

REACHING IN, REACHING OUT: SATISFYING THE SPIRITUAL HUNGER OF TODAY'S JEWS

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Today, many Jews are traveling along different spiritual paths in a search for meaning, purpose, and certainty. A survey of over 5,000 affiliated Jews in the Los Angeles area found that many Jews are conducting that search outside the organized Jewish community. Creating supportive, close-knit communities, developing role models, and devising creative outreach programs can reach these marginally involved Jews.

About a third of my cases are suffering from no clinically definable neurosis, but from the senselessness and emptiness of their lives. This can be described as the general neurosis of our time.

—Carl Jung
Modern Man in Search of Soul

Jung's description of the modern condition is as accurate today as it was in the 1920s. The material success enjoyed by so many people today has not brought with it a sense of meaning, direction, or purpose (Kushner, 1986). Many today are materially rich but spiritually hungry.

This spiritual hunger has led to a religious revival in contemporary American society, not only among the organized religions of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism but also in the growth of the New Age movement. The many different New Age beliefs and rituals, some of which are connected with Christianity and some with Eastern faiths, are characterized by a lack of faith in technology and rationalism.

Today, many American Jews are traveling along different spiritual paths in a search

for meaning, purpose, and certainty. Yet, how pervasive in the Jewish community is this spiritual search? Are all age groups participating in it? Has New Age philosophy made an impact on modern Jewish living? To explore how Jews are gaining religious and spiritual fulfillment—how they are answering the key questions about what being Jewish is all about—the Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles surveyed over 5,000 Jews who were involved with the Los Angeles organized Jewish community in some way. The assumption was made that if Jews involved in the Jewish community were seeking alternate paths of fulfillment, then the unaffiliated would be subjected to even stronger pulls from the outside. It was hoped that the findings of the survey would suggest ways that Jewish communal institutions could be modified to enable their constituents to be involved in them in a more meaningful manner.

STUDY POPULATION

A total of 5,056 pretested questionnaires were mailed to seven groups; the rate of return was 35%. The number of responses from each of the groups is shown below:

1. Federation leadership development group (persons under 40 years old)-60 returns
2. Makom Ohr Shalom, a spiritually oriented synagogue-24 returns

Presented at the World Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Jerusalem, Israel, July 3, 1989. The author expresses his appreciation to Wayne Feinstein for his helpful review of this essay. Eve Fielder of UCLA served as research consultant and played a key role in every phase of the research on which this article is based.

3. Temple Beth Am Library Minyan, a highly observant Conservative synagogue-108 returns
4. Brandeis-Bardin Institute for Young Adults-11 returns
5. Federation Young Adult Leadership-782 returns
6. B'nai Horin, a spiritually oriented synagogue-189 returns
7. Contributors to the United Jewish Fund-566 returns

Most of the respondents were between 26-45 years old, with the elderly representing about 13% of the sample, which is about the same proportion as in the Los Angeles Jewish population. The respondents were equally divided between men and women, and slightly under one-half were married with children. The group was exceptionally well educated, with over 50% having completed graduate school or higher. About one-half of the respondents were born in California, and one-fourth moved there from New England or the Middle Atlantic states, particularly New York.

STUDY FINDINGS

Jewish Identity of the Respondents

The study sample is more affiliated and involved with the Jewish community than the Los Angeles Jewish population as a whole. When asked to describe their religious identity, 40% described themselves as Conservative, 33% as Reform, and 22% as "just Jewish." Interestingly, those who were brought up on the West Coast identified themselves as Reform or "just Jewish" to a greater extent than former East Coast residents, most of whom saw themselves as Conservative or Orthodox. Whereas only 26% of Los Angeles Jewry belong to synagogues, 47% of the sample are members. Eighty-seven percent of the sample are married to a Jew, and more than half belong to one or more Jewish organizations. Almost 60% reported that all of

their close friends were Jewish, and only 4% said that they had no Jewish friends.

Three-quarters of the respondents grew up in synagogue-affiliated homes. Interestingly, this statistic was higher in those under the age of 36 years as compared to those over the age of 50—84% versus 65%. Although 63% grew up in neighborhoods that were at least half-Jewish, again this varied by region. Whereas 50% of former East Coasters grew up in primarily Jewish areas, only 18% of those from the South did so. Similarly, although the childhood friends were mostly Jewish for 64% of the respondents, those born outside the United States or on the East Coast had the highest proportion of Jewish friends.

Although only 8% received a day school education, two-thirds of the sample did attend Jewish Sunday school and 57% attended afternoon Hebrew school. About half had a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and 40% were confirmed.

