



**ARE WE READY FOR THE “POST-MILLENNIALS”?  
THOUGHTS ABOUT TOMORROW’S JEWISH STUDENTS**

**A Lippman Kanfer Institute “Conversation Starter”**

In recent years, it has become popular to identify, label, and characterize generational cohorts. “Baby boomers” were followed by “Generation Xers” and now by “Millennials.” Numerous books and articles have been written describing typical attitudes and behaviors of members of these generational groupings and applying these to social and political life, the workplace, and education. William Strauss and Neil Howe, among the most prolific of these authors, have analyzed all of American history in terms of generational successions, rhythms, and archetypal paradigms.

Although the utility of such schema is certainly limited – each generation includes diverse and disparate individuals with many characteristics *not* held in common – it also seems evident that different generations do manifest distinct and differing dispositions. Individuals born and raised during particular periods are, after all, exposed together to specific historical events, cultural trends, and technological developments. And the commonalities of one generation (its culture, its style, its norms and values) form a backdrop against which successive ones are reared, producing new commonalities in turn. Thus, regardless of whether or not one accepts the more far-reaching claims of those who see generations as *the key* to understanding the twists and turns of history, it makes sense to look at each generation of students and ask: “What can we say about them? What are they like, or likely to be like? And, what are the implications for educating this generation?”

In the Jewish world today, a great deal of attention is being given to Gen Xers and, especially, Millennials. These are individuals born in the period from the mid-1960s into the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The bulk of students in Jewish education today (those from roughly age 7 – 25) are Millennials, and most parents of these students are (or soon will be) Gen Xers. For obvious reasons, growing efforts have gone into trying to understand these youth and younger adults, and initiatives to engage them in Jewish life are manifold and expanding.

But the youngest students entering our Jewish schools are *not* Millennials. There is good reason to believe that when we look back, we will see children born from 2002 on as part of a new generation – as yet unnamed. Increasingly, it is these young people whom our Jewish educational institutions will be enrolling as the latter cohorts of the wave of Millennials pass through our high schools, on into college, and out into the world. It is

not too soon, therefore, to begin asking what this new generation will be like. What experiences are likely to be shaping their attitudes, values, and behaviors? How are they likely to respond to these and to their experience of the generations that precede them and the culture they are being exposed to? Can history and reasonable extrapolation give us some guidance in formulating hypotheses? Perhaps. At a minimum, it's an interesting intellectual exercise to pursue, and one certainly not devoid of practical consequences.

Here, then, are some initial speculations, a brief, but hopefully not fantastical, portrait of the generation now entering our early childhood programs and elementary schools:

These are the children of 9/11. They are growing up in a world marked by apparently irrational conflicts and sudden violence. Economic and environmental prospects are also uncertain and anxiety-producing. The United States and the West no longer rule an orderly domain making steady progress toward "freedom and democracy." The world as a whole has become more visibly diverse and intermingled. Boundaries are blurring, and as a reaction some are seeking and embracing new/old certainties and absolutes. Others, repelled by the violent by-products of this quest, try to negotiate between and among competing truths and visions, and find themselves struggling to find solid moral ground.

As the children born in this environment mature, they are likely to be seeking shelters from the buffeting currents and conflicts swirling around them (and their parents will be seeking such shelters for them). Unlike Millennials, who tend to be positive, optimistic, and achievement-oriented, these young people are likely to be somewhat passive. They will be skeptical that they as individuals can really control their own destinies. In the face of life's uncertainties they will be pragmatic and adaptive, avoiding grandiose visions and focusing on making the best of whatever situation they find themselves in. Technology will be a taken-for-granted aspect of their lives, but the impetus to use it subversively will be diminished. As they grow up, their "youth culture" (music, art, etc.) will be eclectic, rather than monochromatic, with lots of styles and genres co-existing. In general, youth culture will lack a hard edge of rebellion.

In their schooling, these children will encounter conflicting pressures. Subject to unprecedented regimens of testing from the earliest years on, they will be pressed to achieve in conventional terms. The competitive economic climate will argue for a pragmatic approach to learning and encourage efforts to position oneself (or one's children) to stay above water – look for lots of classes in Chinese language. But, as the limitations of NCLB and what it represents become more evident, voices supporting a broader educational vision and a more nurturing, caring, attentive environment will grow louder, arguing that academic success in conventional terms is less important than personal growth and development. A fair number of Jewish families will likely be attracted to this alternative approach, though the bulk will continue to emphasize academic achievement.

The Jewish environment in which these children grow up will be the most diverse in history. Children born and raised in Orthodox families will form a distinct enclave, though there will continue to be “in-migration” and “out-migration” from this enclave. With respect to religious life and education, the Orthodox community and the rest of the Jewish community will maintain parallel infrastructures, in effect learning to “live and let live.” Among the non-Orthodox, denominational distinctions will continue to blur and become less relevant. As the post-Millennial children mature, they will be asking questions about their own Jewish identities, but largely in a spirit of curiosity, not challenge. They will take for granted that there are many different ways of being Jewish, and, perhaps as a result, feel less compelled to try to create their own. In this sense, they will be more conventional than the Gen Xers and Millennials who precede them, less eager to build new frameworks, though not necessarily more committed to existing ones. They will respond well to “positive” Jewish experiences that make them feel good about their Jewishness. Their GenX parents will seek out such experiences for them. Because so many will be growing up in homes with only one Jewish parent, they will not “get” the notion of a clear dividing line between Jews and others. They will wear their Jewishness quietly, though not in any way ashamedly. They will look to religious leaders to be strong figures of reassurance, rather than “rabble rousers.” As always, though, in a relatively conformist, pragmatic generation, some will become “outliers,” asserting their individualism more strongly and manifesting a more activist social consciousness.

The above is, of course, just a guess. History could, and likely will, turn out quite differently. It’s also a broad generalization, and as such poor guidance for understanding what any particular individual or group of individuals will be like.

But, whether this portrait, or some other that you may draw, turns out to be accurate or not, the questions of what the next generation will be like and how we should seek to engage them in Jewish education are ones we should be beginning to talk about.

- If this generation (and their parents) will be seeking “positive” Jewish experiences that emphasize how we can live as Jews in a multi-cultural society, how should we respond?
- If economic uncertainty grows, will Jewish education be perceived increasingly as a “luxury,” and if so, what can we do?
- If significant numbers of parents and children both embrace and rebel against “achievement-oriented” education, what should our programs be like?
- If young people will be growing up without a conviction that they can make a real difference in the world, do we want to teach a Judaism that seeks to convince them otherwise?

As we learn more about what the post-Millennia generation really is like the conversation around these questions and many others we can imagine will grow surer and more focused. But, it is not too soon to begin.

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*Lippman Kanfer Institute “conversation starters” are occasional think pieces designed to stimulate discussion of new issues, trends, and developments affecting Jewish education.*