's own understanding of how to participate in the world, overwhelms any other rationale. Even those most affiliated with the Jewish community eschew the two obligation categories: that doing good in the world is compelled as a way to live out one's Jewish life, and that working to make the world a better place is a religious obligation for Jews. This, as we have noted before, is in spite of decades spent teaching that *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) is a religious and civic Jewish responsibility, a way to be Jewish. (Tables for Q.9) This reality is confirmed in other studies of other Jewish demographics, including those more nominally affiliated and engaged. What is "good for Jews" in America is the wide array of choices available to them each day as they consider what to do with their lives. This should lead us to consider in what ways that which is good for individual, autonomous Jews can also be "good for the Jews"—the ephemeral sweet spot that bridges two often contrasting needs and values. This is the elusive, but urgently needed, place at which current activism and connections can include Jewish values and, perhaps, Jewish communal linkages and participation.

No issue better poses this tension than the conversation raging over endogamy and intermarriage. If this and other studies are accurate in their findings, "Jewish" is usually but one variable among many for the individual Jewish man or woman who seeks a spouse. Such a reality is hardly surprising given the intermarriage rate among other ethnic white minority communities in the United States, and among Christians of various denominations. (Schaefer Riley). Given the deeply personalized nature of identity, ethnic and religious identities do not command the same allegiance that they clearly held only a few generations ago. It is increasingly harder to imagine any significant number of cases in which an individual in love is willing to abandon a potential spouse over ethnic or religious commitments. Whereas once intermarriage between minority Jews and majority Christians may have been seen, even by the intermarrying Jew him or herself, as a means of exit from Judaism and the Jewish community, this does not seem to be true today, according to survey research of those who have intermarried. And, as a result, the perplexed community institutions and spokespeople struggle with how to respond to intermarriage. For some, there are many ways to be Jewish that represent hope for the future, with intermarriage included as an option; for others, this evolution means a loss of collective strength.

Cohen, along with significant thought and institutional leaders, and the philanthropic dollars that support them, sees intermarriage as a singular defining issue that will undermine the Jewish community as a minority community in the United States. Writing with Leon Morris, he speaks for the welfare and assumed value of a vital and sustainable minority community in an open and welcoming society:

***T**hese episodic, seemingly peripheral Jews actually share much more with those more engaged than the traditionalists want to acknowledge.*

We have no illusions. We know that more rabbis who unequivocally state that in-marriage is the ideal will not dramatically lower the intermarriage rate. That lofty goal can be achieved only through additional investment in policies and programs that strengthen Jewish life generally and create stronger social networks among young Jews—overnight camps, Israel travel, campus workers, day schools, and more. That said, rabbis who raise intermarriage to a status where it's as valid a Jewish choice as in-marriage, or an ideal reflected in the lives of our greatest prophets, undermine Jewish law, Jewish history, and contemporary demographics. For, as the research unequivocally shows, in-marrying spouses observe more, affiliate more, identify with Israel more, and raise their children as Jewish significantly more than the intermarried. We believe that we can welcome the intermarried without losing the right to teach our children the actual advantage of in-marrying in order to live a fuller Jewish life. (Cohen and Morris).

Eric Yoffie, a former president of the Union for Reform Judaism, provides a robust counter-argument that the cost of communal parochialism will further alienate the very individuals whose allegiance to the Jewish community is critical for its survival:

The simple fact is that no feasible strategy is available to lower those rates in any dramatic way. Doing so would require Jews in this country to pull back from full, enthusiastic participation in American life and to construct barricades and bunkers to separate themselves from the American mainstream . . . . What is needed is to make plain to American Jews what they can and should do to keep Judaism vibrant. In the case of the intermarried, this means, in one word, outreach. Far from being the problem . . . , outreach is instead a benefit and a blessing. After all . . . communal organizations of every variety work hard

to keep the doors open to intermarried families. Outreach is now for everyone, including the very traditional.

This policy debate, central to any minority community, is how to sustain fidelity to a shared collective past, present, and future that once was determined by affiliations, philanthropic giving, long-term participation, and strong identification. The conversation, then, is about what is "best for the Jews." The irony is that this debate itself runs counter to the highly personalized nature of identity in America, even among the minority population itself—"the Jews." For most American Jews the question is, "what is good for me and, perhaps, for my immediate family?" The options available in the larger society are myriad, and Jews are taking advantage of all that is offered.

### **Leveling The Playing Field: Generational Distinctions Then And Now**

What stands out throughout these survey results is that the ways in which we may well imagine generational cohorts distinguishing themselves was far less evident among a population of connected Jews. This is especially true on a deep level, in contrast to the lifestyle choices that people make at different ages as they mature. One expects different priorities for those who are beginning families compared to those becoming empty nesters. Yet, beyond these factors, there are indeed similarities that bridge the generational divide.

This parallels a complementary trend, revealed by the present study: disaffected Jews who live more peripherally to Jewish life, engaging in few voluntary Jewish associations—synagogue memberships, philanthropic giving to Jewish causes, participation in Jewish social

justice activities and communal service—share similar expressions of identity across generational lines.

These trends at once complicate and simplify approaches to communal engagement. If the hope is that, by providing a wide range of opportunities and benefits to young Jews, institutions can establish permanent and untouchable ties to Jewish communal structures, taking on the many responsibilities critical to sustain the American Jewish community, then there is reason for concern and skepticism. Baby Boomers are interacting with the Jewish community in ways remarkably similar to the younger cohorts: trending toward episodic, short-term engagement and a loosening of institutional affiliation ties. At the same time, focusing on Boomers and their interests and needs may well pave the way for institutional transformations that will create new, more flexible and inviting platforms for Jewish life accessible to the succeeding generations. Unfortunately, engaging Boomers as a rich resource and reaching out to Boomers who have moved away from (or never associated with) the Jewish community has not been a priority for most Jewish institutions or funders. This has severely limited the more flexible and nimble models that could be available to Jews of all generations.

This trend—and organizations' lack of readiness to find a place for Jewish Boomers other than on existing Boards, committees and fund-raisers—occurs against the backdrop of decreased membership, affiliation, and volunteer leadership in many Jewish voluntary associations. If Jewish communal leaders and their institutions—federations, agencies, organizations and synagogues—fail to respond, the evidence suggests that there will be a significant cost: this generation that has always gone its own way will slip away from connection to Jewish life and unhesitatingly find meaning elsewhere. This would erode the Jewish community's resources and deny it the full benefit of Boomers' energy, ideas, financial resources, skills, wisdom, and increased availability at a time when they are sorely needed. And it would intensify a pattern of disengagement for future generations.

This predicament is compounded by the limited vision of Jewish institutions and foundations that focus solely on youth. The community often measures success by how compelling its programs are to twenty- and thirty-somethings. While it is natural for anxious minority communities to show that their young identify with, and will commit themselves to, communal institutions, it is strange that youth engagement would be viewed as the sole path to ensuring strength and viability, and as the primary measure of success.

Many foundations and communal organizations that fund innovation, especially in the Jewish community, are convinced that their focus on twenty- and thirty-somethings sufficiently covers the innovation terrain that will assure communal transformation. The implications of taking this limited view are massive; the foundations and organizations involved drive the public and Jewish communal agendas. Their rationale reflects a shared mantra that intergenerational and Boomer issues are not part of their mission—an ironic echo of the language foundations and Jewish communal organizations used a generation ago to explain their failure to address those in their twenties and thirties. In a recent study of more than 250 philanthropic funders regarding their programmatic goals, responses clustered around childhood education and a wide range of entitlements for young adults. The only mention of any other age group related to rising demands for geriatric social services. (Cohen and Berkowitz 15).

As a result, a powerful challenge to Jewish communal policy and practice is emerging: if the presumption is that providing meaningful entitlement experiences for young Jews is sufficient in the current

landscape to guarantee a high level of allegiance, a rude awakening lies ahead. Jewish Baby Boomers, even those once most affiliated and seemingly committed, will look elsewhere for meaning in their lives if they do not find it within the Jewish community. Furthermore, given enhanced life expectancy, this is a problem—and a failing—that will not go away. Boomers can look forward to 20 years or more of activism, energy and exploration before considering a lifestyle shift to “retirement”. The question is whether or not their path will include Jewish possibilities. We know it already includes emerging choices provided by secular organizations, and even the government, as they capture Boomers' availability and interest. If the Jewish community does not keep pace with Boomers' evolving needs, interests, lifestyles, and values, they will easily seek and find meaning elsewhere.

### **How Involved Jews View The Future**

We noted earlier that American Jews have a deep faith that the Holocaust has meaning for them, a response found to be equally powerful in the Pew study. The Holocaust, as an historic event, seems to have some binding quality. Jews of all ages share a very strong identification with this moment in the Jewish past. In the language of collective memory that undergirds identity, Jews share a history in the Holocaust on a very deep level. Again, we do not fully understand why this past event connects Jews more than other events, but it does.

But a vital minority community must also feel that it shares a present and future, that the individual's fate is linked to that of the community of which she or he is a part. Here, as with the Pew survey, Jewish identity—feeling Jewish—is strong across all cohorts. Without asking about affiliations or other indicators of strong social or organizational bonds, the relationship of respondents to their Jewish identity is profound and, for many, growing. When asked about the meaning of being part of the Jewish community, the population of this survey—unlike in the Pew study—respond with similar and often growing fervor. The Jews in this study express a powerful, shared present with the Jewish community and the Jewish people.

In terms of sustaining a minority community even in America's inviting culture, the responses indicated here would indicate a situation of vitality and health. (See Tables Q.28-1 and Q.28-2.) The only caveat is that our respondents' American identity, their role as citizens that they share with Americans of all ethnicities and religions, is equally compelling for them. While there is no indication of a conflict between the two identities, this finding is a reminder that even those most engaged with the Jewish community reflect an equal commitment and passion for their American identity (although we should note that Millennials evince less robust connections to both). (See Table Q.28-3.) And it is worth noting that both identities are equally challenged by the impact of social media and the web as access to connections and information erode the need for, and interest in, the institutions of previous decades, whether in the Jewish community or the general civic culture. It remains to be seen which settings will succeed in adapting to this change and create models of engagement that are relevant, responsive, and sustainable.

