

## **Nothing New Under the Sun**

What Jewish young adults today have in common with their parent's generation, and why they are just as open to the gospel.

*“How do we reach millennials?”* This is an important question to be raised in a room of ministers and academics analyzing the spiritual climate of 2016. Jewish evangelism is not the only field in which this topic seems to be hot. In 2015 alone the Wall Street Journal published over 70 articles analyzing millennials and what makes this generation, born in the 1980's and 90's and the largest in American history, so special.<sup>1</sup> While there certainly are many things which make this demographic distinct, history, like every story, unfolds in patterns. To be relevant in how we approach Jewish evangelism in 2016, we not only need to look at what makes 2016 unique, but also what makes it the same as previous times in history. My hope is to demonstrate to you how my millennial generation has several key things in common with our parent's generation, the baby boomers, and that Jewish millennials are just as open to the message of the gospel as their parents were as young adults.

### **Introduction**

The cultural climate of the 1960s and 1970s in North America, coupled with an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, led to an open door for the gospel among Jewish baby boomers. Nothing was ever the same after the Civil Rights movement, the antiwar movement, and the invention of the birth control pill. After watching a man walk on the moon, the idea of a Jewish person investigating the claims of Jesus didn't seem so radical. Today, we look back at the 1970s

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<sup>1</sup> As determined by a search of the WSJ with key word “millennial.”

as an unprecedented time when young Jewish people were willing to question traditions like never before. But is it possible that within the last decade we have again seen dramatic changes in culture that have left another generation of Jewish people ready to encounter Jesus?

This paper will seek to explore the parallels between the U.S. social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which created a platform for Jewish evangelism, and social movements that are doing the same today. The millennial generation has three defining experiences in common with their parents, the baby boomers: a profound disillusionment with authority, the reality of a shrinking world, and unprecedented choices for personal identity. Through culturally relevant methods, the gospel was brought to the hippies. Now, we must bring it to the hipsters.

### **A Profound Disillusionment with Authority**

The first parallel between millennials and baby boomers is a profound disillusionment with authority. The 1960s has gone down in American history as a decade of disillusionment. American journalist Kenneth T. Walsh described it as, “*a decade of extremes, of transformational change and bizarre contrasts: flower children and assassins, idealism and alienation, rebellion and backlash. For many in the massive post-World War II baby boom generation, it was both the best of times and the worst of times.*”<sup>2</sup> Any trace of youthful optimism and hope for change was dashed by the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King. It is quite fitting that during such a decade a new description for civil unrest was coined—the police riot.

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<sup>2</sup> Walsh, Kenneth T. "The 1960s: A Decade of Promise and Heartbreak." *US News*. U.S. News & World Report, 9 Mar. 2010.

The term “police riot” refers to a riot which the police are responsible for instigating, escalating or sustaining as a violent confrontation. The phrase became a part of the American vernacular after its use in the *Walker Report*, which investigated the events surrounding the 1968 Democratic National Convention. In late August of 1968, thousands of antiwar, anti-establishment demonstrators clashed with police at the convention held in Chicago. The police beat marchers unconscious, sending at least 100 to emergency rooms while arresting 175.<sup>3</sup> Images of violence and anger were broadcast on television screens around the world. The Walker Report later described the incident as “*unrestrained and indiscriminate*” violence that the police “*inflicted upon persons who had broken no law, disobeyed no order, made no threat.*”<sup>4</sup> It seemed that the American people had undergone a collective nervous breakdown. One of the major groups behind the organization of the protests was the Youth International Party, commonly called the Yippies. Formed only one year earlier, the Yippies’ goal was to communicate to the nation how their young members felt: that the average American didn’t have control over the political process.<sup>5</sup> They succeeded. The brutality and violence executed by the police at the Democratic National Convention and the protests which followed seriously marred the public’s faith in the establishment and its institutions.

