

The Pew Survey and Day Schools: Opening Ourselves to New Possibilities?

■ by **JONATHAN WOOCHEER**

The publication of the Pew Research Center Survey on U.S. Jews on October 1 has given the Jewish world plenty to talk about as it got back to work after the holidays.

The initial report has only a modest amount of information that relates directly to day schools, and what is reported generally confirms what we already knew. About a quarter of Jewish parents say that they had a child enrolled in a day school or yeshiva during the past year—slightly more than the percentage of adults who attended themselves—with extent of enrollment following a predictable denominational pattern. Regrettably, except for Hebrew language proficiency, the initial report does not compare day school attendees and non-attendees with regard to many dimensions of Jewish activity and attitude. However, there is no reason to doubt that such comparisons would show that day school attendees “score higher” in almost every respect than do those who did not attend day school.

So, in terms of day schools themselves—who attends them, what impact they have—there is little new in the Pew survey data published thus far. This doesn’t mean, however, that day school leaders—especially community day school leaders—should simply put the report aside. In fact, I would suggest that

there are other findings in the Pew survey that should be stimulating serious conversations among day school leaders.

I’m referring to the findings about how American Jews define their Jewishness and what is important to them about it. The not-so-secret secret revealed (again) in the survey is that “religion” as most Americans and many American Jews understand it is not a good “fit” for the way in which large numbers of American Jews understand and embrace their Jewishness. The good news

Are we operating and marketing day schools that provide American Jews with opportunities to engage Jewishly with the things they care most about?

is that vast majorities of American Jews, including many who explicitly deny being Jewish by religion, *do* embrace their Jewishness positively. Ninety percent of Jews by religion (JBR) and 46% of Jews of no religion (JNR) say that being Jewish is very or somewhat important in their lives. Ninety-seven percent of JBR and 83% of JNR are proud to be Jewish. Eighty-five percent of JBR and 42% of JNR feel a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people.

And what does this Jewishness mean to them? Well, it turns out that even for self-identified Jews by religion, for 55% it is primarily a matter of ancestry and culture. For only 17% is it primarily a matter of religion, and for 26% it is both ancestry/culture and religion. The conclusion that being Jewish is for most American Jews (and certainly most who are not Orthodox) about something more (or other) than being religious is reinforced by looking at the responses to the survey’s questions on what respondents consider essential to their own Jewishness.

Not surprisingly, the responses show that ethical living and working for justice and equality rank among the most strongly affirmed elements of Jewishness (remembering the Holocaust—both an ethnic and an ethical act—is the top choice). But the fact that being

intellectually curious and having a good sense of humor were regarded as “essential” by half and two-fifths of the respondents respectively (more than saw being part of a Jewish community as essential) clearly signals that for many American Jews—and not just those who are totally secular—being Jewish is a complex identity with multiple dimensions beyond those that are normally focused on in the public discourse of institutional Jewish life.



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