The participants in this survey include segments of the population in which we would expect to see a healthy belief in the third temporal aspect of one's communal identity, the Jewish future in America and around the world. Three questions were asked that indicate a need for further research and communal concern. When asked the question about their faith in the future, a disturbing and pronounced dichotomy is apparent. All four generational cohorts exhibit highly optimistic confidence in their own personal future (although Baby Boomers were the least enthusiastic, an indicator that should concern those thinking about Baby Boomer fidelity to the Jewish community, even

*If the presumption is that providing entitlement experiences for young Jews is sufficient to guarantee allegiance, a rude awakening lies ahead.*

among those who are most connected today). In addition, they reflect a healthy confidence that their time and money can make a positive difference in the world (see Table Q.10). They are prepared to engage, as professionals and volunteers, in doing good, and they want to do this on the largest possible stage, helping Jews and all others in need (see Table Q.11). Again, we witness the privatized and autonomous confidence that the Jews of this study exhibit. But when asked about Israel and America's future, and the future of the world, answers took a dramatically pessimistic turn (see Tables Q.34-5-6). As noted above, America is a geographic and political reality. Pessimistic images of the future are reason for political and moral, but not existential, American concern. And pessimism about the world does not lead to disengagement from humanity. That is not, however, true for a minority community dependent solely on voluntary association. If a vision for a shared future is essential to sustain a vital community, this striking set of responses is, in fact, reason for anxiety. If imagining a positive future is difficult, if Israel and the Zionist identity are considered endangered, what is compelling about sustaining the community? And given that the same individuals' deep identification with the Holocaust, a painful genocidal narrative that is often at the core of Jewish messaging, one could wonder whether the commanding past of genocide and the pessimistic future are inextricably entwined.

### Anticipating The Future

So where are we? W.G. Sebald, whose part German, part English writings explore the unmoored position of us all, suggests that we are all emigrants from, but not immigrants to, giving us words uttered by Onkel Kasimir: "I often come out here, *sagte der Onkel Kasimir*, it makes me feel that I am a long way away, though I never know quite from where."

We are a long way away from the world into which many of us were born, even if we live in the same towns, speak what seems to be the same language, and participate actively within the civic culture of Jewish and American societies. Living in the twenty-first century, we have come a long way, but we are not sure from where, and even less certain where we are going.

If this reality makes research difficult, it creates even greater challenges for those who are committed to public service in the Jewish community. Those Jews most involved in planning and ensuring the Jewish future are being called upon to construct more compelling institutions and offer ways to motivate and involve Jews, both those who affiliate and identify, and those less connected and committed, to greater Jewish communal engagement.

If American Jews seek to find common ground and create a shared agenda, the first thing needed is to teach those making decisions in the Jewish community that radical autonomy is now the hallmark—and intersection—of American liberty and Jewish life. This may not be a revolutionary feature of the American political system, but it is revolutionary for minority communities that seek cohesion and allegiance. The problem is as simple as a Jewish teenager from an observant home eating his first Big Mac, and as complex as the question of who will be considered Jewish. Even those who identify as Jews and are active members of the American Jewish community have still chosen to live in a world filled with autonomy, freedom, wealth, power, democracy, acceptance, and change. Minority communities and their institutions must honor choice and autonomy as a way to respect the uniqueness of each human being, and as a core mantra of America. Next to the radical autonomy of each individual Jew, demands of self-limitation for the sake of the future Jewish community will be incredibly hard to sustain. If the traditions, language, and rituals—the building blocks of identity—of the Jewish community cannot provide rich contemporary meaning for its adherents, then its communal death will be natural.

No amount of coercion can prevent that from occurring. So the task is not to bemoan the loss or criticize those who seek additional affiliations and meaningful experiences, but rather to help to build ethnic, religious, and local communities that are compelling and that enhance each member of that community. Among the array of possibilities that could help achieve this is for the community to nurture meaning-makers. The messages offered by those most active must be believable and significant for those hearing them, not merely for those who pronounce them.

The second lesson is that we live with indeterminacy, which places a great burden on those responsible for making decisions, creating policies, and exhorting others to "buy in" to a vision. As Mark Johnson notes:

*The messages offered by those most active must be significant for those hearing them, not merely for those who pronounce them.*

It takes no great insight to recognize that our moral understanding is complex, multidimensional, messy, anything but transparent and utterly resistant to absolutes and reductive strategies. This is not to say that we shouldn't seek as much clarity, determinateness, and stability as we can realistically manage . . . [but] we negotiate our way through this tangled maze of moral deliberation, one step at a time, never sure where we will end, guided only by our ideals of what we, and others, and our shared world might become. (260).

So what may be most needed at this pivotal moment is humility and some modesty by those who purport to have the answers, who set limits on what Jewish should look like, who want to set the rules and boundaries. One key way to effect a greater openness is to make space, to create platforms for people to choose to gather, and to listen to and respect the voices that come from within the community. (See Hayim Herring.) When those most directly affected by the problems and issues a community seeks to address, those who seek meaning in their lives, are invested in the community's success, they help it remain vital and successful over time. Empowering Jews to have a voice, creating dialogue settings, and fostering openness to diversity, are some ways to link the individual and the community, and to create a shared sense of what is right and wrong—and what is valuable. As A.O. Hirschman declared years ago in *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, the alternative to giving voice is exit from the community. Silencing people does not nurture their loyalty.

At the same time, we want to teach the Jewish communal field that leadership should carefully provoke. Harvard leadership specialist Ronald Heifetz claims that leadership is most importantly about making people aware of what is precious and what is expendable. This can be a radical demand on traditional systems. But if leaders are to sustain a viable Jewish community, they must recognize that neither they nor their institutions are likely to hold exclusive claims on anyone. Heifetz says decision-makers and those taking on significant roles within a community must be prepared to grasp the adaptive gauntlet. Writing with Alexander Grashow and Martin Linsky, Heifetz compares adaptive work to a car engine—in order for it to work, it must generate heat, or stress. The true leader is a master of disciplined attention who can keep one eye on the temperature gauge while steering the organization with the other. (31).

American Jewry—and, for that matter, world Jewry—has a problem today of what stories are to be told. The Holocaust is one that, as we have shown, remains compelling to an overwhelming number of Jews. Yet its meaning and where it leads us are confusing at best in an America that honors Jews, and are potentially dangerous in focusing on Jewish suffering and death. The Zionist story, the powerful one with which many Jews grew up, is waning as an effective unifying narrative—we have confirmed

what has been obvious for a number of years as each generational cohort responds less well to traditional Zionist messaging. If the Jewish people is without a clear and compelling story to tell about what it means to be a Jew in the twenty-first century, a story that is convincing enough to explain and sustain Jewish uniqueness, then that alone may be the greatest challenge. Effective leaders must link the Jewish narrative with compelling personal and collective narratives of American Jews and those who seek to associate with the Jewish community. Alasdair MacIntyre offers:

Narratives have remarkable power. Man is in his actions and practice . . . a story telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" (216).

Consider three Jewish brothers from Los Angeles who grew up in Los Angeles, went to Camp Ramah and Hebrew school in a Conservative congregation, and were raised by parents who (while not observant) were actively engaged and affiliated with Jewish life. One is now a Haredi yeshiva student living in Jerusalem with six children, the second is a gay former human rights activist who works at a Jewish communal organization, and the third is intermarried and belongs to a Reform congregation. Family background, age cohort, public norms, and education would not have predicted their individual identity choices. (Nor, to be fair, do traditional assimilation indices claim to predict every individual case by virtue of these variables.) But if those who seek to guide and lead were willing to listen to these three individual stories, the narratives of the journeys upon which these Jews are embarking, rather than forcing them to fit into the story the "leaders" want to tell, perhaps it would be easier to understand how each one arrived at his present position.

Panic over intermarriage, railing at congregants over the hemorrhaging of Jewish life, demanding fealty to a singular Israel message, desperately investing solely in the young and ignoring the spiritual

and meaning-system needs of other generational cohorts, constantly speaking only about the Jewish community and not about the personal needs of individual Jews—all these practices seem to ignore the evidence careful readers of contemporary culture and thoughtful experts in branding and marketing have to offer, or else they must value delivering these divisive messages more than they value the vitality of the community they lecture. We are certainly convinced that, in an oversaturated culture in which children have the technological capacities to locate themselves anywhere in the world and link themselves to those

far away, providing multiple rich Jewish narratives may offer pathways to meaning that can inspire allegiance—or, if not, then at least active curiosity, a key first step. So, perhaps most important of all, we need to teach those who want to serve to become great storytellers who also are able to listen, rather than pronounce, and to bring out the stories of others and then weave them together. From these will emerge dynamic Jewish traditions and practices, and a Jewish community of vital meaning.

Pedagogically, teachers, students, researchers, public servants, community organizers, and community members would be well-served to see this period as one of great fracture and disorientation,

personal and communal, and to perceive that the narratives we share may provide the most compelling material from which we can build renewed, revitalized senses of community. Or, as Robert Coles says so simply, "This story, yours, mine—it's what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them." (30).

Some 12,500 Jews of all ages told us a story through their responses to this survey. The shape of that story is not neat, clean, uniform, or necessarily consistent. And that is as it should be in a time of change and repositioning. What we know is that, as leaders of a minority community in the United States, those committed to American Jewry's vitality and sustainability need to listen well to that story, and to come away ready to let go of precious hopes that often animate an anxious nuclear community—ready to open the doors and windows to the emerging interests, attitudes, and needs of the people who are, after all, the body and the life of that community.

*Those who want to serve must be able to listen, bring out the stories of others, and become great storytellers with a compelling twenty-first century narrative.*



## AMERICAN JEWRY'S GREAT UNTAPPED RESOURCE: GRANDPARENTS

<http://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/2016/01/american-jewrys-great-untapped-resource-grandparents/>

**They've got time, money, and love to spare, and there are more of them than ever. Why isn't the Jewish community enlisting their help?**

January 28, 2016 | Jack Wertheimer

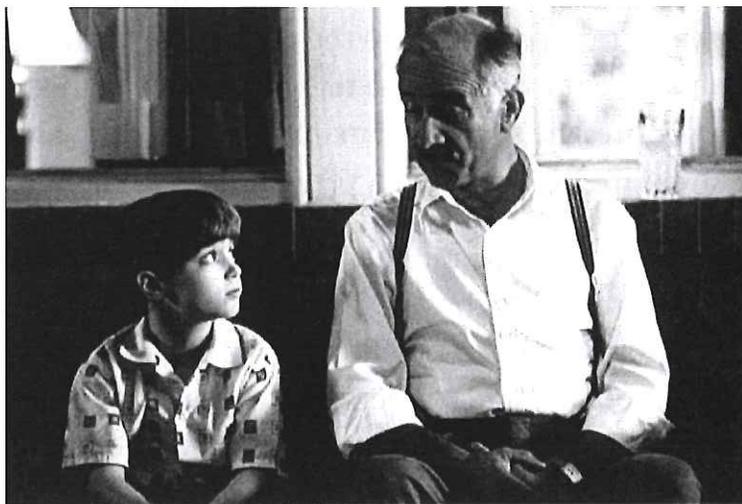
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In *The Best Boy in the United States of America*, the Jewish educator Ron Wolfson pens what amounts to a love letter to his grandparents, whose wise and benevolent influence has continued long after their demise to shape his life, his values, and his loyalties as a Jew. Wolfson's story has elicited paeans of confirming praise from readers eager to share their own grateful memories of grandparents like his.

