

Enough Identity Already

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The Pew study confirms what we have seen in every other study in recent years. American Jews today are perfectly comfortable with their Jewish identities.

by Jon A. Levisohn

In the blizzard of articles, reactions, and blog posts about the Pew Research Center study of American Jews, the most unexpected came from the prominent public intellectual Noah Feldman.

Writing in [Bloomberg](#), Feldman's column jumps from the Pew study to some observations about, surprisingly, the Lakewood yeshiva. He explains that Lakewood is a massive ultra-Orthodox educational institution (6500 students embedded in a community of 55,000) focused almost entirely on the study of Talmud and exclusively for male students, that its educational model is "astonishingly egalitarian and democratic," that it demonstrates that "one kind of authentically Jewish experience is flourishing in America."

He concludes:

"[Lakewood] matters. It matters for the future of Jews in America precisely because it matters for the future of Judaism in America. By privileging ideas and thought over identity, it proudly stakes out a position of genuine durability."

Feldman is no apologist for traditionalism. What he notices about Lakewood, astutely, is that they have identified a particular cultural practice that they value above everything else, and they have set up an educational system to pursue that cultural practice with single-minded focus and discipline.

That's what makes Lakewood admirable, even for those of us who do not particularly admire their ideology, who do not believe that educational systems should be so narrow in their curriculum, and who, especially, are skeptical about what the "Lakewood model" produces and contributes to the world.

That focus and discipline is the quality to which Feldman was pointing in his phrase "privileging ideas and thought over identity." What he really meant to say, I think, is that Lakewood does not worry about the Jewish identity of its students, and does not believe that vacuous phrases like "strengthening Jewish identity" – the phrases that populate so much educational discourse in the broader Jewish community – are sufficient to inform an educational vision.

Instead, Lakewood wants students to learn Talmud, and to do so in a particular way that they value. It doesn't matter that that particular methodology is only a couple of hundred years old; they're not interested in history. Nor, for that matter, are they particularly interested in "ideas and thought," if we take that phrase to indicate philosophy or theology. That's not part of the curriculum either. It's all Talmud, all the time.

The rest of us in the Jewish community, who are not about to mimic the Lakewood model for any number of good reasons, ought to ask ourselves how our educational visions might achieve the clarity that Lakewood's seems to have. This is not about theological clarity. It's about focus and discipline, about identifying the cultural practices that we value most, and then figuring out what we are doing to help students achieve the capacities to pull off those cultural practices.

What do we want students to know and be able to do? Read texts in certain ways? Speak certain languages? Enjoy Jewish culture? Produce Jewish culture? In what ways do we want them to be engaged with their local Jewish and non-Jewish communities? Who do we want them to be, as interpreters of Jewish history and tradition?

How do we envision the connection of Jews to other Jews, locally or globally? What is our picture of engaged citizenship, and in what polities? What are our aspirations for the inner, spiritual lives of Jews? What does it mean to live a life on behalf of others, or to pursue justice, or to create beauty in the world, or to serve the Divine?

The Pew study confirms what we have seen in every other study in recent years. American Jews today are perfectly comfortable with their Jewish identities. Jews are happy and proud to be Jewish. They are happy for others to know that they're Jewish. They are not running away from their Jewish identities in any sense. If they marry another Jew and have children, they inevitably raise

their children as Jewish. If these are our metrics for success, then we have to conclude that Jewish education has been successful beyond anyone's wildest imagination.

But if these are not our metrics of success, then we have to stop focusing on Jewish identity. The argument here goes beyond [Paul Steinberg's critique](#); the problem is not, as he says, that American Jews do not care about their Jewish identities (actually, they do!) but that the very notion of identity is insufficient for educational purposes. As [Marc Kramer recently wrote](#), "Jewish identity' is a flimsy shingle to hang on a school door."

We have to stop talking about "building Jewish identity" and "strengthening Jewish identity" and "transmitting Jewish identity" in Jewish education. Instead, we have to articulate to ourselves and to the community what cultural practices we really value, what we want our students to know and be able to do, who we want them to be in a deep and substantive way. Enough identity already.

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