Symposium: Millennial Engagement

Guest Editors’ Introduction

Ben Spratt and Joshua Stanton

The largest generation in American history is coming of age, reshaping nearly every aspect of society. The Millennial generation (approximately 14–36 years of age) is the largest in the labor force, has a spending power of over $200 billion, and is set to inherit $40 trillion in the coming decades. They have grown up during a time of technological change, globalization, and economic disruption and have seldom known stasis in any part of their lives. Perhaps because of this recurrent flux, they are a generation of seekers, pursuing enduring values, meaning, and relationships to sustain them amid such change. They have been slower to marry and move out on their own, and they prioritize access to services over ownership of goods. They want their investment of time, money, and energy to offer a sense of meaning and purpose and are more influenced by the opinions of friends than by brand advertising—and correspondingly want their voices to be heard, as well.

As religious leaders in the United States, we cannot afford to ignore this rising generation. In fact, it is critically important for us to understand Millennials as a generational cohort in order to ensure that our communities endure and thrive in the years ahead. This holds true not only for Millennials themselves, but also insofar as they serve as a bellwether generation and early adopter of technology and social norms that their parents and grandparents soon will utilize as well.

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Challenges and uncertainties abound in the growing body of research about Millennials, but we must not shy away from them or their possible implications. For example, two data points particularly near to us as rabbis might leave us grasping for easy responses: Millennials both prioritize wellness more than prior generations\(^8\) and are relatively unattached to organized religion. Twenty-nine percent claim no affiliation with any religion, the highest levels of any generation in the last twenty-five years.\(^9\)

Some have suggested that the only explanation is that Millennials are the “self-ie generation,”\(^10\) too narcissistic to grasp the significance of religion and so much else that prior generations hold dear. We maintain that such responses seem callous and lacking in both nuance and empathy. What if Millennials really need ethical, spiritual, and social connection but simply are not finding it in our houses of worship—at least not in the ways that they need? What if our voices are speaking to their needs, but what they really want is to find a way to express their own voices, as well?

In studying this rising generation, religious leaders need courage, compassion, and a willingness to adapt. But if we can summon the strength to listen to Millennials and adapt in authentic ways to the changing demographic landscape, we might even find ourselves living amid an era of spiritual revival.

In his book *After Heaven*, American sociologist Robert Wuthnow articulates decades of research on the trends of religion in America. He notes that most Americans fall into two categories: “dwellers” and “seekers.” Those who find meaning and purpose in stability are dwellers. Those who find meaning and purpose in the journey, across shifting landscapes and beyond safe walls, are seekers. Interestingly, within Jewish tradition, we are presented with both modes of meaning. Wuthnow writes:

> [In Judaism, dwelling] spirituality is suggested in stories of the Garden of Eden and of the Promised Land; it consists of temple religion; and it occurs in the time of kings and priests. A spirituality of seeking is tabernacle religion, the faith of pilgrims and sojourners; it clings to the Diaspora and to prophets and judges, rather than to priests and kings. The one inheres to the mighty fortress, the other in desert mystics and itinerant preachers. The one is symbolized by the secure life of the monastery, the cloister, the shtetl; the other by peregrination as a spiritual ideal.\(^11\)
We are the bearers of two ideals, propelled over and over again in
our tradition to leave home only to come home again. We leave a
promised land, only to strive to return. Our Patriarchs and Matri-
archs enter and leave and enter and leave. We are the wanderers,
and we are the builders. We retain the tradition of the Tabernacle,
carrying God’s presence in the midst of seeking, and we bear the
iconic Temple, a fixed house for God. Ours is a perpetual story of
leaving in order to return. The challenge is that upon arrival, we
never manage to stay put.

Nearly a century ago, the late Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan actual-
ized his vision of the future of the synagogue: the Jewish Center on
86th Street in New York City. Kaplan made this ten-story structure
into “a shul with a pool and a school.” At that time, he knew that
the synagogue had to both create community and help integrate
American Jewry into civic life. It needed to become a multifaceted
clearinghouse of culture and connection—a truly Jewish Commu-
nity Center; a social, spiritual, and communal home for them as
new immigrants who still felt like outsiders. This model filled the
profound needs of the Jewish community at the time.