About half of the respondents felt that their parents were very or somewhat religious. However, as can be seen in Table 1, the pattern of observance in their families of origin clearly favored those rituals that were observed only once yearly—lighting Chanukah candles, fasting on Yom Kippur, attending a Pesach seder—rather than those that demand a weekly or daily commitment, such as keeping Kosher or lighting Shabbat candles. The respondents' current patterns of observance follow their childhood pattern in which child-oriented, infrequent rituals are observed much more frequently than those requiring a greater time commitment (Table 2).

Table 1
CHILDHOOD PATTERN OF OBSERVANCE

Practice	Yes (%)	No (%)
Have/attend Pesach Seder	83	17
Light Chanukah candles	78	22
Fast on Yom Kippur	62	38
Light Shabbat candles	39	61
Keep Kosher in the home	26	74
Attend weekly synagogue services	18	82

Table 2
CURRENT PATTERN OF OBSERVANCE

Practice	Yes	No
	(%)	
Have/attend Pesach Seder	83	17
Light Chanukah candles	69	31
Fast on Yom Kippur	66	34
Light Shabbat candles	24	76
Personal prayer	20	80
Keep Kosher	19	81
Attend weekly Shabbat services	12	88
Jewish study	11	89
Participate in a Havurah	9	91

Although less than half the sample is affiliated with a synagogue, almost three-quarters report that they are "very or somewhat religious/spiritual." Women and those under the age of 55 view themselves as more spiritual than their male and elderly counterparts. Over one-fourth of the respondents reported that they had personally undergone significant religious or spiritual experiences. The major influences on their spirituality are shown in Table 3. Among those who practice the Jewish religion most intensively today, 78% reported that the synagogue was the single most important institution in their spiritual development.

Despite the lack of formal affiliation, the synagogue is still viewed positively by a majority of respondents. Many (69%) felt that the synagogue made a "great deal or somewhat of a difference" in their spiritual and religious development. Young adults have a more positive image of synagogue life; those under the age of 36 were more likely to have been favorably influenced by a synagogue (74%) than those over 55 (60%). There was near-unanimous agreement with the statement, "Synagogues provide a needed service and sense of community."

Given the respondents' view of themselves as religious and their favorable image of synagogues, it seems surprising that less than half have actually taken the step of joining a synagogue. Table 4 lists the reasons for this lack of affiliation. In response to a follow-up question, only 50% felt that

Table 3
MAJOR INFLUENCES ON SPIRITUALITY

	Yes	No
	(%)	
Attending synagogue	69	31
Religious study	59	41
Prayer	55	45
Communing with nature	52	48
Running/physical exercise	39	61
Meditation	32	68

the synagogue provided religious/spiritual satisfaction for them, and one-quarter agreed with this statement, "Synagogues are fine for some people, but not for me."

Spiritual Search within the Jewish Community

Clearly, this study sample shares the general societal interest in spiritual concerns. As mentioned above, three-quarters of the respondents characterized themselves as very or somewhat religious/spiritual, and close to 60% said they were "very or somewhat interested" in furthering their spiritual development. Less than 20% believe that "religion is a means of escaping the reality of life," and only 12% feel that "religious ritual is cold."

As shown in Table 5, spirituality has a number of dimensions and a number of definitions. Most respondents define it as a value system that preserves and enhances life according to a moral vision of right and wrong. One person wrote:

Table 4
REASONS FOR NOT JOINING A SYNAGOGUE

	Yes	No
	(%)	
Membership dues are too expensive	69	31
No/New friends belong	56	44
No programs of interest to me/ my family	50	50
Do not feel comfortable with services and/or prayer	46	54
Synagogue is too cold/impersonal	44	56
Children too old or young or no children for religious school	21	79

Table 5
DIMENSIONS OF SPIRITUALITY

	Strongly Agree and Agree	Undecided (%)	Strongly Disagree and Disagree
There is much more to life than what can be understood by those who believe only in the reality of the material world.	77	15	8
I believe in God.	71	21	8
I have peace of mind.	62	19	15
Prayer should be recited only when deeply felt.	33	22	43
Religion is especially important to me because it answers questions about the meaning of life.	34	29	37
There is a divine plan for the universe.	30	45	25
God responds to prayer.	30	43	27

Spirituality in part translates to me as a certain level of morality, a way of living and doing because God lives in all of us. I have long felt that to be a good Jew, a good person, is a lifestyle, a way of being that is as much a way of moral life as our parents taught us and as reinforced or reiterated spiritually as in temple.

Others linked a feeling of spirituality with Judaism's sense of community, a means of linking with other Jews. Some saw it as a way to take root in the world: "Judaism gives me a language and framework for understanding who I am and what I experience as a person. It gives me a sense of particularity and rootedness in time." Many articulated the need to comprehend the meaning of life.

