

Generations in Transition

by Richard Address

One of the great constants of being Jewish is the fact that we will never run out of something to worry about. The threat to our survival is always at the door, howling at us in angst-laden tones that have been informed by centuries of trouble, wanderings, and multi-cultural infusion. Yet, we are still here. Perhaps the real underlying secret to our longevity is our historically tempered ability to adapt to new cultures and situations and, when necessary, create new forms of Judaism.

What seems to be emerging is that we now are experiencing what may be the transition of American Judaism into a new form. This “age of transition” is taking place right before us and, as such, may be the reason why it is becoming so difficult to understand. After three hundred and fifty years of residence in America, we really seem to have created, for the most part, a distinct “American” Judaism. This transition is having an impact on the generations that seem to be most affected by this shift. Whatever the letter or label we assign them (“X,” “Y,” “millennials,” etc), what does seem to be true is that things have changed and how we, as a community, in all of our systems, choose to respond may very well have a great deal to do with how they choose to live out their Judaism as they grow into adulthood. One other suggestion as well: Let us remember in our attempts to analyze and dissect these cohorts, that these are *our* young people. It is best that we not enter into our communal and programmatic discussions from a position that “in my day” we knew better. Just remember what it felt like when our parents approached us with that as an opening line!

The “Americanization” of our community seems to be a fact. This comes as a surprise to many of the “establishment” in the community who still seem to reflect on the reality of separate Jewish and American cultures existing side by side. Yet, for the overwhelming majority of our people that “reality” is a myth. Sylvia Barack-Fishman of Brandeis, in her *Jewish Life and American Culture*, wrote of the “coalescence” of the two “texts” of American and Jewish cultures into a unified text. “In coalescing American and Jewish values, many Americans Jews — including some who are very knowledgeable and actively involved in Jewish life — no longer separate or are even conscious of the separation between the origins of these two texts.”¹

The impact of American/Western culture on the Jewish community in North America has affected every aspect of our behavior. Recent Jewish communal population studies confirm that we are witnessing greater autonomy in religious expression, a lessening of the number of years that people affiliate with synagogues, a decline in involvement with Jewish philanthropies, and a loosening of identity with Israel. Our young people, those in their twenties and early thirties, have been raised in this environment. Perhaps they do not represent a series of generations who slowly are drifting away; perhaps they present a unique opportunity for us to re-invent what it means to be Jewish in an open society. I am going to suggest that this opportunity for creativity is the real task of the next several years in dealing with these cohorts. Resting just beneath the surface of many of these young people may be an untapped reservoir of faith and Jewish identity that is trying to break out. The vocabulary for proper expression may be lacking, but, I suggest, the desire and certainly the need is not.

Being Jewish In an open society

Lisa Shiffman, in her book *Generation J*, seems to indicate that desire and need when she writes about growing up in a typical American suburb: “Being Jewish was an activity: *Today I’ll be Jewish. Tomorrow I’ll play tennis.* In secret, we sometimes wondered if being Jewish was even necessary. We could resist that part of ourselves, couldn’t we? To us, anything was possible....I’m part of a generation of fragmented Jews. We’re in kind of limbo. We’re suspended between young adulthood and middle age, between Judaism and atheism, between a desire to believe in religion and a personal history of skepticism. Call us a bunch of searchers. Call us post-Holocaust Jews, Call us Generation J.”²

Just a few years younger than Schiffman’s cohort live the twenty-year-olds. They also seem to share some of Generation J’s sense of drift and search.

We now are experiencing what may be the transition of American Judaism into a new form. How we, as a community, choose to respond may very well have a great deal to do with how Gen X, Gen Y and future generations choose to live out their Judaism as they grow into adulthood. Communal leaders need to rise to the challenge and create new opportunities for learning and communal involvement.

