

“The Persistence of the Synagogue: Why this rabbi believes in the future of temple membership”

“The children and grandchildren of the former pious, strict, and observant generation... became completely estranged from the spirit of Judaism... The synagogue stood empty, abandoned by the younger generation, which had turned its gaze toward secular education and integration.”

You might be thinking, I've heard this doom-and-gloom quote before, as year after year, sociologists describe the inevitable decline of the synagogue as modern American Jews deaffiliate and secularize. But this quote wasn't written this year. Or last year. Or even 25 years ago.

Our opening reflection was recorded in 1908! Pauline Wengeroff composed a first-of-its-kind memoir, titled: *Memoirs of a Grandmother: Scenes from the Cultural History of the Jews of Russia in the Nineteenth Century*, in which she details the evolution of Jewish identity after the emancipation of Russia's Jews. Wengeroff shares the same story that demographers caution us today: the current generation isn't embracing Jewish institutions in the same way as previous ones, and in our lifetime, we will see the end of Jewish institutional life as we know it. Well, here we are, 118 years after Wengeroff published her memoir, and quite the opposite is true.

Over the past two years, our federation, CJP, conducted and analyzed a survey on the state of the Jewish community in our region. And the data doesn't lie. Our community is healthy and robust, grappling with and responding to the 21st century. I'm not going to stand here and spew numbers and statistics at you. You can look that up on your own if you would like. I want to share my honest reaction, as a rabbi, on where I'm seeing the strongest glimmer of hope for the future of our community.

When historians, sociologists, and even rabbis look at the past, they use numbers to drive their data. The health and success of a synagogue was measured through its growth or decline on levels of engagement and affiliation. Questions like, 'how many b'nai mitzvah or weddings graced your bimah' or 'how many people attended your weekly Torah study class' were the norm for understanding Jewish identity. They're not bad questions; however, it leads us down one path that tells only one story, a narrative where Jewish identity is determined solely by the deepest level of involvement. It's the same as the viability of a sports team through the players alone, ignoring the management, fans, and commentators that make the magic actually happen. In 2025, we are now expanding our understanding of Judaism, not through affiliation or engagement, but through connection.

Defining a Jewish community by its numbers leaves out the stories of why people belong. Because you might start as a member when you need religious school training for your kids, but you stay a member when the community supported you after your mother's death. You might begin attending programming because you retired and had more time for extracurricular

learning. But you stayed because you went out to lunch afterwards, and had someone to share in the joys - and the joys - of this new stage of life.

Yes, people ebb and flow through Jewish institutional life like the tide. But the memories of the moments we foster stay with us forever. These are moments that cannot be built into the bricks and mortar of a building, nor can they be captured by numbers and data. They exist in the nurturing of the neshama, the essence of us, the desire to be part of something holier.

It's when a 20-year-old moves to a new city, and one of the first things they do is set up a mahjong club with their friends because they saw their mother and members of their Jewish community bond and solidify their friendship over the clacking of tiles.

It's the return to a preschool for a new parent, reliving the wonders of Shabbat through song and ritual through their child, their eyes aglow with the renewal of their earliest Jewish formation three decades earlier.

It's the call an octogenarian receives from the person who sat next to them at the High Holy Days because their brother is on the Mi Shebeirach list and their neighbor wanted to share their support during this moment.

These are the reasons why I do not doubt that there is a constant urge to support a healthy and vibrant community within the walls of a synagogue. There will always be naysayers. But those who complain about the present are unable and unwilling to shape the future. The beauty of a synagogue is that together, we craft and nurture the Jewish future. As Moses learns in this week's parsha (Chukat), we might not see the fulfillment of that vision. Nonetheless, it is our God-given responsibility and privilege to be the supporters for those still to come.

Will Temple Tiferet Shalom look the same in 5, 25, or 118 years? I sure hope not! We are in partnership with those sitting next to us, those who came before us, and those still to come, strengthening a connection that breathes new hope and appreciation of a Jewish community.

Statistics can only tell so much of a story. And while anecdotes should never be considered synonymous with data, when enough stories speak together, a vision begins to form, and that can take a community and take all of us to new heights, as together we sing of the power and persistence of the Jewish experience.