Similar testimony is not hard to find in the writings of Jewish figures as various as Rabbi Joseph B.

Soloveitchik and the novelist

Mordecai Richler (in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*). In the extensive interviews they conducted for *The Jew Within* (2000), the scholars Arnold Eisen and Steven M. Cohen encountered no end of American Jewish adults attesting to relationships with grandparents far more positive than those with their parents. Social media today abound with similarly loving recollections, as in this Facebook post upon the death of a grandfather: "My Grandpa meant the world to me, as did our entire family to him. . . . My love of Israel, Judaism, and family all came from him." To these I can add my own experience of serving over the years on the admissions committee for the rabbinical



A Jewish grandfather and grandchild in the 1990 film *Avalon*.

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school of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) and being repeatedly struck by the number of applicants citing grandparental influence in their eventual decision to become actively committed members of the Jewish clergy.

Buttressing such anecdotal impressions are two recent studies. One, based on surveys of Birthright Israel alumni, reveals that, in general, “connection to Jewish grandparents is an important predictor of a wide variety of [positive] Jewish attitudes and practices” in later years. A second study of 1,150 Jewish college students, conducted in 2014 by Barry Kosmin and Ariella Keysar, and focusing on the respondents’ middle-school years, likewise finds that those whose grandparents accompanied them to synagogue and other Jewish settings are likeliest to feel strong attachments to Israel and the Jewish people. In religious life, too, both studies underline the extent to which grandparents, as Lisa Miller puts it in *The Spiritual Child*, are “key coordinates” on a child’s “spiritual map.”

But if these are the feelings and attitudes of adult or young-adult grandchildren fortunate enough to have been the beneficiaries of grandparental attention and concern, what about the feelings and attitudes of the grandparents themselves—and in particular of *today’s* Jewish grandparents? Are they still recognizably of the same breed as Ron Wolfson’s grandparents, or have the radical transformations in American and American Jewish family life, the stuff of so many books, essays, and movies—and so much communal handwringing—created a very different dynamic of intergenerational relationships?

To answer this question, I recently oversaw a series of two dozen interviews with Jewish grandparents residing in fourteen states covering all regions of the country. (My partner in this effort was Laura Shefter, a graduate student in JTS’s Davidson School of Jewish Education and a most tactful interviewer.) Admittedly, ours was a relatively small sample, and not necessarily fully representative of majority views: although we tried hard to include people across the range of Jewish denominational orientations and in different types of family configurations, we deliberately did not speak with those expressing no interest in their grandchildren’s Jewish lives. Nevertheless, the results are highly suggestive. Many grandparents are indeed eager to play an active role in the lives of their grandchildren, including as role models and as guides in the art of Jewish living. While some Jewish institutions, for their part, are alert to the rich possibilities offered by this undervalued resource, a great deal more could be done to mobilize it as an active partner in the socialization of the next Jewish generation.

**First, a little general background.** The large demographic bulge known as the “baby boomers” now consists of fifty- and sixty-somethings; the eldest among them will very soon be turning seventy. Quite a few members of this “forever young” generation have in fact already attained the status of grandparents, and many more will be joining them in the next decade. In this new role, to judge from a spate of studies, they are performing in

their own distinctive way.

Today's heightened concern with healthy living, coupled with remarkable strides in medical and pharmaceutical knowhow, means that large numbers will live better and longer than any previous generation in history. With health, longevity, and financial resources, those interested in participating actively in the lives of their children and grandchildren will be able to do so—and, indeed, to become almost equally active great-grandparents.

Boomer grandparents benefit from new communications technologies. Thanks to email, social media, and video chats, they can maintain a close and continuing relationship with their grandchildren even at a geographical distance. Exemplars of what one business consultant has termed today's "grandparent economy," they are also more inclined to spend money in the here and now than to have assets transferred only after their deaths. Many provide their children with financial assistance, especially for education, and also expend considerable sums on travel, visiting regularly and/or taking their grandchildren on trips to broaden their horizons.

Not least, American grandparents today seem as intent as their forebears on conveying to grandchildren their own values, commitments, and ways of thinking, including when it comes to religion. A recent study, *Families and Faith*, concludes that "for many children, grandparents are the de-facto moral and religious models and teachers in lieu of parents who are too exhausted or too busy on weekends to go to church or temple." Some would state the relationship even more strongly than that.

All of these characteristics of baby-boomer grandparents are well represented in the subset of their peers within the population of American Jews—and there they sometimes manifest themselves with special intensity. Thus, in listening to such grandparents, what comes across most powerfully is the depth of emotion evoked by the very subject of grandchildren. As one grandmother testifies, "I don't have a fancy car, but I consider myself the luckiest woman in the world because I have my grandchildren close by." They especially treasure the opportunity to get to know their grandchildren one by one. "This past year on my birthday," a grandfather reports, "I went to Washington for the day and spent it with my granddaughter. It was probably the best gift I could have."

Additional leisure time, especially in the case of grandfathers, is not the only factor at work. Unlike in earlier generations, most Jewish grandparents today were born and educated in the United States. Their schooling and other formative experiences, like summer camp, were not all that dissimilar to their grandchildren's. All of this makes for easier communication.

Rather than conforming to the old saw about grandparents and grandchildren sharing a common enemy, namely, the parents, those we interviewed claim their self-defined role is

to offer relief to their harried children—as one retired grandfather put it, “to keep my kids and their spouses sane.” This relief takes the form of financial support and, for families living nearby, service as part-time minders, with grandmothers in particular taking charge of the children once or twice a week, picking them up from school, spending an evening with them, and in some cases sleeping over.

Aside from such interactions, grandparents also make clear that they want to convey some specific messages. For many, the chief hope, in the words of one grandmother, is “to pass down a sense to my family that they are all connected.” Especially as grandchildren outgrow their most adorable early years, many grandparents take to heart their responsibility to serve as moral guides, teachers of family lore, and exemplars of virtues. And, for most, the legacy they wish to impart includes a serious dose of Jewish identification.

Some, candidly aware of how poorly they themselves may have fulfilled this last role as parents, are trying to remediate their sins of omission. High on the list of priorities are family gatherings for Shabbat dinners and holiday meals, in their own homes or as guests of their children. Building associations between such practices and the ideal of family togetherness is seen as especially meaningful. With great pride a grandmother quotes the postcard sent by a grandchild from camp: “Shabbat is great here, but not like in your house.”

A sizable number also assume an active role in taking their grandchildren to Jewish religious services, often picking up the slack when parents themselves are not active synagogue-goers. The same intentions are on display with those who have become more punctilious in their own observance. One grandfather, whose wife assumes responsibility for preparing festive meals on Jewish occasions, admits to a lack of personal connection with the rituals—but “I go along with it because I know it’s a good thing for the kids. . . . I think it’s important for them to understand that this is how we came to be Jewish and this is what it means.” Says another, realistically: “Our grandkids see that we’re involved, and they become involved. . . . [Otherwise] they’ll say, ‘Zaydeh [Grandpa] doesn’t do it, why do we have to do it?’”

The “it” includes teaching grandchildren about their Jewish communal responsibilities. Quite a few interviewees make reference to the stress they place on “*tikkun olam*” and “*tzedakah*.” One grandfather who, like his own father, had served as president of his synagogue, stresses the importance to him of maintaining that legacy. Others emphasize the responsibility to contribute financially to Jewish institutions.

And then there is Jewish education. Some pay a portion of their grandchildren’s hefty day-school tuitions, or help cover the costs of afternoon synagogue schooling or Jewish summer camp. Some even take each grandchild on a bar- or bat-mitzvah trip to Israel. A grandmother dismisses the expense involved: “we’re giving ourselves a gift; we’re buying

[our grandchildren's] time.”

**None of this is to** suggest that the involvement of grandparents always goes smoothly or is without serious challenges.

Skype, Facetime, and frequent visits notwithstanding, one challenge can be sheer geographical distance. Grandparents speak of being engaged actively with grandchildren living nearby but far more episodically with those farther away. They strive to compensate by reading books to them online when young, conversing about their lives and thoughts as they grow older, visiting frequently or scheduling regular family reunions. But none of this can match the easy interactions with grandchildren nearby

Near or far, grandparents also come up against another large obstacle. It's one thing to read books to pre-schoolers, but something very different when grandchildren have friends to visit and homework to complete, and are otherwise pulled in many directions. The older the grandchildren, the harder it is to find time with them. And time constraints are also a challenge for many grandparents themselves—as is the pull of other diversions. (Our interviewees frequently mention peers who seem more eager to pursue their own interests and are content to let their married children take on the job of rearing the next generation.)

Not the least of the complications arise from interpersonal family dynamics. In the perception of those we interviewed, it is the daughters, not the sons, who make the primary decisions as to how the grandchildren will be raised, what sorts of time constraints will be placed on grandparents, and what are the permissible kinds of activities and topics of discussion. Not coincidentally, grandparents report being closer to the children of their daughters than to those of their sons, though many also make a point of how well they get along with their daughters-in-law.

Parents' receptivity to such involvement, therefore, looms very large, and the grandparents we spoke with predictably claim to take great pains to avoid confrontations with their children. In the words of Rela Geffen, one of the few sociologists to have studied the subject, Jewish grandparents learn the “norm of non-interference”—and the price to be paid for violating the rules.

What happens, then, when parents do not share the grandparents' commitment to Jewish involvement or religious practice? This subject came up in virtually every interview. Almost invariably—though to a lesser extent among Orthodox interviewees whose children have remained Orthodox—grandparents express frustration or disappointment on this score. Whatever the degree of their own emphasis on Jewish living during their children's formative years, many are convinced they imparted a stronger Jewish

foundation than what is being passed on to the grandchildren. This, indeed, is the only area in which our interviews took on an elegiac tone, as grandparents spoke strongly about an erosion they were striving to counteract—provided, of course, the parents did not object.

All of this becomes very complicated indeed in the case of divorce. The divorce of parents can have a profoundly injurious impact on the grandparents, curtailing or breaking off their contact with the children—especially if custody is not given to their own son or daughter. In instances where the grandparents are themselves divorced and remarried, the step-grandparent's relationship with the spouse's grandchildren tends to be limited.

Even more so than divorce, haunting these discussions was the great subject of intermarriage. Given the high incidence of Jewish intermarriage in America today, few of our interviewees were able to report that all of their children had married Jews. The rare exceptions, all too aware that, outside of the Orthodox community, today's parents exercise little if any control over the marital choices of their children, chalked their good fortune up to sheer luck.