Now we live at a time of great specialization. Organizations
offering meaning in life abound and are designed for this era of
seekers: book clubs, Soul Cycle, Pilates studios, meet-up groups,
trivia, craft beer making (and drinking) opportunities. This is in-
creasingly becoming true in the Jewish world, as well. If learning
is what you want, you can take a class at the Skirball Center at
Temple Emanu-El in New York with the top Jewish scholars in the
world. If social justice is your calling, the American Jewish World
Service will make a bigger impact than the average synagogue. If
you want to advocate for Israel, join ARZA or AIPAC or JStreet so
that you can remain among those who agree with your political
bent. Want to meet a Jewish romantic partner? Try JDate or JSwipe
(or countless non-Jewish dating sites on which you can specify a
religious persuasion or preference, among other identity markers).
Nowadays, wanting your child to become a bar or bat mitzvah is
even not reason enough for Jewish institutions to exist. Rooms and
rabbis can be rented through a simple search on Google.

Synagogues, and even Jewish Community Centers, which
once were the great centers of Jewish meaning, now find them-
selves surrounded by an array of offerings, each geared with re-
markable specificity to the needs and interests of constituents.
The sense of religion as patriotic duty during the Cold War has faded, while the marketplace of meaning has become filled with new options.

For four years, Jewish leadership has been grappling with the mountain of data emerging from the 2013 Pew Study on American Jewish life. There is fascinating information about a wide range of the American Jewish experience, from politics to practices. The most thought-provoking data concerns the decline of synagogue life. Forty years ago, 70 percent of American Jews belonged to a synagogue. Today, that number hovers at only 30 percent. At the same time, as some of our teachers have noted to us, pride in Jewish identity is on the rise, now at 94 percent. This suggests that institutional Jewish affiliation is no longer necessary to affirming Jewishness. The most precipitous declines may be seen in Jewish Millennials. Kaplan’s vision for a synagogue as a Jewish intermediary with the broader world worked in a time when Jews could not afford, find access to, or find interest in what secular society offered. Those conditions from a century ago do not exist today. In fact, if Kaplan were alive today, we believe that he would demand a new reconstruction of communal life to fit the needs of American Jewry as it presently exists.

We do not purport to know what institutional changes should take place in order to engage the Millennial generation and reengage other generations and demographic groups that have similarly reduced their participation in organized Jewish life. Though we have cofounded and continue to codirect an empowerment-focused model of Millennial engagement in New York City, we suspect that the American Jewish community has entered a period of much-needed experimentation from which best practices will emerge. This holds true for adaptations by synagogues, Jewish Community Centers, and advocacy organizations—as well as burgeoning new organizations and models. Our hope is not to proclaim victory at having discovered the panacea for our community’s demographic challenges—or to suggest that anyone could possibly do so right now—but to convene a conversation that brings together leaders, visionaries, and builders who are actively addressing Millennial engagement within the Jewish community in order to start culling promising principles and practices. This issue of the Reform Jewish Quarterly brings together the voices and expertise of many generations of Jewish leaders, all focusing
some of their creative energies on Jewish Millennials. All feel the urgency of a changing landscape of Jewish America.

As Andrew Solomon powerfully captures in his book *Far from the Tree*, the formation of identity takes places in two ways. Vertical identities are those attributes and values passed from one generation to the next; horizontal identities are those fostered by one's peer group. Ethnicity and nationality tend to be examples of the former, while genius and sexual identity tend to be examples of the latter. Vertical identities are usually respected as positive traits; horizontal ones (unfortunately) are often minimized or treated as deficits. When horizontal identities are not faced and embraced by the prior generation, the following generation will move far from the tree. In short, our best hope of passing values to the next generation comes from embracing many aspects of identity that Millennials already possess—while sharing in new and meaningful ways Jewish identity markers that we seek to impart.

As the *Mishkan* gave way to *Mikdash* and then in turn to shul, the realities and mind-sets of new generations have continuously called leaders to reenvision the means and modes of Jewish engagement. We hope that this issue of the Journal ignites a larger conversation, as we all encounter with intention this new generation. Studies from every industry and facet of social life indicate that the mentality, priorities, and sense of well-being among Millennials are markedly different—or at least manifested in markedly different ways. The question is what our response to this generation will be.

Notes

1. This precise generational demarcation varies based on sociological study.
13. http://www.jewishcenter.org/history.html; not to be confused with the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, which Kaplan founded in 1922 as an exploration to new approaches in bringing Judaism into modern American life.
14. http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/chapter-3-jewish-identity/; The number for American Jewry as a whole currently is 31 percent; amongst Reform Jews the number is 34 percent; Conservative Jews, 50 percent; and Orthodox Jews, 69 percent, which indicates the urgency within the Reform world in particular.
15. It is called Tribe, and more information can be found on its website, www.nytribe.com.