

The following are titles of recently published news articles.

“US Church, Synagogue, and Mosque Membership Falls Below the Majority for the First Time”.

“Empty Pews– the Decline of Religion in America”

“Hebrew School Enrollment Down By Nearly Half Since 2006”

These are just a few of the many studies and reports that predict ongoing doom and gloom for religious institutions. Though the US is still considered a religious country, we are becoming less and less so with every year.

For the first time in American history, the Gallup poll found that only 47% of the population was religiously affiliated.

47%, down 20 points since the year 2000. The cause? Fewer and fewer American adults are claiming a religious preference.¹

In the Jewish community, the most recent Pew study showed that over 30% of Jews between the ages of 30-49 do not identify as religiously Jewish. They mostly identify as Jews of no religion. When we look at 18-29 year olds, that number jumps to 40%.²

And in just 14 years, from 2006-2020, the number of students in our supplemental Hebrew schools has decreased by 45%. Parents of Hebrew School age children do not feel obligated to Jewishly educate their children in the same ways as generations past. Miriam Heller-Stern of our Reform seminary, HUC, was quoted, saying, “[it is a myth]... that parents send their kids to Hebrew school because... [it’s] a rite of passage in North America... People don’t want to push their kids to have to do the same thing they did... anymore.”³

These statistics are pretty stark, and hard to take in. While we have not had such extreme changes in the last 20 years here at Temple Sinai, the general conversation amongst religious institutions is that we are at a major point of transition. But we don’t know what we are necessarily transitioning to. People’s relationship to religion is changing fast. Many are asking if our religious organizations are going to continue to be relevant in the future.

In the Jewish world, we know that these changes are, at least in part, because the greater American society became more inclusive. As you know, many social and professional institutions were inaccessible to Jews for so long. When I first got to Sinai, we hosted regular lunches with our eldest members of the community. It was fascinating to hear how many of them met their spouses at Temple Sinai youth events, or at young Jewish singles nights. Those were the events young Jews attended, because, societally, their options were more limited. Thus, it may be that some of our high affiliation rates, once upon a time, were due to the exclusion we faced from so many other organizations. We didn’t always have a choice but to go to the Jewish community.

¹<https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx#:~:text=Story%20Highlights&text=WASHINGTON%2C%20D.C.%20%2D%2D%20Americans'%20membership,Line%20graph>.

² <https://jewishstandard.timesofisrael.com/empty-pews-the-decline-of-religion-in-america/>

³<https://www.jta.org/2023/04/19/united-states/hebrew-school-enrollment-across-us-down-by-nearly-half-since-2006-report-says>

But that wasn't necessarily clear to Jewish organizations. We grew accustomed to people seeking us out, and we took for granted that Jews would always want to connect with other Jews. We took for granted that Jews had a sense of obligation to the Jewish community, to Jewishly educate their children, to support Jewish institutions. We imagined that Jews would always value the synagogue as a community resource. We took for granted that Judaism and being Jewish would always be important to people.

We might have reached this point sooner, but the Holocaust and its devastating reality gave people through the second half of the 20th century a need to connect. To this day, 76% of Jews claim that Holocaust Remembrance is a primary aspect of Jewish identity.⁴ People stayed connected, so, we, the established, religious Jewish community, didn't realize that we needed to do a better job articulating why Judaism matters. We haven't talked enough about what Judaism, as a religious tradition, gives to our lives. Perhaps that needs to be the shift in our focus in this coming era. We've taken a lot for granted. It is time, now, to make a case for being Jewish.

Yes, I know I am "preaching to the choir." All of you in this room fall into the shrinking numbers of those who continue to affiliate with Jewish institutions. But, then again, the trends teaches us that we shouldn't take you for granted, either. Let's talk more about why all this matters. Let's not fall into a default of behavior, rather, let's intentionally choose Judaism again this year.

Why are you here?

How does Judaism enhance your life?