The feelings of helplessness expressed by these grandparents are hard to exaggerate. "Neither my daughter nor her husband is interested in Judaism, so we have to play it very low-key," reports a grandfather. And what is his reaction to this state of affairs? He feels "victimized." "We have no choice: it's painful."

Responses to the challenge of intermarriage in these unhappy families differ in many ways, but three strategies seem typical. One is a more or less open battle between grandparents and parents for the hearts and minds of the grandchildren. The latter are the prize in this tug-of-war, which the grandparents strive to win without alienating either the parents or the other set of grandparents—a daunting challenge. Then there is the opposite and much safer approach, which is to avoid religion altogether. A grandfather active in his Conservative synagogue laments that his daughter, after marrying a non-Jew, has opted to deny her son a Jewish education and bar mitzvah, but then adds, with a shrug of resignation: "They're your children and you don't treat them any different. . . . It's just a feeling that I have." That feeling, he makes clear, causes him much stifled unhappiness.

Between these two responses lies a third: a middle ground that many grandparents try to negotiate. With the concurrence of the parents, they expose their grandchildren to carefully calibrated doses of Judaism: Shabbat dinners, occasional visits to the synagogue, minimal instruction in Jewish perspectives. The parents, in this scenario, whether out of indifference or a desire to avoid quarreling with each other, essentially cede their role as Jewish exemplars to the older generation. And that generation treads carefully. "I still don't like it," says a Holocaust survivor who reports that two of her children are married to non-Jews, "but I have to accept it or lose them."

There is no minimizing the very real and often agonizing hardships placed upon grandparents by these difficult family circumstances. Still, it would be foolhardy to rule out the impact they can nevertheless exercise. In documenting the remarkable continuity between grandparents and grandchildren on various measures of religiosity, the co-authors of *Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down across Generations* (2013) argue that especially when “home life is precarious,” due to divorce, frequent moves, or other upheavals, the religious influence of grandparents “can be a great stabilizing factor in grandchildren’s lives.”

**What, then, can institutions** of the Jewish community do to help? In the simplest sense, those institutions—synagogues, educational venues, community centers, among others—can endeavor to enroll grandparents at all levels of experience, knowledge, and involvement and aid them in seeing how they might play a more active role in raising their grandchildren as Jews.

On a limited scale, some of this is already happening. Congregational rabbis report that their most persistent adult-education students tend to be empty-nesters; they specifically mention grandparents looking for help in answering the questions of their grandchildren. Most such programs are designed around general Jewish themes, leaving grandparents to apply the lessons as best they can. More useful might be classes geared explicitly to the art of Jewish grandparenthood; they might even attract more students. There are also opportunities here for blogs and other Internet-based forums where grandparents can swap experiences and learn from each other.

Some educational institutions have also created opportunities for grandparents’ involvement, inviting them to witness first-hand what their grandchildren are learning and thus bringing them into the educational process. To be sure, there is a financial dimension here: tacitly and openly, the schools encourage grandparents to help with tuition costs. But the goals go beyond this to building community and adding depth to the educational and religious lives of students. Some summer camps under Jewish auspices engage in similar activities.

Much more creative thinking is required. Some of this may involve new religious rituals bringing young people together with their grandparents: one instance is the Reform practice at bar and bat mitzvahs of passing the Torah scroll from grandparents to parents to grandchild as a symbolic gesture of family transmission of the Jewish tradition. Along similar lines, Jewish institutions of all stripes might devise initiatives whereby members of the grandparental generation can play a role in the lives of youngsters other than their own flesh and blood: a kind of Jewish Big-Brother program for young people who lack an ongoing Jewish connection in their own family or whose extended families live far away. In a third initiative, creative professionals in the Jewish tourism industry might organize

grandparent/grandchildren travel to Israel and other Jewish sites.

Such suggestions hardly exhaust the possibilities. On the contrary, they point to the yawning gap that separates present-day communal thinking and planning from the potential, so far lurking in plain sight, of a significant and significantly under-utilized resource in American Jewish life. To maximize that potential, much remains to be done.



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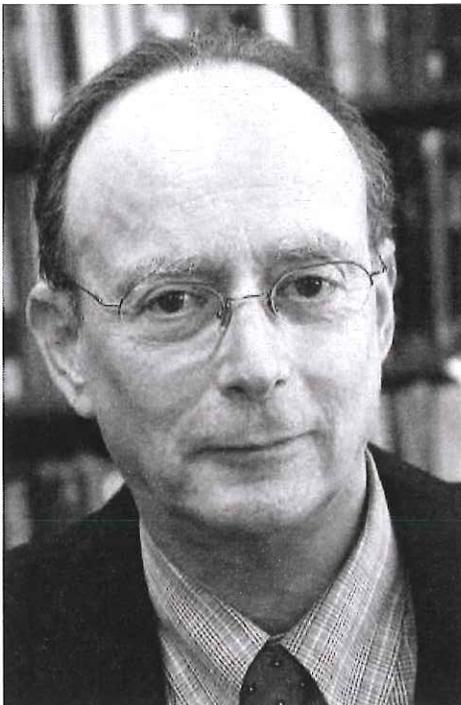
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## Move Over, Millennials Engaging young adults is important, but what about everyone else?

Tue, 03/18/2014 - 20:00

Gary Rosenblatt  
Editor And Publisher



Gary Rosenblatt

Financial advisers agree that we should diversify our investments. "Spread the money around," we're told, "don't put all your eggs in one basket." Yet when it comes to investing in the Jewish future, our largest sources of wealth are doing the opposite of what they preach.

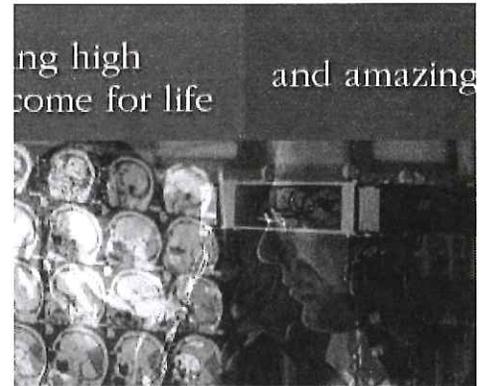
Philanthropists, foundations and federations are so focused on engaging young Jews, fearful that we'll lose them in terms of Jewish affiliation, marriage and identity, that it is rare to find support for any project geared toward reaching Jews over 40.

Several years ago a [Jewish Funders Network](http://www.jfunders.org/) study asked nearly 200 funders and foundations to describe the primary target of their giving. Of the 21 categories listed on the survey, only one — social services for the elderly — referred to a specific age cohort older than young adults.

Isn't it possible that in our zeal to attract one significant group, we're making a mistake by overlooking the others?

At conferences and meetings in the Jewish community, locally and around the country, I find that whatever the political viewpoint or religious denomination of the sponsors, the most urgent question posed about sustaining American Jewish life in the 21st century is: How can we reach, connect to, captivate and hold our youth — particularly the Millennials (defined as those reaching young adulthood around the year 2000) — before it's too late?

It's a vital question, and believe me, I understand the concern. It shouldn't have



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taken the recent Pew study on American Jewish identity to alert us to the problem. Any number of surveys of American Jewry of late, consistent with the results of studies of American society in general, reflect a move away from religious observance (while those who keep the faith increasingly are drawn to fundamentalism). There is also a move away from a sense of the community and the collective, and a strong shift toward individualism. In addition, Millennials are marrying later and having fewer children.

For the country as a whole, it's a trend. For the Jewish community, it's a potential disaster.

Judaism is all about Clal Yisrael, Jewish peoplehood. We need 10 to pray and we need a sense of collective responsibility to connect us as a people around the world. For thousands of years it has been our religion and our love of Israel – the land, the people, the history and the aspiration of a messianic future – that united us. Now those threads that bind us together are fraying, and many in this generation are averse to joining – whether it's a synagogue or organization. And they're finding Israel more confusing, if not embarrassing, than inspiring.

So yes, I praise the efforts to double down and explore creative ways to reach young Jews where they're at, and I have seen the success of our boldest experiment, Birthright Israel, in bringing hundreds of thousands of 18- to 26-year-olds to experience Israel first-hand.

But too little creative funding is aimed at the interests and needs of the rest of us.

### Learning From The Mormons

Consider for a moment the approach and success of the Mormon Church. On the surface, American Mormons and Jews have much in common. Each has about the same small percentage of the American population, with higher levels of education and income than most other religious groups. And we have many shared values, especially in terms of family and education. But while the Jewish birthrate is declining, the Mormons' rate is growing rapidly, with a strong emphasis on service to the church (its leadership is lay, not professional), strong intergenerational bonds, early marriage and large families.

What's more, they have a remarkable 85 percent in-marriage rate, and their young adults have the highest participation in church life of any group.

So what are the Mormons doing that we can learn from?

Michelle Shain, a research associate in modern Jewish studies at [Brandeis University](https://www.brandeis.edu) (<https://www.brandeis.edu>) who is working on a doctoral dissertation on fertility and American Jews, asked herself that question. One observation she offered is that Mormon leaders put special emphasis on engaging their teens, starting in junior high school, in serious conversations about church beliefs and goals, including sexual ethics and family values. Many of their youth aspire to serve for two years, without pay, at age 18 (for men) and 19 (for women), missionizing around the world and doing service projects for the poor.

Surely part of the Mormons' success in creating high-level, engaging opportunities for education, humanitarian service and social interaction for young men and women in their 20s stems from the groundwork laid in engaging them in their early and mid-teens. That's precisely the age – after bar and bat mitzvah – when Jewish boys and girls disappear from the communal map.

Starting Jewish engagement programs during the millennial years “is getting a late start,” observes Yossi Prager, executive director for North America of the [Avi Chai Foundation](http://avichai.org) (<http://avichai.org>), which focuses its efforts on Jewish day school and summer camp experiences.

### Neglecting The Boomers

While early to mid-teen years is one age range we should be focusing on, another, at the upper end, is pre- and post-retirement. Many of those are the Baby Boomers

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(born between 1946 and 1964), our biggest cohort.

David Elcott and Stuart Himmelfarb direct a nonprofit project called B3, “dedicated to engaging — or re-engaging — baby boomers in Jewish life,” according to their website. But they have had a difficult time raising interest or support for their work, with funders saying the effort is of value, and even ahead of the curve, but not as important as “saving” the Millennials.

“That response leaves me perplexed,” says Elcott, who is Taub professor of public service and leadership at NYU’s Wagner School of Public Service. He believes boomers should be cultivated not only for their financial support in sustaining Jewish causes but because, as role models for their children and grandchildren, their affiliation with the community is vital. Focusing on boomers is “such an obvious investment,” he says.