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Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner recently looked at this cohort in a very challenging way in their book *Quarterlife Crisis*. They feel that this “crisis” of meaning often is rooted in the fact that, by contrast with their perception of what was true in their parent’s and grandparent’s generations, there is a lack of predictable stability. What that seems to mean is that this generation is now finding that, after a childhood of entitlement and comfort, the real world may not be as accommodating as they had expected. “After about twenty years in a sheltered school setting — or more if a person has gone on to graduate or professional school — many graduates undergo some sort of cultural shock...But after graduation, the pathways blur. In that crazy, wild nexus that people like to call the ‘real world,’ there is no definite way to get from point A to point B, regardless of whether the points are related to a career, financial situation, home or social life...The extreme uncertainty that twenty-somethings experience after graduation occurs because what was once a solid line that they could follow throughout their series of educational institutions has now disintegrated into millions of different options.”³

We can only speculate on the meaning of this “crisis” for our young people who, for a variety of reasons, do not enter college or graduate schools and who attempt to negotiate the “real world” without benefit of this extended period of “security.”

The “trend to older”

Yet, for the majority of our young people, this twenty-year educational umbrella is a reality and this, along with many of the social and cultural changes that are now part of their American world, has produced a new reality that is, I feel, at the heart of much of this new generational discussion. The Jewish community of America, much like its Christian counterpart, is being impacted by the revolution in longevity that is now part of our world. This “trend to older” is now a major component of our community and its effect is just now being looked at and understood. This reality may, in the long run, be the real issue and may serve as the catalyst to new forms of thinking regarding how we approach this multi-layered and faceted cohort of young adults.

In the non-Orthodox Jewish community, this “trend to older” is causing an entire cultural shift. Studies confirm that, on the average, we are marrying later and thus delaying having children. Ask your rabbi how often he or she does a wedding for a young couple between twenty and twenty-five as compared with couples marrying for the first time between twenty-five and thirty. It has not become out of the ordinary, in this day and age, for many of those first marriages to take place between young adults over thirty. They often delay having that first child for a few years and wait until they must register that child for religious school to make their return to the synagogue. Thus, it is not unusual in our communities that we lose contact with these people for close to, if not more than, twenty years. If they leave us after *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* and/or Confirmation, and do not return until their mid-thirties to bring their child, we need to face the fact that we may be looking at a twenty-year “affiliation gap.”

Just think of your family, your synagogue, your friends, your-

self! This “trend to older” is impacting us in a variety of ways. Our people may be returning to our communities with less Jewish knowledge and certainly more “worldly experience.” By the time they reach their mid-thirties, many have begun to experience the randomness of life through illness, through family, and through personal crises. They may reach into their spiritual pocket and be able to pull out a religion and a theology that was good at thirteen, but useless at thirty-three. An underlying question is now being raised regarding this expanded time frame that many spend away from our doors: Just how much of our resources should be expended -- and can we expend -- to keep in touch

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with these generations? After all, as some would argue, isn’t this their time to live their dreams, to experiment and to “find themselves”? The feeling continues in that, since we know that life choices and events for these cohorts are now done five to ten years later than in previous generations, all we have to do is adjust our communal time clocks and wait for our young people to return. The danger in such an approach is the chance that in choosing not to engage these cohorts, we send a message that we do not care. In choosing to let them “live their life” and experience the world, we assume that things will be as they have always been; we make what may be an unwise assumption in the beginning of the twenty-first century -- that they *will* come back. The new reality may be that, given the gap in affiliation, the “me”-centered focus of much of American society, and the explosion of Jewish educational and spiritual options that now exist, traditional models of education and access to Jewish life may not remain in play.

Given the pervasiveness of American culture and the reality of the “trend to older,” it may be interesting to suggest a few ideas that our congregations and communities may wish to try. The base line of all these discussions is, of course, is that there is no *one* answer to any of this. Communities, and the people that inhabit them, are fluid. With that in mind, a few thoughts on opening dialogues with the “affiliation-gap generations.”