During the 1960s and 1970s an unprecedented amount of protests took place around the country: 66 accounts of civil unrest were documented as having occurred in the 1960s, with another 53 having taken place in the 1970s. These uprisings stemmed from a dissatisfaction among young people with the actions of the government, specifically with the Vietnam War and the civil rights of minorities. When these movements had moved off the scene, the occurrence of

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<sup>3</sup> "Yes, a Police Riot," editorial of The New York Times, August 26, 1988, Section A; Page 30, Column 1; Editorial Desk.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from "History of the Federal Judiciary." Federal Judicial Center.

<sup>5</sup> Farber, David (1988). *Chicago '68*. University of Chicago Press. pp. 3–28.

riots dropped dramatically; in fact, there were only 42 civil uprisings in the United States between 1980 and 2009. But in the last five years something has changed. Another generation is becoming profoundly disillusioned with the American establishment and institutions. From 2010 through 2015, youth movements reacting to the unemployment crisis, police brutality, and other injustices, led to 25 separate incidences of protests, riots, and police interventions. If current trends continue, this decade is right on track to rival the chaos of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>6</sup> Are we on the brink of another collective crisis?

Many Americans seem to think so. Kalle Lasn, author, activist, and Holocaust survivor, told Salon Magazine, *"1968 was more of a cultural kind of revolution. This time I think it's much more serious. We're in an economic crisis, an ecological crisis, living in a sort of apocalyptic world, and the young people realize they don't really have a viable future to look forward to."*<sup>7</sup> Salon also quotes Gary Gerstle, professor of American history at Vanderbilt and Cambridge and a scholar of social movements, as saying, *"I think what's going on is very interesting precisely because this kind of protest has been so absent for the last 25 or 30 years."*<sup>8</sup> Even Time Magazine took note, declaring the 2011 person of the year "The Protester."<sup>9</sup> The police riots that have erupted all over the country in the last five years have revolved around two major protest movements: Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matters. While these movements capitalized on an element of shock and surprise, the reality is that they both were an overdue response to long-simmering concerns. They correspond perfectly with the two issues that millennials are the angriest about: the economy and inequality.

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<sup>6</sup> These numbers are based on the "List of Incidents of Civil Unrest in the United States" on Wikipedia.com.

<sup>7</sup> Elliott, Justin. "The Origins of Occupy Wall Street Explained." *Salon* 4 Oct. 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Elliott, Justin. "Occupy Wall Street: A Historical Perspective." *Salon* 8 Oct. 2011.

<sup>9</sup> "Person of the Year 2011." *Time*. Time Inc., 16 Dec. 2011.

Mirroring the events of the 1960s but with a twenty-first century twist, the two frustrations that have been bringing young protestors to the streets are rights for minorities and the nation's widening wealth and income gap. A Pew Research Center poll discovered that the number of Americans who believe that changes are needed to give African-Americans equal rights swelled from 46 percent to 59 percent just during the year 2015. This same survey found that 60 percent of Americans believe that the economic system in this country unfairly favors the wealthy and that 84 percent of Americans think that money has too much influence in politics.<sup>10</sup> The current political race is a microcosm demonstrating the disillusionment young people feel towards the political establishment as party outsiders have become favorites. In the words of CNN, "*Disillusioned with the status quo and eager to break with traditional models -- it's no wonder millennials respond to (Bernie) Sanders' Uncle Sam-style finger-pointing. Next to this disheveled firebrand, the well-oiled "Clinton machine" can at times come off as too measured, inauthentic and conventional.*"<sup>11</sup> One only has to look so far as the packed audiences for movies such as the Hunger Games, Chaos Walking, The Host, and Divergent, to see what type of narratives are resonating with American youth. These films all have the exact same plot line: a dystopian society masquerading as a utopia, until a young person rises up to spark a revolution.<sup>12</sup>

Millennial cynicism is deeply rooted in a generational perspective. This demographic has lived most of their lives within a historically toxic political climate while facing a massive unemployment crisis and the largest wage gap in modern history.<sup>13</sup> Corporate America consistently ignores these fundamental challenges to succeeding in the world today, which goes a

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<sup>10</sup> Wittner, Lawrence. "What Do Americans Think About Economic Inequality?" *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 7 July 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Burns, Dasha. "Millennials Are Bernie Sanders' Biggest Fans - CNN.com." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 18 Jan. 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Doherty, Mike. "What Occupy Can Learn from the Hunger Games." *Salon.com RSS*. N.p., 8 Jan. 2012.