B3’s findings indicate that Jews contemplating retirement or already retired would prefer doing volunteer work in the Jewish community. But two-thirds say they will help where they are most needed and where the efforts are most meaningful. They are finding programs at the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps that meet their interests.

The relative lack of communal interest in these boomers “takes us down a negative path,” Elcott said, asserting that if Jewish retirees don’t feel wanted, they will do their volunteer service outside our community. He and Himmelfarb, who is the president of The Jewish Week’s board of directors, are completing a survey that indicates boomers are as episodic in their Jewish paths and affiliations as Millennials. If funders are committed to reaching people exploring their options about Jewish identity and personal life, “that exact rationale applies to boomers,” said Himmelfarb. Boomers are staying healthy and living longer, and when considering retirement, “they’re thinking, ‘What am I going to do for the next 20 years?’” he noted. “That’s why we started B3, to engage these people, connect generations and strengthen Jewish community.”

In this society of endless options, there is no one stage of life when Jews make the decisions that generations ago were practically made for them — from career pursuits to marriage choices to being part of the Jewish community.

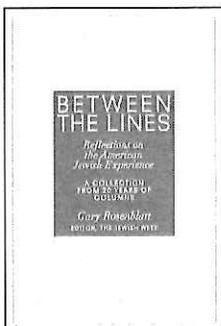
Let’s keep on reaching out out to the Millennials. But let’s do the same for Jews younger and older than that celebrated cohort. There are just too few of us to discount the majority of American Jews.

[Gary@jewishweek.org](mailto:Gary@jewishweek.org) (<mailto:Gary@jewishweek.org>)

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## Jewish Baby Boomers Get An Encore

New study shows that Boomers want engagement, though opportunities are still limited.

10/07/14 Hannah Dreyfus Staff Writer



Mimi Lox, 70, got involved with Engage, UJA-Federation's Jewish Service Corps for boomers. Courtesy of JCC

Mimi Lox, 70, is a retired social worker thoroughly enjoying her second career. The active Upper West Sider – who still takes ballet classes and regularly attends services at her synagogue, *B'nai Jeshurun* (<http://www.bj.org>) – volunteers in an affordable housing facility run by the *Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty*, (<http://www.metcouncil.org>) where she has office hours one afternoon a week.

“When I had retired from my first career, I started looking for a new journey,” said Lox, who started working in 1966 and officially retired in 2009. She found her new position through Engage, UJA-Federation of New York’s Jewish service corps for Jewish baby boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964.

“It didn’t start off as a big deal for me, but today I feel like I’m making a real contribution to Jewish life. My new work gives me a place, and a mission,” she said.

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Lox is far from the only Jewish boomer facing the challenge of finding meaningful work after retirement, what many refer to as an “encore career.” According to a new study released last week by B3/The Jewish Boomer Platform (<http://b3platform.org>), a nonprofit organization dedicated to re-engaging baby boomers in Jewish life, older adults affiliated with Jewish organizations are more interested in making major time commitments to Jewish causes than previously thought. According to the study, performed at NYU’s Wagner School of Public Service, 20 percent of boomers surveyed expressed interest in long-term, immersive three-month projects.

To collect data, an online questionnaire was circulated to over 12,500 participants using the email lists of more than 50 Jewish organizations across the United States.

“There’s a critical misconception that those who are “in,” meaning active in Jewish life, will stay in and those who are “out” will stay out,” said David Elcott, one of the study’s authors and a professor at Wagner. “That’s not how it works. Those who are engaged in Jewish life are not guaranteed to stay engaged, and those who are not engaged at all might be looking for a second chance to get involved.”

Although his study only looked at people already connected to Jewish communal life, Elcott said it suggests that there is also a contingent of unaffiliated Jewish boomers who would be open to outreach.

Jewish boomers, with more time, mobility and financial stability than previous and subsequent generations, are ideal targets for Jewish engagement, said Elcott. With life expectancy increasing at a rapid rate, 20 extra years have been added onto the average timeline. And, though most think those years are tacked onto life’s end, when people have withdrawn from civic life, the time is really added to life’s “middle,” between the ages of 60 and 80, prime time in most people’s lives for volunteer work.

“We want to encourage a new way of looking at aging,” he said, “Not as an end, but a potential for new beginnings.”

B3’s study underscores and expands upon previous research on Jewish baby boomers. Chaim Waxman’s seminal 2001 study, “Jewish Baby Boomers: A Communal Perspective,” first pointed to a break between boomers and previous generations, that boomers displayed weaker ties to the Jewish community than their predecessors. A previous study by Elcott, in 2009, “Baby Boomers, Public Service and Minority Communities,” suggested that religious communities could benefit greatly from involving boomers in their communal institutions. Finally, Synergy, the synagogue services department of UJA-Federation of New York (<http://www.ujafedny.org>), is currently doing a study on “empty nesters” that so far has shown that parents with post bar/bat mitzvah aged children are far less likely than the previous generation to remain affiliated with a synagogue.

“Clearly, this demographic is being overlooked,” said Stuart Himmelfarb, co-author of the B3 study and co-founder of B3/The Jewish Boomer Platform. Himmelfarb, who is also president of The Jewish Week’s board, he embarked on the study in the spring of 2013, after being Himmelfarb repeatedly turned down by funders.

“The Jewish community is lavishing funds on one segment of the population – all you hear is ‘NextGen,’” said Himmelfarb, referring to the segment of the population between 18 and 30. When he tried to bring up boomers, “we got nowhere,” he said.

Steven Bayme, director of the Contemporary Jewish Life Department of AJC, says that the overwhelming focus on NextGen makes a lot of sense. While the boomer cry for attention is understandable, the long-term Jewish future depends upon adolescents and young adults, he said.

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"Time and again, we've discovered that the key area where communal intervention makes a difference is in the adolescent years," said Bayme.

He quoted the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, which uncovered higher rates of intermarriage and assimilation than ever before. "The immediate reaction when the survey came out was 'how could this have taken place on our watch?' What can we do to save the next generation," he said. "Assimilation was discovered as a widespread problem when the Jewish boomers were already adults – the focus, therefore, skipped that generation and moved to Generation X and the millennials."

While Bayme said that efforts to engage boomers are constructive, he maintained that they shouldn't be the priority.

"Friendship patterns, dating, marriage, romantic patters—these are all kindled during adolescence," he said. "Someone is not deciding who they're going to marry at age 65."

Himmelfarb, however, made the case that there are many more similarities between boomers and NextGen than at first perceived.

"Boomers are like college graduates, but thirty years later," he said, noting the higher rate of drug-use and divorce among those on the verge of retiring. "It's a time of transition, and a time of re-defining who you are and what you care about, Jewishly and otherwise," he said.

Alex Roth-Kahn, managing director of UJA-Federation of New York's Caring Commission, says that the Aging Task Force at UJA is well aware of the burgeoning need for boomer engagement. In recent years, funding strategies have shifted in pursuit of these goals, she said.

Still, according to Himmelfarb, who sits on several of the boards at UJA overseeing these efforts, there is a lot of work to be done.

"We are pleased that New York UJA-Federation has invested in boomer engagement, [but] there are, as of now, only a few other initiatives underway outside New York," he wrote in an email. "The major options thus far, not counting the New York programs mentioned here, are outside the Jewish community, such as AmeriCorps, the Peace Corps, [encore.org](http://encore.org) and so on."

Over the phone, he noted that he is himself a boomer, and looking for meaningful Jewish engagement. "I'm also in my encore career," he said, referring to his work at B3. "I just had to create it myself."

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Last Update: 10/13/2014 - 11:49

Jewish baby boomers, Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty, NYU's Wagner School of Public Service, UJA-Federation of New York

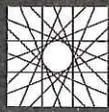
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# Baby Boomers, Public Service and Minority Communities:

*A Case Study of the Jewish Community in the United States*

**David M. Elcott, PhD**

Research Center for Leadership In Action  
Berman Jewish Policy Archive  
Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service  
New York University

In concert with Civic Ventures

## Executive Summary

By 2030, when Baby Boomers will be between 66 and 84 years old, they will still represent over 20 percent of the U.S. population, and in terms of the particular interest of this study, an even larger percentage of the Jewish population. They are healthier, wealthier, more mobile and more highly educated than any preceding generation. Whether or not they are anxious over the present economic downturn, the presumption remains that they will remain active and stay involved in society for many decades (Roof 1993, pg. 2). This has led to a shift in some of the research about the elderly, from traditional geriatric concerns (health, housing and psychological services) to issues such as full-time “Encore” or Bridge careers and volunteerism, job flexibility, life meaning, time management and mobility. Civic Ventures, an advocacy and research effort based in San Francisco, posits that the United States must begin promoting Encore or post-retirement careers in public service for Baby Boomers. In fact, many such efforts are afoot, encouraging civic engagement through public service that would press governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other public service agencies to revamp the ways they look at things such as hiring, job retention and work schedules, while rethinking the lines separating paid professionals from volunteers.<sup>1</sup> This cohort could offer 30 years or more of active and creative involvement, revitalizing—in the particular focus of this study—Jewish culture, civic engagement, social services, political activism, intellectual life and artistic creativity, as well as the Jewish communal institutions that would support these efforts.

If this hypothesis about continued civic engagement bears fruit, minority ethnic, religious and national-origin communities could benefit from increased involvement in their communal institutions. Such increased involvement by Baby Boomers in the minority communities with which they identify could foster greater allegiance and fidelity as well as provide invaluable talent. But it is also possible that the larger and better funded national, secular efforts, akin to Teach For America or City Year, will provide similar opportunities for this cohort, thus drawing away this pool of Baby Boomers. This could deleteriously affect these minority communities, if as their members look outside for resources, supports and volunteer or paid professional opportunities, their allegiance to their community diminishes. For an ethnic, religious or national origin community to flourish, it may well need to learn everything it can about this new phase of life and strategize about how to maximize Baby Boomer involvement.