An overwhelming 94% of the respondents reported some positive Jewish experience or memory in their background. For most respondents, their most positive feelings toward Judaism centered about the sense of community. Many equated the feeling of community with belonging to an extended family. Family celebrations of Jewish holidays were many respondents' most positive Jewish memories. Consider this response: "Judaism means to me, in many ways, family celebrations, a feeling of everything being right when we get together to celebrate holidays—a feeling

of belonging and contentment." Another frequently cited group of positive experiences occurred during life-cycle events when family and friends came together to celebrate a traditional religious event.

Among the younger respondents, Jewish camping, participation in Jewish youth groups, studies with a rabbi or other charismatic individual, and experiences in Israel were positive Jewish experiences. It was these informal educational approaches, rather than their years of religious education, that engaged many young Jews.

In sharp contrast to these very positive Jewish memories and experiences are the respondents' experiences as adults with the organized Jewish community. In response to the question whether they as adults had experienced any obstacles, barriers, or hindrances to participating in Judaism, an overwhelming 82% answered in the affirmative. Some noted that their uninterested spouses or close friends did not provide them the needed support for Jewish participation, making it difficult for them to be more Jewishly identified. Although almost everyone had a favorable view of synagogues in the abstract, only 11% of those who currently belonged to a congregation were satisfied with it. Many described their synagogue associations as cold and impersonal. Newcomers bemoaned feeling like strangers who were not made to feel at home. Consider these two typical re-

sponses: "I've tried several synagogues. It's the same . . . unless you are in the right crowd, you're not in the crowd," and "I have never felt so alone and lonely as in the temple." Single adults reported a particularly high frustration level. The separated, divorced, or never married, especially those under age 35, feel like "social misfits" in a synagogue environment that they perceive as family oriented. A number are actively seeking marriage mates and felt that the synagogue could be an ideal setting to find a spouse. However, because there is not the critical mass of eligible singles in the synagogue, they search elsewhere. Clearly, many people are seeking and not finding a sense of community, of camaraderie, and warmth in the synagogue.

Some respondents feel Judaically incompetent. Because of their weak Jewish backgrounds, they cannot follow the services or perform the rituals, and they do not know where to turn for caring guidance. One in four therefore asked that a greater variety of religious services be offered at the synagogue, ranging from a beginner's learning group to a text study group to highly participatory and creative services to traditional prayer services. Many of these respondents are seeking serious adult learning that would compensate for their poor education received as a child. They desire intellectually coherent explanations of Judaism given by first-rate thinkers.

The majority of the sample see the importance of spirituality and religion in their lives, are interested in furthering their spiritual development, and have some positive Jewish experiences and memories. They do not reject the synagogue in the abstract, only in the particular. They are seeking less formal, more caring, and more individually oriented Jewish experiences than are offered by the organized Jewish community. The decision of more than half the respondents not to seek those experiences within the synagogue suggests that many will search for a sense of spirituality outside the community. And that is what the survey found.

Table 6
INTEREST IN NON-JEWISH SPIRITUAL
ACTIVITIES AND BELIEFS

Activity	Percentage Expressing an Interest
Mystical realms	32
The Messiah	21
Such objects as crystals, charms, and talismans	14
Channeling	14
Resurrection	9

Spiritual Search Outside the Jewish Community

Many of the respondents have explored spiritual activities outside of Judaism in their quest for meaning. Table 6 lists specific non-Jewish activities and beliefs and the percentage who have expressed an interest in them. Women expressed significantly more interest in each of these areas than did men.

Over one-fourth (28%) have participated in groups linked with Eastern faiths or in human potential groups: yoga (25%), transcendental meditation (13%), and EST (12%). Over one-half (55%) of those who ventured into those non-Jewish realms reported that they gained religious or spiritual gratification from their involvement. Again, there was a difference between the sexes; 60% of women versus 46% of men reported a positive gain from those experiences.

About one-third of the respondents have been involved in some way with formal religions other than Judaism, such as Christian Science, Unitarianism, Catholicism, Scientology, or Buddhism. Many felt that this exploration did not undermine their Jewish identity. For example, one respondent wrote, "I joined Science of Mind because I liked the positive input I got there. That is where I learned to meditate and never felt my Jewish identity or faith was challenged. Each experience . . . and my spiritual love of Judaism has never been in conflict."

Over and over again, the respondents wrote of the value they found in these

non-Jewish spiritual activities. For many, the spiritual search seemed to have no boundaries. One person wrote, "I do not believe Judaism is the only and one right way . . . I accept it on my own terms, to discover for myself who I am and how I relate to God, truth, and the universe."

TOWARD AN ACTION PLAN

Many Jews today are engaging in a spiritual search for purpose, meaning, and a sense of direction. Many are not finding that the Jewish communal institutions can aid them in that search. As a result, their search for a value system that gives them standards to live by and an extended family of persons that are important to them and that stand for something important is carried out beyond the bounds of the organized Jewish community.