<sup>13</sup> "\$17K Wage Gap between Millennials With, without College Degree." *UPI*. N.p., 11 Feb. 2014.

long way to explaining why young people are so unmoved by the vision of America that the establishment is trying to sell. It's been seven years since Barak Obama's promise for change carried him all the way to the White House, and he has inevitably fallen short of the somewhat messianic expectations placed on him. In 2015 the Harvard Institute of Politics found that half of 18–29 year olds believe that the American dream is “dead”.<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein summed it up well when he blogged, *“Rage and despair--these seem to be the two dominant feelings coursing through the veins of today's America. People are pissed and despondent. The "system" that seemed to work pretty well for our parents and grandparents ain't working so well for us.”*<sup>15</sup>

It's no secret that the millennial disillusionment with American institutions has affected organized religion, and the Jewish world has been no exception. Synagogue affiliation and membership is floundering. The widely discussed 2013 Pew Research Center study on American Jews found that 32 percent of Jewish 18-29 year olds identify as “Jews of no religion,” but even of the 68 percent who claimed to be “religiously Jewish,” only 29 percent attend religious services at least once a month.<sup>16</sup> When the numbers are crunched, they reveal that for every 10 Jewish millennials, only 1–2 are part of a faith community.

However, it's a mistake to think that millennials are giving up on Judaism. Over 90 percent say they are proud to be Jewish, an incredible statistic when we consider that half of this demographic was raised in intermarried families. It's not being Jewish that millennials are

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<sup>14</sup> "Harvard IOP Fall 2015 Poll." *The Institute of Politics at Harvard University*. The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 10 Dec. 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Goldstein, Niles Elliot. *SPIRITUAL WARRIOR: Is the American Dream Dead?* N.p., 13 Oct. 2011.

<sup>16</sup> "A Portrait of Jewish Americans." *Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project RSS*. N.p., 30 Sept. 2013.

rejecting; it's the current institutions and denominations that are being abandoned.<sup>17</sup> Columbia professor Sonja Sharp told Tablet Magazine, *"The truth is, being asked to choose between Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox is like being asked whether you want Pepsi, Coke, or black coffee from the 40-cup urn. What we want are cold brew and single origin pour-over — better yet, a chemistry set and a Soda Stream, the ingredients to concoct something new, something ours, something real."*<sup>18</sup>

Even though they threw off tradition themselves, new forms of Jewish expression are still nerve-racking for baby boomers. Rabbi Niles Elliott Goldstein of Greenwich Village's The New Shul told the Huffington Post that, *"For the old guard that came of age in the shadow of the Holocaust, steeped in concerns and fears about anti-Semitism and annihilation, the transition is terrifying. Their focus is often on the past, on "continuity," on battling the forces of assimilation and intermarriage, rather than emb*

*acing the future. But for younger Jews, and especially for the next generation of Jewish leaders, the current transition is exciting and filled with possibility. Their focus is on discontinuity, on new and disruptive models for Jewish life, practice, and community."*<sup>19</sup>

Goldstein practices these types of models himself—the New Shul is known for experimental services where the congregation listens to Bob Dylan songs and then discusses the lyrics.<sup>20</sup> But he's not the only Jewish leader trying to forge "new and disruptive models for Jewish life, practice, and community." The website "Adventure Rabbi" attempts to gain attendance by

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<sup>17</sup> Sasson, Theodore. "Pew Data Shows Children of Intermarriage Still Identify as Jews." *Tablet Magazine*. N.p., 11 Nov. 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Sharp, Sonja. "My Journey to the New Jerusalem." *Tablet Magazine*. N.p., 29 Sept. 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Goldstein, Niles Elliot. "The Terrors of Transition." *Huffington Post*, 25 June 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Lipman, Steve. "Closer to God, Far from Shul." *The Jewish Week*. N.p., 6 Sept. 2007.

