

1 in 5 American Jews Do Not Believe in God

One out of five Americans who consider themselves culturally or ethnically Jewish say they do not believe in God or they do not follow any particular faith, in a sign of the changing nature of American Jewish identity, according to a study released on Tuesday.

The Pew Research Center survey found vast differences among generations—with 93 percent of Jewish Americans born between 1914 and 1927 saying they identified as religiously Jewish, compared with just 68 percent of Jews born after 1980.

A total of 22 percent of U.S. Jews said they were atheist, agnostic or simply did not follow any particular religion—numbers similar to the portion of the general public that is without religious affiliation.

“The numbers are interesting, but I am not surprised by the news that a significant number of the emerging generation of Jewish adults are what the survey calls ‘Jews of no religion,’” said Rabbi B. Elka Abrahamson, president of the Wexner Foundation, a Jewish philanthropy group.

“They are not connected to Jewish life the way their parents or grandparents were,” said Abrahamson, who was given an advance copy of the report. “I don’t think this means we count them out.”

The U.S. Jewish population, including those who are non-religious but who identify as Jewish based on ethnicity, ancestry or culture, counts about 5.3 million people or 2.2 percent of American adults, the Pew study said.

But the percentage of U.S. adults who say they follow the Jewish faith has dropped by about half since the 1950s, the

survey found.

Orthodox Population May Grow

Orthodox Jews, the smallest of the three major Jewish denominational movements, are also the youngest and have the biggest families. This suggests that their share of the Jewish population will grow, according to the study.

“The study testifies to some disturbing demographic vital signs for non-Orthodox Jews,” said Steven Cohen, a professor at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. “The next generation will be much more heavily Orthodox than this generation.”

An adviser to Pew, Cohen said that Jews with no religion were “very unengaged in the Jewish community and Jewish life” and said non-Orthodox Jews should promote social ties among unmarried younger adults.

The survey also found that intermarriage rates, the rate of Jews marrying non-Jews, has risen substantially over the last five decades, with non-religious Jews much more likely than religious Jews to have a non-Jewish spouse.

Among Jews who have married since 2000, nearly six in 10 have a non-Jewish spouse, compared with just 17 percent of those who married before 1970.

This has consequences on the next generation, as more than one-third of intermarried Jews say they were not raising their children as Jewish.

Abrahamson said that the fact that Jews of no religion still call themselves Jews suggests a new category that needs to be explored and understood by other Jews, especially Jewish leaders.

She called the survey a wake-up call for the Jewish community to work to “build wider doors, to listen to new voices, even

in the midst of some discomfort about what those voices might (be) saying.”

The survey was conducted among 3,475 U.S. Jews between February and June, with a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

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