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<sup>1</sup> On April 29, 2009, at a conference of researchers hosted by NYU's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, Greg O'Neil, director of the Public Policy Institute at the Gerontological Institute of America, presented a diagram of the dozens of efforts supporting Baby Boomer public service. He noted that the majority of organizations focusing on these topics were created within the last five years. The national organizations on aging, such as the American Society on Aging, National Council on Aging and the Gerontological Society of America, all have projects on civic engagement. The center circle of the chart reflects new social innovators/social sector organizations, and many of these organizations are geared toward the highly skilled, middle-aged set (e.g., former Peace Corps members looking to go back abroad to do higher-level work). He explained that the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act will change some of the income eligibility levels for grants to get older adults involved and the US Department of Labor's Senior Community Service Employment Program will provide immediate jobs as funding flows from the stimulus bill. Foundations such as the John Templeton Foundation, the Rose Community Foundation and Atlantic Philanthropies are putting significant funds toward Civic Ventures and other such Baby Boomer projects. There are now numerous articles in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, and the *Wall Street Journal's* “Encore” section, by Kelly Green, is one of most widely read. Private sector enterprises such as IBM have large retiree volunteer programs, and Civic Ventures has piloted a public service Encore career placement program for professionals from downsized companies. The Serve America Act's \$5-6 billion could be a stimulus for this network, and AmeriCorps' \$100+ million allocated for people over 50 could be a tipping point.

This research focuses on one such minority community, the Jewish community in the United States. By analyzing a national survey in 34 communities of Jewish Baby Boomers, comparing the results to a national survey by the MetLife Foundation and Civic Ventures in 2008 and utilizing the comments recorded in seven focus groups, this study addresses the impact of Baby Boomers and retirement/Encore careers on one minority community. The interest is to provide a baseline understanding of the retirement plans of Jewish Baby Boomers that can be extrapolated to offer data and analysis that could help minority communities sustain Baby Boomer allegiance. The research described in this paper lays out the tools for doing so, highlighting the types of efforts minority communities can use to engage Baby Boomers in public service and foster institutional changes that can then be replicated across the country.

Minority communities, even those as organized as the Jewish community, do not necessarily have the resources and research to influence effectively the discussion concerning Encore public service careers for Baby Boomers or provide the services Baby Boomers would require. Unlike major national efforts that are well funded and publicized, minority communities may find it difficult to marshal the resolve and effect the institutional changes necessary to create a public service Encore infrastructure. Yet without major retooling to capture Baby Boomer attention and allegiance, an open society in which minority members can seek meaning and professional or volunteer fulfillment in any setting they choose will prevail to the detriment of minority communities in the United States.

## Major Findings

The most salient findings provided by this study include:

1. Wealthier and more educated Baby Boomers are not likely to seek retirement in the traditional sense at 65. In fact, nearly 80 percent are prepared to consider an Encore career in some form of public service.
2. Jews are potentially less likely than other educated and wealthy Americans to seek out an Encore career in public service.
3. Jewish Baby Boomers are concerned about earning income (although not simply for economic security), as well as staying active and involved as they grow older.
4. The two most emphatically perceived needs for those interested in an Encore career are (a) flexible time and (b) staying active, productive, challenged and intellectually engaged.
5. Jewish professionals expressed great concerns that the demands Baby Boomers (both volunteers and those seeking paid positions) will place on Jewish institutions are more than these institutions can handle. Jewish institutions are not prepared or preparing for an influx of Baby Boomers as volunteers or Encore career professionals.
6. Jewish Baby Boomers would prefer being helped by Jewish communal agencies in finding meaningful Encore activities and would also prefer to serve the wider American society through Jewish institutions, but they are also prepared to utilize non-Jewish resources if the services and opportunities they seek are not available in the Jewish community.
7. The majority of Jewish Baby Boomers do not at this time see either volunteer or paid Encore careers as a way to express their Jewish identity.

## Strategies for Organizations to Engage Baby Boomers in Public Service

Examples of strategies for successfully engaging Baby Boomers in public service careers<sup>14</sup> (many of which are good practices for the recruitment and hiring of any employee) include:

- Look to your volunteers and board members, past and present. Word-of-mouth and informal networking are the most effective recruitment resources.
- Brand the organization as a place where people can learn and grow. Create environments that encourage multi-generational teamwork.
- Offer flexibility, including part-time senior leadership positions, and health benefits to make up for lower nonprofit pay.
- Seek out individuals who combine passion with pragmatism, but don't expect the passion to develop overnight.
- Provide training to encourage employee flexibility and growth to take on multiple roles.
- Focus on transferable business skills and best practices. Pay attention to job design and ways to provide feedback. Listen to the sector switchers you already have.
- Provide orientation processes to acclimate newly hired Boomers to the nonprofit culture, including, if appropriate, a consensus-driven environment.
- Pay special attention to senior leadership transitions, including operating in a resource-constrained environment, fundraising and nonprofit board experience.
- Make sure your board and top leadership play a role in transitioning new Boomer employees.

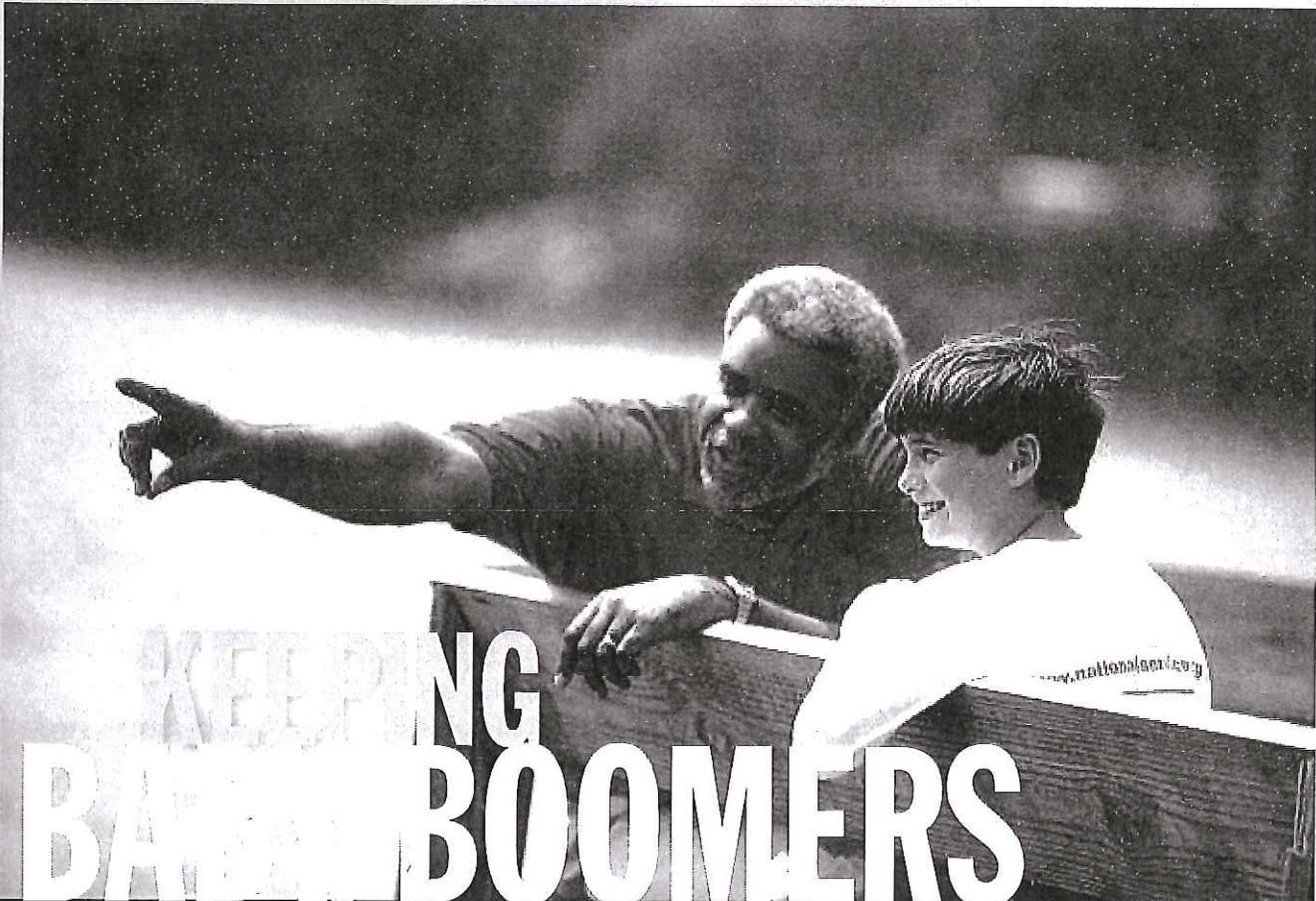
## Strategies for Minority Communities to Engage Baby Boomers in Public Service

There are steps minority communities can take, beyond those instituted by separate agencies and organizations, that would enhance the whole community's capacity to engage and effectively utilize Baby Boomers.<sup>15</sup> These include:

- Support innovation and experimentation by individuals and organizations.
- Make it possible for new organizations to come into existence and for existing organizations to innovate.
- Draw champions and support from leaders across the ideological spectrum of the community.
- Work on the community-wide level and across institutions to professionalize human resource management.
- Expand recruitment efforts.
- Create communal (rather than just institutional) settings where best practices and leadership training models can be provided.

<sup>14</sup> Many of these recommendations have been drawn from the Conference Board. See Casner-Lotto, J. (2009). *A Perfect Match: How Nonprofits Are Tapping Into the Boomer Talent Pool* (p. 4). The Conference Board.

<sup>15</sup> The first three strategies listed here are from John S. Gomperts (2006-07). The second three are from the Conference Board's 2009 report; see Casner-Lotto, J. (2009).



KEEPING  
BABY BOOMERS  
VOLUNTEERING

**A Research Brief on Volunteer Retention and Turnover**

Corporation for  
**NATIONAL &  
COMMUNITY  
SERVICE** ★★★

## INTRODUCTION

Baby Boomers—the generation of 77 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964—represent a potential boon to the volunteer world. Based on U.S. Census data, the numbers of volunteers age 65 and older will increase 50 percent over the next 13 years, from just under 9 million in 2007 to more than 13 million in 2020. What's more, that number will continue to rise for many years to come, as the youngest Baby Boomers will not reach age 65 until 2029.

The volunteer potential of Baby Boomers is vital to the nonprofit world, not just because of the generation's size but also because of Boomers' relatively high education levels, health, and wealth. Boomers today are entering their later years with a broad range of skills, talents, and experience—as well as with a set of attitudes, expectations, and needs that is decidedly different from previous generations. Harnessing those skills, and accommodating those expectations, will be critical to solving a wide range of social problems in the years ahead.

To attract Baby Boomers to volunteering, experts on aging agree that nonprofit groups and others must boldly rethink the types of opportunities they offer—to “re-imagine” roles for older American volunteers that cater to Boomers' skills and desire to make their mark in their own way. This is vitally important to ensuring that the potential of this vast resource is tapped to its fullest.

While much attention has focused on how to recruit Baby Boomers into the ranks of volunteers, relatively little attention has been paid to ensuring that those who choose to volunteer one year continue to do so the next. The importance of volunteer retention should not be underestimated. Despite their reputation for self-centeredness, Baby Boomers today have the highest volunteer rate of any age group. They also, as this report notes, volunteer at higher rates than past generations did when they were the same age. Because three out of every ten Boomer volunteers choose not to volunteer in the following year, a key aspect of keeping Boomer volunteer rates high is to learn how to retain existing Boomer volunteers.