promising, “*These are not your parents’ High Holiday services!*”<sup>21</sup> Innovative Jewish initiatives have sprung up all over the country in the last few years, such as the Jewish Plays Project established in 2011 in New York City and now producing Jewish performances across the nation,<sup>22</sup> and the Shabbos Project which was started in 2013 in South Africa and became a world-wide phenomenon in just one year. It’s estimated that over a million people participated in their Shabbat events in October of 2014,<sup>23</sup> and the project has now expanded to include local events for every Friday night of the year.<sup>24</sup>

Just this month, the Jewish Telegraph Agency ran an article on engaging with the unaffiliated. Speaking about the most successful young congregations in the United States, they said, “*Even though none of these communities are affiliated with the major denominations and most don’t have a regular space, let alone their own building, they are consistently able to draw hundreds to weekly Shabbat services and thousands on the High Holy Days. The vast majority of attendees are under 40 and unaffiliated with traditional synagogues.*” The article continues to explain that, “*Though the individual communities differ somewhat in their particulars, they share a conviction that declining synagogue affiliation rates are not evidence that Jews have lost interest in Judaism. Rather, members suggest that traditional synagogues are largely unable to speak to the Jewish masses — either because they are too rigid and dogmatic, or because they have watered things down to the point where Judaism fails to inspire.*”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> "Upcoming Events." *Adventure Rabbi: Jewish Retreats, Bar and Bat Mitzvah, Rosh Hashanah, Passover Retreat, Wilderness Weddings.*

<sup>22</sup> See [jewishplaysproject.org](http://jewishplaysproject.org).

<sup>23</sup> Apfel, Simon. "The Shabbat Project: Making History." *aish.com* N.p., 19 Oct. 2014.

<sup>24</sup> See [theshabbosproject.org](http://theshabbosproject.org).

<sup>25</sup> Harris, Ben. "Thriving Indie Jewish Communities Join Forces to Create Rabbinic Fellowship." *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*. N.p., 07 Feb. 2016.



Just like their parents were in the 1960s and 1970s, young adults today have experienced a profound disillusionment with traditional authority and institutions, even those which represent faith. I can imagine no better spiritual climate for the message of the Gospel to go forth to young Jewish people. Although the historical details have their differences, the profound disillusionment with institutions felt by today's hipsters is remarkably similar to the disillusionment felt by the hippies of the 60s and 70s. The Jesus movement took off in the wake of the boomers' spiritual hunger, as young people were starving for an alternative to empty religion. As a Messianic movement, we must poise ourselves once again to present the Jewish Messiah as this alternative. But we must be willing to consider the way we have institutionalized our own movement. If millennial seekers are not connecting to services rooted in the traditions of the Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox, they are not going to connect any better to Messianic services modeled after these traditions. The question is: are we willing to explore what it means to express our Jewish faith in Jesus in a new era, or are we so rooted in the ways, that our forefathers saw Jewish life that we will become just another brand of organized religion for disillusioned young people to reject?

Millennials may not be attracted to institutions, but they are attracted to dynamic community, and especially to groups with people their own age. Wayne Firestone, president and CEO of Hillel, commented on the wildly successful Hillel student driven initiative saying, *"It turns out that peers not only can reach students in ways that institutions can't, but they also can do it creatively, imaginatively and with lasting effect."*<sup>26</sup> Rabbi Goldstein sums up his thoughts for the Jewish Week by stating, *"Urging our youth to become active Jews through the use of guilt, sending out alarming fundraising letters that imply there's a skinhead hovering at our*

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<sup>26</sup> Hoffman, Graham, and Abi Dauber Sterne. "Networking Millennials Through Peer Engagement." *RAVSAK*.

*street corners, building Holocaust memorials in nearly every major city around the country—none of these things are going to make Jews—particularly young Jews—want to embrace their Jewish identities or spiritual traditions. What we need is a Jewish community rooted in affirmation, joy, and celebration, not guilt, sentimentality, and fear.*”<sup>27</sup> The joy of following Yeshua is the message we must bring to this generation.

