

## **Rabbi Zamore's Message for November, 2013**

As I remarked at a recent Friday night service, the 2013 Pew study examining the metrics and identity of the American Jewish community ([www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/](http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/)) could cause any rabbi to crawl under a rock and hide. In the weeks since its release, the pundits have weighed in with their opinions, most adding to the negativity. The study, in many ways, tells us what we already know: Jews live in great ease in 21st century America; We are fully integrated and assimilated into greater American society; We feel comfortable and even proud of our Jewish identity; We are intermarrying in unprecedented numbers; We are not joining synagogues like our grandparents or parents did; We see Judaism more and more as a cultural, not religious identity.

While the initial headlines reported much doom and gloom, the Pew study includes some good news. The study measures 6.3 million Jews in America. That is pretty remarkable since that number has increased since the population study of 2000. This is especially notable because demographers since the 1980s have been harping on American Jews' diminishing numbers and low birth rate. The study also documented substantial Jewish pride.

When I was in rabbinical school, my teacher, Dr. Michael Chernick, used to point out that we live in a Golden Age of Judaism. Historically speaking The Golden Age of Judaism refers to the period in medieval Spain (well before 1492 when the Golden Age ended and the Jews were expelled) when Jews lived in unprecedented comfort with their neighbors. During this period, the Jews had unequalled access to education, power, and culture. It was not a perfect time, but stood in stark contrast to the experience that Jews were having in other parts of the world or in other ages.

My teacher was correct – today's American Jews are living in another Golden Age, not perfect, but certainly Golden. We are not ghettoized, discriminated against, or held back. We have full access to both religious and secular education, jobs, careers, and society. On the religious side of life, our choices are only limited by ourselves. We have amazing Jewish resources in person, as well as virtual. Through the power of the internet, we can learn almost anything from our Jewish tradition. What was once only available through in-person teaching or rare books is ours for the asking and a click away. The problem is that we are not asking or clicking. The study shows that more and more Jews are not interacting with their heritage (at least in my point of view, eating a bagel does not count).

So what can we Jews in the northwest quadrant of New Jersey do?

1. We must remember that each one of us is an ambassador of Judaism and our synagogue. We must tell others about our congregation and invite them to visit. We must be welcoming when visitors do come to the synagogue. That is everyone's job, not one person's or one committee's.

2. As we speak of passing Judaism "l'dor v'dor", "from generation to generation," we have to remember that this can only happen if one generation is willing to pass the heritage and another accepts it. The more we Jewishly strengthen our own generation, the more we will have to pass to the next generation. The more we instill in the next generation the responsibility and joy of sustaining Judaism, the more willing the younger generation will be to accept their role in our future.

3. We have to help people understand that synagogues are the center of the Jewish community. In our age, religion seems to have become a bad word for some. Reform Judaism is designed to allow modern Jews to mix secular learning and living with our rich tradition. Religion is not a synonym for rigidity. We have to help our fellow Jews know that the synagogue is a place of acceptance, community, growth, and spirituality.

4. We have to let every Jew know that they matter a great deal to us. And for that matter, every non-Jew who supports Judaism deserves our appreciation, too.

Judaism has survived thousands of years, overcoming annihilations, as well as the test of time. How ironic it would be, if the thing which ended Judaism would be unplanned neglect. Ultimately, our continued survival is in our own hands.

L'Shalom,

Rabbi Mary L. Zamore