To better understand this dynamic, the Corporation for National and Community Service looked at data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics from 2002-2006. The data trace the volunteer habits of the same sample of Baby Boomers over two consecutive years, as well as a similar sample of pre-Boomers.

This is the first time that these data sets have been analyzed. Though much work remains to be done, the hope is that the findings contained herein will help nonprofits and others gain greater insight into the volunteer preferences of Baby Boomers so that turnover can be kept to a minimum and the greatest number of Boomers will remain engaged in their communities in their later years.

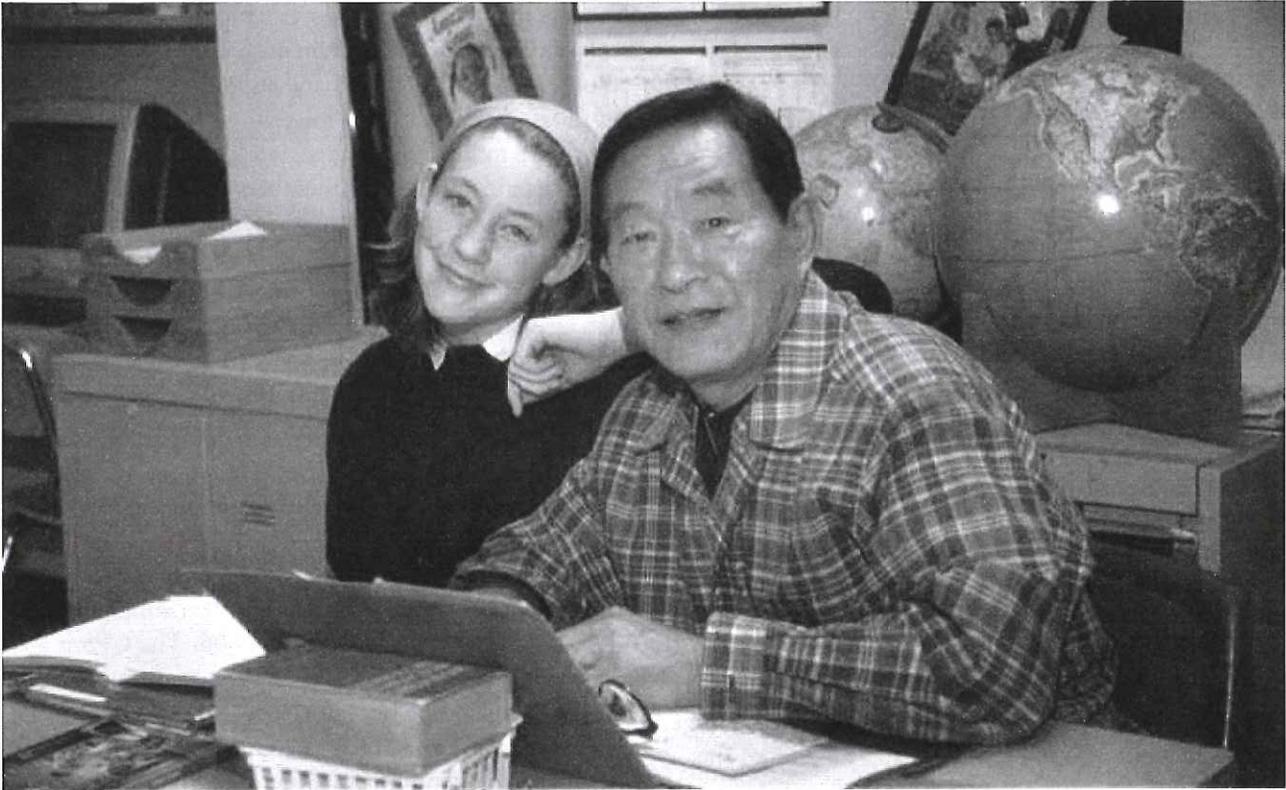
## KEY FINDINGS

■ **Baby Boomers in their late 40s to mid-50s have higher volunteer rates than past generations had at the same ages.**

Surprisingly, given many of the concerns raised about their lack of civic engagement, Baby Boomers age 46 to 57 are volunteering at higher rates than members of either the Silent or Greatest Generations. The differences in volunteering seem to be the result of several factors, but two are noteworthy. First, Baby Boomers have higher education levels compared to older generations. Second, Baby Boomers in their 40s and 50s are more likely to have school-aged children at home than older generations were at the same age. Research shows that the propensity to volunteer rises with increases in education. There is also evidence that adults with children under 18 years of age residing with them are more likely to volunteer than adults without school-aged children at home.

■ **Holding age constant, Baby Boomers appear to have different volunteer interests than past generations.**

Between 1989 and 2003-2005, there has been a change in the types of organizations that 41 to 59-year-old adults volunteered with. In both 1989 and 2003-2005, 41 to 59-year-old volunteers were most likely to volunteer with religious organizations. However, in 1989, the second most popular type of volunteer organization for the Silent and Greatest Generations



was civic, political, business, and international. By 2003-2005, the second most-popular type of volunteer opportunity for Baby Boomers appears to have been educational or youth service organizations.

■ **Each year, approximately 3 out of every 10 Baby Boomer volunteers dropped out of volunteering.**

On average, 69 percent of Baby Boomers who volunteered in the first year also volunteered in the second year. This means that 31 percent of Baby Boomers who volunteered in the first year did not volunteer in the second year. Unfortunately, volunteer recruitment efforts tended to fall short of fully replacing those volunteers who chose not to continue volunteering. On average, only 83.2 percent of the volunteers who chose not to continue were replaced with new volunteers.

■ **Volunteers with the highest attachment to volunteering also have the highest retention rates.**

The likelihood of volunteering year after year increases as volunteer hours and volunteer weeks rise: for volunteers who serve 12 or more weeks per year, the volunteer retention rate is 79 percent, versus 53

percent for volunteers that serve two weeks or less per year. The greater the time commitment a Baby Boomer makes to volunteering during one year, the more likely he or she is to volunteer in the following year.

■ **Volunteer retention is related to the type and nature of volunteer activity.**

For those volunteers who perform only one activity for their main volunteer organization, volunteer retention rates are highest for Baby Boomers whose volunteer activities are professional and managerial, engaging in music or some other type of performance, and tutoring, mentoring, and coaching (74.8%, 70.9%, and 70.3% respectively). Volunteer retention is lowest for volunteers who engage in general labor or supply transportation (55.6%).

■ **Volunteer retention rates are related to the ways Baby Boomers become volunteers.**

Among volunteers who are asked to volunteer, those who are asked by the volunteer organization have the highest retention rates, while those asked by their employer to volunteer have the lowest retention rates (70.5% vs. 53.9%).

## IMPLICATIONS

It is important to remember that in general, anything that keeps people volunteering year after year (volunteer retention) will increase overall volunteer rates. Volunteer turnover should be seen as just as undesirable as turnover among paid employees. For most businesses and nonprofits, a 30 percent employee turnover rate would be an indication of a workplace problem. The same should be true for volunteers. Two models of volunteer retention that might be considered are the donor model and the employee model.

Most charitable organizations attempt to maintain repeat donors, especially large donors. To get repeat gifts from large donors, charitable organizations must spend time cultivating the donor and making him or her feel connected to the organization and its mission. Some of the same tools and approaches used to encourage a large donor to make a repeat gift might be helpful if applied to volunteers. In a sense, through their time commitments, volunteers are making a huge in-kind donation to the resources and mission of the organization. Moreover, research suggests there is a strong connection between volunteering and giving. Thus, it makes sense to find ways of encouraging substantial volunteering because it will produce substantial in-kind gifts and could simultaneously produce considerable monetary gifts.



The employment model assumes that volunteers should not be seen as just free labor. Instead, they should be approached as a key resource and an integral part of the organization's success. Most employers recognize that employee turnover imposes both direct and indirect costs. The same is true of volunteers.

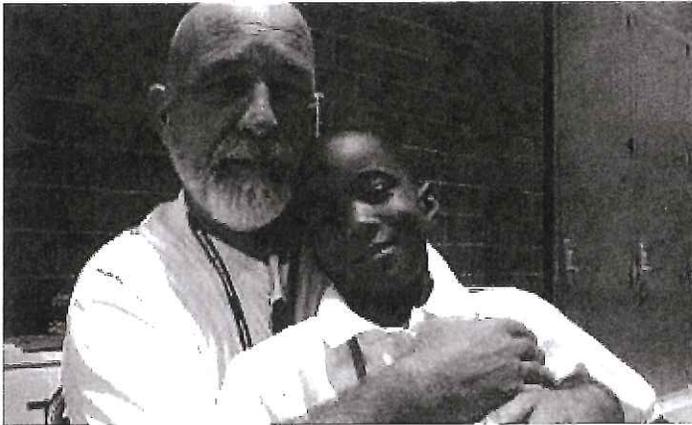
The loss of a volunteer imposes search costs to find a replacement. When replacements are found, the new volunteers must be trained and supervised. They must get to know the work and mission of the organization. They have to form productive work relationships with the paid and unpaid members of a charitable organization's staff. The human resources field has developed a host of insights and tools for reducing employee turnover and our recent reports on volunteer management capacity in nonprofit organizations illustrate that many of those tools (such as offering training and professional development opportunities) would be helpful in reducing volunteer turnover.

## METHODOLOGY

The data for this report is drawn from the Current Population Survey's (CPS) volunteer supplements for 1974, 1989, and 2002 to 2006. The CPS is a monthly national household survey administered by the U.S. Census Bureau (Census) for the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The CPS is the primary source of employment information on our nation's labor force. In addition to the main CPS, supplements are also periodically administered on a variety of topics, such as voting and food security. The volunteer supplement is an annual set of questions administered to the CPS survey households specifically aimed at gaining information on Americans' volunteering behavior—i.e., volunteering through or with an organization. Since 2002, the volunteer supplement has been administered on an annual basis. Prior to 2002, the last volunteer supplements had been administered in 1989.

The monthly CPS is administered to between 50,000 and 60,000 households. At any one time, about half the respondents have been in the survey for two consecutive Septembers. This means it is possible to follow respondents over a two-year period. Since 2002, there have been four waves of respondents that have been in the survey for two years in a row. Each of these waves forms a separate two-year panel of respondents. This report will use the survey responses from these four two-year panels to analyze volunteer retention and turnover among Baby Boomers and volunteers born before 1946.