The desire and the need for community

At the heart of the department that I direct for the Union for Reform Judaism -- the Department of Jewish Family Concerns - - is the belief in what is called the “theology of relationships.” That is a belief that basic to every one of us is the desire and need for community and the desire and need to be in relationships with people. This is, of course, not a new or original idea. Yet it needs to be reinforced, for we believe that the generations we are speaking about here have just as much need for community and relationships as does anyone else -- perhaps even more. As they begin their lives, leaving that educational and familial safety net, the first expressed response to their new life situations is to try and reach out and establish new relationships

or attempt to keep old ones alive. Thus, it makes good sense to have synagogues and organizations do everything in their power to help create vehicles for establishing cohort-centered social outlets. The success of some of congregations in bringing large numbers of young adults into the “worship” experience is due more to the opportunity to meet and greet Jewish people with shared values than it is to proclaim God’s glory on earth. The challenge is what happens after the service experience. Jewish community and socialization have often been enhanced and supported by the concept of the “*mitzvah*.” There still exists within our people the call to justice and action to repair the world. We need to help our communities develop social and community-based occasions that bring our young people together and challenge them to give back to the world from their vast reservoir of education and untapped faith.

Part of this effort may mean that organizations, synagogues, and the like need to “go where the people are”. If we want to maintain contact with and have an impact on these generations we will need to “leave the building.” Classes, discussion opportunities in offices and malls, and sponsored vacation/social trips to interesting places that build in a Jewish study and workshop component — in generational specific format — may be methods of keeping in touch. We need to develop new forms of outreach educational programs on such varied issues as sexuality, family development, relationships with peers and parents, career enhancement, and culture and the arts and place that information in our gyms, coffee houses, markets, and offices. Organizations from a variety of institutional affiliations may have to forego their institutional identity and work cooperatively in order to keep the network of communication alive.

Within our communities we already have a core of 20- and 30-somethings who have found their way to the Jewish world. They are active members of JCCs, Federation young leadership, and even some synagogues. We may need to organize them as a type of internal evangelical task force. In other words, let those who have found meaning in activism and affiliation be encouraged to actively go out into the community to spread the message of the power and value of relationships and community. Let this group send the message that “there is a place for you with us.” In the same vein, why not encourage existing members

of congregations and communal organizations to serve as mentors to this emerging generation? Why not have adults in congregations -- who have built businesses or have served/ currently serve as physicians, lawyers, clergy, etc. -- be matched to young people who are just beginning their careers or who are thinking of making a change in their lives? Think of the potential power of community and relationship-building as we meet and learn from one generation to the next. Think of how important it may be for young people, who may be in a strange city, to be able to learn and build a relationship with someone outside of their work place, but inside their career track.

Cost: the great barrier

Finally, the community must look at one of the great barriers to affiliation and identity: cost. Why not just do away with it entirely? Why not have congregations reach out to young people in their community and offer free membership. This is a generation that makes few demands on clergy and congregation. Think of the message we can send to this group by just saying, “We want you, we love you and if you wish to be a member of our synagogue, our JCC, it is free. Just come, be a part of us, let us learn from you and you from us. Let us grow together and let us keep those relationships alive.” We need to revisit how we define membership and how we charge for that membership. Perhaps it is time to remove what for many people who are just starting their adult lives is a major barrier to their involvement in the organized Jewish community: the high cost of being Jewish.

This “age of transition” is emerging. For communal leaders, educators, and clergy, this is a dynamic time to create new opportunities for learning and communal involvement. Let us take up the challenge and embrace this moment. ❁

ENDNOTES:

1. Barack-Fishman, Sylvia. *Jewish Life and American Culture*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000, pp. 9, 10.
2. Schiffman, Lisa. *Generation J*. New York: Harper-Collins, 1999, pp. 4, 11.
3. Robbins, Alexandra and Robin Wilner. *Quarterlife Crisis*. East Rutherford, NJ: Tarcher/Penguin. 2001, pp. 2, 3.