### **The Reality of a Shrinking World**

The second defining experience millennials and boomers have in common is the reality of a shrinking world. The year 1969 saw a small step for man, but a giant leap for humankind. That July, Apollo 11 went down in history as the first manned mission to land on the moon. But believe it or not, there was an even more important flight that took place that same year. Just six months before the launch of Apollo 11, the Boeing 747—appropriately nicknamed the “Jumbo Jet”—graced the skies for the very first time. While Apollo 11 will always have a special place in the heart of Americans, historians agree that the first flight of the Boeing 747 was one of the biggest turning points of the century. In the late 1960s the demand for international travel was growing by leaps and bounds, and the supply wasn’t keeping up. Enter the Jumbo Jet, with two and a half times greater passenger capacity than the largest commercial aircrafts of the early 60s.<sup>28</sup> It’s creation re-defined air travel as something now affordable for the middle class. For the boomers, who were teenagers in 1969, the world had just shrunk.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Goldstein, Niles Elliot. "The Terrors of Transition." Huffington Post, 25 June.

<sup>28</sup> Branson, Richard. "Pilot of the Jet Age." *Time*, December 7, 1998. Retrieved: December 13, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> "Boeing 747: A History in Pictures." *The Telegraph*. Telegraph Media Group, 4 Feb. 2016.

In 1965, only 20 percent of Americans had ever flown in an airplane. Over the next 30 years, flying would become so common that by the year 2000, 50 percent of the country was booking two round-trip tickets a year.<sup>30</sup> During the late 60s and 70s, restless young people were for the first time able to travel the globe, and this exposure changed their worldview. It was no coincidence that a new range of spiritual and religious beliefs influenced by the east and collectively referred to as “New Age” developed during the 1970s.<sup>31</sup> The U.S. Government had recalled the Asian Exclusion Act in 1965, just in time for young Americans to board a plane and explore the practices of Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism, paganism, and Universalism.<sup>32</sup> When they returned home, these travelers brought their spiritual experiences back to their Jewish communities, where young people were eager for alternatives to the traditions they were raised with.

Coinciding with their new opportunities for exploration, two new movements within Judaism sprung up during the early 1970s: the Jewish Renewal Movement and the Baal Tshuva Movement. Renewal Jews embraced mysticism and added practices such as meditation, chanting, and dance to traditional worship, borrowing freely and openly from Buddhism, Sufism and other faiths. Baal Teshuva, the return of secular Jews to religious Judaism, appealed to young hippies, many of whom had been raised in non-religious homes and had developed a longing for dynamic faith.<sup>33</sup> According to the Cambridge Companion to American Judaism, “*In the 1970s, Orthodoxy began a remarkable revival, spurred on by the missionizing done by the*

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<sup>30</sup> Thompson, Derek. "How Airline Ticket Prices Fell 50% in 30 Years (and Why Nobody Noticed)." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 28 Feb. 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Kemp, Daren (2004). *New Age: A Guide*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

<sup>32</sup> Melton, J. Gordon (1992). "New Thought and the New Age." *Perspectives on the New Age*. James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton (editors). New York: State University of New York Press. pp. 15–29.

<sup>33</sup> Magid, Shaul. "Jewish Renewal." *In Encyclopedia of the Jewish Diaspora: Origins, Experiences, and Culture*. Vol. 1. N.p.: n.p., 2009. 627. Print.

*Baal Teshuva movement among other Jews. Lubavitch (also called Chabad) sent emissaries to hundreds of Jewish communities around the country and the world.*”<sup>34</sup>

Millennials may have flown on airplanes all their lives, but they have still experienced a dramatic shrinking of the world during their lifetimes. The invention of the Internet has made information from all corners of the globe accessible for the very first time, while the creation of the social network has opened the door for friendships between people who have never visited each other’s countries of residence. Bestselling author John Zogby refers to 18–29 year olds today as the “First Globals,” since he considers them the first generation to have a truly global perspective on everything from foreign policy to environmental issues to the coffee they drink.<sup>35</sup>