We have tried to capture the strength of Judaism in our Temple Sinai Shema Statement: Explore Tradition. Find Purpose. Create Community. To expand on that, I see Judaism's meaningfulness communicated through specific activities and attributes: prayer, blessings, holidays, study, questioning, and openness.

Prayer has a powerful effect of connecting people together. How does it feel, being here together, in this space, and singing Avinu Malkeinu together? When we are with others and we start singing the same songs or prayers, we feel connected to each other, even if we don't know anything else about one another. Prayer creates that sense of community. But not just in the here and now, because we know that our rituals are common to Jews through time and space. We don't hear the Jews of the past or those observing in other parts of the world, but we know they sang, and are singing, and our voices join together with them as well. In this way, participating in prayer grounds us in the greater context of the Jewish continuum. We are a part of something much bigger than ourselves as individuals, and much bigger than any one particular Jewish community. Prayer gives us a sense of belonging to the greater Jewish whole.

And by connecting to the whole, we get a little taste of eternity. Though each of us has a brief, finite time on this earth, a finite number of people we can affect, Judaism, as a continuum, as a people, has had an ongoing and profound effect on history and humanity. We are a part of that, a part of what has been and a part of what will be. So, what we are doing, right now, is experiencing our piece of eternity. Prayer connects us, grounds us, and expands us.

⁴ <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/reflections-on-the-2020-pew-study/>

Blessings teach us mindfulness, to be fully present in the moment. As you may know, there are blessings for everything: for food, for new experiences, for gratitude. Before you eat something, you have to pay attention, you have to discern whether it was plucked from a tree, taken from a vine, or harvested directly from the earth. You have to know what you are eating, you have to know where it came from. Judaism urges us to acknowledge, from the moment we wake up, how lucky we are to be alive, and to offer blessings of gratitude for the ways in which our bodies work. And sometimes blessings are time bound, which means we have to watch the moon, and the setting sun, and the seasons. Now, this is not to say that we have to know the specific wording for every blessing ever written. The blessings that exist now are simply records of blessings once spoken spontaneously. We can create blessings for what we experience. Every time you recognize the significance of the moment, say a blessing. Offer an expression of thanks.

That's what Jacob did in Genesis, chapter 28. As he fled from his brother with absolutely nothing and an unclear path, he dreamt of angels and had a vision of a future for himself and his descendants. When he awoke, he said, "God is in this place, and I did not know it." Marking the significance of his experience raised his consciousness and enabled him to move forward, rather than being frozen in despair. For us, too, meaning is found when we are grateful and conscious of our lives as they are happening, to be in the moment, to name what we experience. Blessings teach us to be mindful.

Holidays. Amongst other things, our holidays help us be better and more well rounded people. Because Yom Kippur is built into the rhythm of the year, we are sure to take the time to reflect and forgive and apologize. We list our human sins, reminding ourselves that we are capable of hurting others, in the same way we are capable of caring for others. Of course, one doesn't require Yom Kippur to be a good person, but, because we have ritualized this reflection and repentance, we ensure that we take the time to actually do it. It is literally on our calendars. We block out the time, plan for it in advance. And as our holidays are shared, we have the whole of the Jewish people to lean on as "gym buddies" to make sure that we show up, to encourage each other, and to support each other in order to become better versions of ourselves.

Holidays also work to help us strike an emotional balance in our lives. We gather today to fast, to beat our chests, to confess our human sins. And then, in just five days, we will celebrate Sukkot, the holiday where we are commanded to be happy, where we invite our friends and family over to homemade forts so we can eat together and to look at the stars. Life has its difficult moments, and its moments of joy, and the Jewish calendar ensures that we make room for both.