Holding age constant, Baby Boomers appear to be more likely to volunteer than their parents as they reach early and late middle age. The combination of a higher propensity to volunteer and the large size of the Baby Boomer generation indicates a huge potential source of new volunteers for community service activities in the future. As Baby Boomers age, there is a strong possibility that they will volunteer in extremely large numbers over the next 10 to 15 years—exhibiting volunteer rates and numbers that exceed earlier generations of older Americans. In fact, the Corporation used Census data to demonstrate that the number of older American volunteers (age 65+) is expected to increase by 50 percent by 2020 (from almost 9 million in 2007 to over 13 million in 2020).



However, the volunteer rate, like the employment rate, masks a lot of dynamism and volatility in the supply and demand for volunteers. An initial decision to volunteer does not mean that an individual will volunteer on a continuous basis. Indeed it appears that on average from 2002 to 2006, about 30 percent of all Baby Boomers who chose to volunteer in one year decided not to volunteer in the next. For example, an estimated 17.4 million Baby Boomers volunteered in 2005 and again in 2006. At the same time, an estimated 8.4 million Baby Boomers who volunteered in 2005 did not volunteer in 2006. While the good news is that most volunteers choose to volunteer at least two years in a row, a 30 percent attrition rate among employees in most industries in the private or government sectors would be considered very high given that the average employment turnover rates for 2006 were about 23 percent. ([www.nobscot.com/survey/index.cfm](http://www.nobscot.com/survey/index.cfm))

While many volunteers who leave volunteering are replaced by new recruits, the recruitment of new volunteers, unfortunately, does not make up for the loss of volunteers through attrition. On average, for Baby Boomers, over the four-year period from 2002-2006, the volunteer turnover rate was 30 percent while the volunteer replacement rates—the percentage of volunteers who were non-volunteers the year before—was only 26 percent (See table 1). A potential lesson is that the best way to keep volunteer rates high is to find ways of retaining existing volunteers.

What are some of the ways to increase volunteer retention? First, keep volunteers engaged. It appears that volunteers with a high attachment to their volunteer work also have high volunteer retention rates. Volunteer managers should focus on finding ways to cultivate greater interest and involvement among existing volunteers. This report indicates that the more time a volunteer spends volunteering with an organization and the more volunteer activities a volunteer is involved with, the more likely she or he is to keep volunteering.

Second, one place to develop committed volunteers is among volunteers who are already volunteering (perhaps episodically) with another organization. The volunteer rate tends to increase with the number of volunteer organizations, at least until the volunteer reaches five organizations. Sixty-three percent of all volunteers only volunteer with one organization. This suggests a real opportunity to increase volunteering among Baby Boomers by asking people who are already engaged to do more.

Third, the types of volunteer activities undertaken and where those activities take place have implications for volunteer retention among Baby Boomers. Certain organizations and activities are more likely to retain volunteers than other organizations and activities. For example, volunteers to religious organizations are above average in their volunteer retention, while volunteers to healthcare are below average—suggesting that healthcare organizations may need to find more effective approaches for retaining volunteers. Volunteers doing professional or management tasks also have above average retention rates, while volunteers that provide general labor or supply transportation have below average retention rates.

Given these findings, in order to retain Baby Boomers as volunteers, organizations should find ways of letting potential volunteers know about the more attractive volunteer opportunities available. But volunteer programs must also begin to consider how to make less attractive opportunities more inviting. Organizations with below average volunteer retention rates, such as healthcare, social and community organizations, and sports, hobby and art and cultural organizations, must find ways to increase the long-term commitment of Baby Boomers to volunteering with organizations. Same is true of volunteer activities, such as general labor and supplying transportation, which also have below average volunteer retention rates.

Fourth, volunteer retention is higher for volunteers recruited directly by a nonprofit or community-based organization. Volunteers asked by their employer or boss to volunteer have substantially lower volunteer retention rates compared to other forms of recruiting volunteers. This suggests that it is critical to differentiate between using the workplace as a venue for volunteer recruiting and making volunteering a work commitment. An individual that is pressured—or feels pressured—to volunteer by an employer may respond to the initial request but is far less likely to make a long-term commitment.

Finally, it is important to remember that in general, anything that pushes up volunteer retention rates among any groups will increase overall volunteer rates. Volunteer turnover should be seen as just as undesirable as turnover among paid employees. For most businesses and nonprofits, a 30 percent employee turnover rate would be an indication of a workplace problem. The same should be true for volunteers. Two models of volunteer retention that might be considered are the donor model and the employee model.

Most charitable organizations attempt to retain repeat donors, especially large donors. To get repeat gifts from large donors, charitable organizations must spend time cultivating the donor and making him or her feel connected to the organization and its mission. Some of the same tools and approaches used to encourage a large donor to make a repeat gift might be helpful if applied to volunteers. In a sense, through their time commitments, volunteers are making a huge in-kind donation to the resources and mission of the



organization. Moreover, research suggests there is a strong connection between volunteering and giving.<sup>13</sup> Thus, it makes sense to find ways of encouraging substantial volunteering because it will produce substantial in-kind gifts and could simultaneously produce considerable monetary gifts.

The employment model assumes that volunteers should not be seen as just free labor. Instead, they should be approached as a key resource and an integral part of the organization's success. Most employers recognize that employee turnover imposes both direct and indirect costs. The same is true of volunteers. The loss of a volunteer imposes search costs to find a replacement. When a replacement is found the new volunteers must be trained and supervised. They must get to know the work and mission of the organization. They have to form productive work relationships with the paid and unpaid members of a charitable organization's staff. The human resources field has developed a host of insights and tools for reducing employee turnover and our recent reports on volunteer management capacity in nonprofit organizations illustrate that many of those tools (such as offering training and professional development opportunities) would be helpful in reducing turnover among volunteers.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See Lee, Piliavin and Call, 1999; Brooks and Lewis, 2001; and Freeman 1997 for discussions of the relationship between charitable giving and volunteering.

<sup>14</sup> See *Volunteer Management Capacity* series, 2004.

# THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

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ARTICLE

OCTOBER 22, 2015

## Baby Boomers Poised to Give \$8 Trillion, Study Says



DANUTA OTFINOWSKI/AMERICAN RED CROSS

Once retirees commit their time, they end up volunteering more hours than any other age group, the study found.

By Maria Di Mento

Retirees are expected to donate about \$6.6 trillion in cash and \$1.4 trillion in volunteer services during the next 20 years as baby boomers retire, according to a report released today.

People give at higher rates after they retire, so extended life spans mean people are in their prime donor years longer than in previous eras, and that is good news for nonprofits smart enough to capture the attention of such donors.

The study, conducted by consulting company Age Wave in partnership with Merrill Lynch Global Wealth Management, also found that baby boomers are 49 percent more likely than their parents' generation to make an effort to find out how nonprofits use their money before they decide to donate, and 44 percent of them want to direct how their charitable gifts are used, compared with only 15 percent of their parents' generation.

That should do more than pique the interest of fundraisers, said Ken Dychtwald, a gerontologist and the founder of Age Wave, a consulting, marketing, and research company focused on aging.

"This is a big boon for philanthropy, but it's not business as usual," said Dr. Dychtwald. "Boomers overwhelmingly want to make an impact on the world, and just writing a check doesn't turn them on. They want to get back from their giving."

Nonprofit officials hoping to capture the attention, dollars, and time of these donors are going to have to be open to their demands for more information and more involvement, he said.

Nonprofits should also keep in mind the wealth of professional experience that boomers possess, said Pamela Wise, a Merrill Lynch financial adviser to retirees.

While retirees volunteer less than other age groups, charities would be smart to figure out ways to increase their involvement, because once they do commit their time, they end up volunteering more total hours than any other age group, according to the report.

"Retirees are awesome, because here you've got a mature, experienced labor market with time and resources who want to get engaged," she said.

## **Giving Expertise**

Kim Griffith, who retired as a vice president of Freddie Mac in February, is one such donor. He said that he gives thousands of dollars a year to charity, but he counts his work as a volunteer as his most important contribution.

With decades of experience working on affordable housing, Mr. Griffith in his retirement is ramping up his volunteer time with the Transitional Housing Corporation, where he serves as board chairman. The nonprofit helps families in the Washington area who are homeless or at risk of losing their housing.

He also serves on the board of Enterprise Community Investment, a national organization that seeks to provide stable housing options.

Mr. Griffith told *The Chronicle* that his goal is to use his expertise to relieve the stress so many low-income families face because they can't find an affordable place to live.

"If I can help do that, I'll feel like I've accomplished something," he said. "I can't tell you how much I'd get out of that; it's hard to put into words."

## **Religion Wanes**

When compared to their parents' generation, boomers are giving less money and volunteer time to religious and spiritual organizations. However, they are still much more inclined to support religious groups than millennials and Generation Xers, of whom only about a third are giving money to religious and spiritual nonprofits. Even fewer are volunteering with such groups.

Among current retirees who give money or goods to charities, slightly more than half, or 53 percent, donated to religious or spiritual nonprofits in the last year, compared to 31 percent who gave to poverty relief and 26 percent who gave to disaster-aid groups. Only 19 percent gave to educational institutions.

In the case of several causes, boomers' behavior is nearer to their parents' generation: Few are volunteering at animal-rights and environmental groups or giving money to human-rights charities, compared with millennials, who are giving more time and money to those causes than other generations. Those types of nonprofits may end up with a robust group of givers decades from now.

### **More Generous Gender**

Retired women are more likely than retired men to contribute both money and volunteer time to charity, with 81 percent of retired women giving money compared with 71 percent of retired men and 29 percent of retired women volunteering versus 22 percent of men.

"Engagement and giving go hand-in-hand for women," said Ms. Wise. "So nonprofits need to drive a vision that will appeal to them."

Ms. Wise said nonprofits should figure out what types of opportunities they can offer potential women boomers well before they try to cultivate them. That way, she said, a fundraiser can present a well thought out way to involve the donor in the charity's efforts.

Women are also more likely than men to define success in retirement by how generous they are versus how wealthy they are, the survey showed. More women than men are likely to say retirement is the best time in life to give back, and they are more likely than men to say they derive more happiness from helping others than from spending money on themselves.

Regardless of gender, said Ms. Wise and Dr. Dychtwald, nonprofits should be thinking constantly about how to attract the boomer generation of donors. Otherwise, they will be missing out on an eye-popping level of support.

"The rising up of this demographic mass with more money and free time than we've ever seen is revolutionary," said Dr. Dychtwald. "It's not just 'where might we want to play golf' but 'how can we help people in need.' "

The study, *Giving in Retirement: America's Longevity Bonus*, included more than 3,600 respondents at all income levels and looked at giving trends across generations and genders.

*Send an email to Maria Di Mento.*