We can reach this group of modern Jews in the following ways.

Create Supportive Close-Knit Communities

Such communities can serve as extended families, meeting people's needs for belonging, acceptance, and warmth (Omer-Man, 1984). Cults are often successful because they capitalize on those needs. In today's highly mobile society, our respondents tell us they are constantly on the move. In any 5-year period, the majority of them change residences. Often lacking family and close friends in their new localities, our respondents yearn for community. They seek warm, organic, supportive relationships.

Our survey data demonstrate that communal institutions are fulfilling instrumental tasks, such as providing a religious education for children or offering a rabbi for a life-cycle event. Many institutions are less successful in connecting newcomers to the life of the organization. In light of such criticism, we must do a better job in decentralizing our activities. People are in quest of smaller volunteer associations where

they feel they can make a difference. Our respondents would rather operate in a small arena than in a big impersonal environment.

Small work groups, task forces, and prayer clusters are needed. Modern Jews are in search for "homes" outside their own homes. They want to share significant experiences with a limited number of other persons. The old cliché is in again — "small is beautiful."

Devise a Cafeteria-Style Set of Approaches to Serve the Marginally Involved

Those who are only slightly involved in the Jewish community are not a monolithic group, and no one approach will work for all of them. These "sit outs"—those who join synagogues, contribute to the federation campaign, and profess to care about Judaism but only occasionally participate in synagogue/organization life—are the group we should target (Mayer, 1985). In previous articles, I have called for special emphasis on these marginally affiliated Jews. How can we reach them?

Perhaps 35% of American Jewry falls into this category of marginally affiliated. We will need a carefully calibrated marketing plan to succeed in reaching this group. Synagogues of every denomination will have to join with social service agencies to bring Judaism into the marketplace. For example, I believe Judaic scholars and pararabbinic teachers should make themselves available in office buildings, medical and legal towers, universities, and elsewhere. They could transform the workplace into a Judaic learning place, even one that is confined to the breakfast and lunch hour. In today's society, successful people often work 60 hours a week or more in their professions. If we infiltrate this corporate world, we can begin to make a difference.

I estimate that no more than half of our respondents will join a synagogue at any time in their lives. Thus, the other Jewish contact points in their lives must reflect

the highest Judaic standards. Informal opportunities, such as Jewish Community Center programs, Hillel Foundation courses on Judaism, and training for future lay leadership, will need to be nurtured. As long as these contact points are rich in serious Jewish content, the multiplier effect can take hold. Put another way, the key principle is "the more, the more." The more one becomes involved in a meaningful Jewish activity, the more likely he or she will expand that involvement.

Develop Jewish Role Models, Who Through Their Behavior and Knowledge, Can Serve as Mentors to Their Fellow Jews

Such role models can play a significant role in the spiritual development of many Jews by showing how one can be a serious Jew in today's world. Rabbi Joseph Glaser (1987) defines such a role model in this way:

A spiritual person is somebody who is at least relatively liberated from the material, somebody who enjoys a flower rather than possesses it. He is in touch with transcendence. He is able to see the sweep of the cosmos and even maybe is aware of his or her place in it. He is someone who is aware of the immanence of God.

These role models may have a significant impact on today's Jews. I am a case in point. I had no Jewish education as a child. I grew up in a poor non-Jewish neighborhood in Philadelphia. My parents were divorced. My grandparents and mother raised me, but had no funds to educate me Jewishly.

As a result of meeting one exceptional rabbi, I developed a strong Jewish identity. Almost by accident, I enrolled in an undergraduate course in the history of Judaism. The teacher, Dr. Robert Gordis, took a personal interest in me. The course con-

firmed my hunch that there was more to life than being a universalist. Dr. Gordis designed an intensive 1-year study program for me and encouraged me to spend an additional year as a graduate student at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I took his advice. He secured the funding and kept in close touch ever since we met in 1970.

Robert Gordis changed my life. He helped transform me into a committed, learning Jew. Caring, compassionate role models, such as Rabbi Gordis, can change the face of the Jewish world. He served as my "rebbe." My advice to others is to do what I did. Seek out a teacher whom you wish to emulate. The results are well worth the effort.

CONCLUSION

Our survey data confirm that the Jewish community cannot rely on business as usual. If we wish to expand the base of Jewish life, innovation and experimentation are essential.

The great Jewish scholar, Louis Finkelstein, once wrote, "A good Jew is a Jew who wants to be a *better* Jew." Many Jews today are well along that path and seek the help of the Jewish community in their spiritual sojourn. Let us work to enable the Jewish community to provide that help.

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