Study. Study is yet another Jewish practice that enhances well being and meaningfulness. The way we study and discuss text in a Jewish context is empowering. As we will read in parshat *Nitzavim* tomorrow morning, Torah and Jewish teaching is accessible to everyone. The text explains that Torah is not too baffling, nor is it in the heavens, or across the sea, rather, it is here in our mouths and in our hearts. It is for each of us to study and explore. We have direct access to the text, to interpret it according to how we see it, to ask questions, to hold it accountable for the positive and negative aspects of the human experience that it reflects. We get to determine what it means for ourselves. We can seek out context and listen to the voices of those who have come before, but each of us gets to see in it and take from it what makes sense to us. If you have never been to our Torah study on Shabbat morning, make this the year when come. All perspectives are present and interesting and worthy of consideration. We all have direct access to see ourselves and our lives mirrored in the text. It's empowering, and enriching.

As is the classic ritual of bar/bat/bet mitzvah (the latter being the term we use for someone who identifies as non-binary). At 13, our children are hardly adults, but we nurture them and encourage them. In the process, we give them the basic tools to stand in front of their community and claim a rightful spot. You can sometimes watch the transformation in our students during the service itself. They gain confidence from being in that leadership position, from knowing that they can do this task, that they have practiced and learned. It is a bold act for a 13 year old to command a space in the way our kids do. Yet, with community support, they learn to expect people to listen to them. That they have something important to say. That it is their voice that echo our collective history through chanting and prayer. They learn that they are entitled to that position and that space, It is amazingly empowering. And through the process of learning to lead the congregation, they also gain competency in the ritual which enables them to feel grounded in the Jewish continuum, giving them a place where they always belong. The process builds confidence, both in the students' sense of themselves, and in their ability to connect to the Jewish people as a whole.

Questioning. Questioning and challenging are important elements of Judaism, which are helpful both in the pursuit of knowledge, and in the pursuit of morality and justice. From the very beginning, we learn, not only of the possibility to question, but of the necessity. When Abraham learned of God's intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of their sin, he challenged God. Abraham asked, what if 50 innocents are found? What if 40? What if 10? He was respectful yet, he spoke his mind and challenged a situation he deemed unjust. From there, so many debates have been captured in our text for us to understand, for us to see all sides of the arguments, for us to make our own empowered decision about what to think and how to be. Question, debate, challenge, think creatively: being a part of Jewish life and ritual helps us to practice and hone these skills, encouraging us to learn and grow, to incorporate new information and to adjust and adapt to the ever changing world.

Which leads us to our final attribute: openness. Life is not fixed, it is not complete, we are always creating. Judaism leaves possibilities open, the seeming end of one situation blends seamlessly into what comes next. We are told, *zedek, tzedek tirdof*, justice, justice you shall pursue. It is carefully worded as an ongoing pursuit, not a project that has a definitive ending. Generations make strides, and then the next generation learns, adapts, and continues the pursuit. In the book of Isaiah that we will read as our haftarah portion tomorrow morning, we are told that no matter where we are in our lives, no matter the path we are on, no matter our actions, we can always start anew and adjust so that the direction we are going is the one we want. We can't always fix problems, but we can always work on them. Judaism gives us that perspective. We are all in process. We can be open, we can adapt.

In the end, our obligations have never really been to Judaism or even to the Jewish community. Our obligations are to be the best versions of ourselves, to be empowered, to recognize awe, to find balance between joy and difficulty, to know that we all have room to grow and the ability to adapt. And to meet these human obligations, Judaism gives us a framework, a rhythm, the intention, and partners. Judaism strengthens our connections to others, it gives a place in history and a direction we help to determine for the future.

I don't know if the affiliation rate with religious organizations will ever go back to the percentages of the past, and I wonder how important that really is. The strength of religious institutions and religious movements will not be about numbers, but about the will of the individuals who know and appreciate why we are here; who will feel and articulate how Judaism makes our lives more meaningful, more complete.

As the Reform Jewish Community of Temple Sinai in Oakland, we are here because Judaism connects us to each other, it gives us belonging, it urges us to be our best and gives us the confidence to know that our best is possible. It helps us to appreciate our experiences and our world. Judaism helps us find joy, comfort and meaning.

Judaism matters because it reminds us that life matters, that we matter.

Shanah tovah.