Having a global perspective doesn’t just mean more information, it means more options. A millennial today can access details about Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and various pagan beliefs with just a few clicks. This access can be both liberating and paralyzing. Matthew Hedstrom, professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia says, *“Having so many options creates a lot of anxiety about which religious beliefs, careers or relationships millennials should choose. Spirituality allows millennials to avoid choosing one religion and instead combine elements from many.”*<sup>36</sup> Highly influenced by the consumer capitalist culture of the Internet, the millennial approach to spirituality is about choosing and consuming different “religious products” such as meditation, prayer, yoga, and personal convictions, rather than adhering to set of doctrines codified by a particular body.

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<sup>34</sup> *“The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism* (Dana Evan Kaplan, Ed. University of Miami).”  
www.cambridge.org.

<sup>35</sup> Zogby, John. “Who Are the First Globals? The Demographics of Millennials.” *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, 22 Dec. 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Newman, Caroline. “Why Millennials Are Leaving Religion But Embracing Spirituality.” *UVA Today*. N.p., 14 Dec. 2015.

Syncretism, the combining of different beliefs, theology, mythology, and practice, to create a custom faith expression, naturally lends itself to a very inclusive attitude toward all religions. Rabbi David Ingber, who leads Romemu, a young and fast growing synagogue on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, describes himself as “God intoxicated,” sees no problem with syncretism. He told Jewlicious that, *“Judaism has always been willing to borrow from other traditions ... We are so much more complex than the simplistic labels that we use.”*<sup>37</sup> Ingber hits the nail on the head: like their approach to so many areas of life, millennials don’t want to label their beliefs. They want to create a faith that is unique to them, even if that involves borrowing from seemingly contradicting sources.

Millennials aren’t just exploring syncretism, they are also intrigued by orthodoxy. As an example, the famous IKAR synagogue in Los Angeles, which boasts that 50 percent of its members are under 30 and has a cult following nationwide, is halachically observant. The congregation goes through an entire prayer book at all of their services, and everything is in Hebrew.<sup>38</sup> This phenomenon is not unique to Judaism. Lee Nelson, Co-Chair of the Catechesis Taskforce of the Anglican Church of North America, believes a sacramental hunger lies at the heart of what many millennials feel. *“In the midst of our consumer culture, young people ache for sacramentality,”* he says. *“If you ask me why kids are going to high church, I’d say it’s because the single greatest threat to our generation and to young people nowadays is the deprivation of meaning in our lives. In the liturgical space, everything becomes meaningful... We’re so thirsty for meaning that goes deeper, that can speak to our entire lives, hearts, and wallets, that we’re really thirsty to be attached to the earth and to each other and to God. The*

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<sup>37</sup> Donna, Ilana. "Mind, Body and Soul in Synagogue." *Jewlicious THE Jewish Blog*. N.p., 11 Apr. 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Fox, Julie Gruenbaum. "How Different Is IKAR; Rabbi Sharon Brous Inspires Change and Controversy." *Jewish Journal News*. N.p., 22 June 2010.

*liturgy is a historical way in which that happens. The millennial generation is seeking a holistic, honest, yet mysterious truth that their current churches cannot provide... One thing seems certain: this "sacramental yearning" will not go away.*"<sup>39</sup> Blogger Rachel Held Evans, in a post for CNN which went viral said, *"Many of us, myself included, are finding ourselves increasingly drawn to high church traditions... precisely because the ancient forms of liturgy seem so unpretentious, so unconcerned with being 'cool,' and we find that refreshingly authentic."*<sup>40</sup> Consider the vintage style of the proverbial hipster, which is characterized by an embrace of nostalgia. Millennials have a deep-seated desire to return to a seemingly simpler and more authentic time, which manifests in a genuine interest in ancient spiritual practice.

Here are the surprising truths about Jewish Millennials. According to a survey of U.S. Jewish undergraduate and graduate students conducted by Penn Schoen & Berland, nearly half of all Jewish college students today participate in Hillel events—a 36 percent increase from the last time PSB did this poll in 2005.<sup>41</sup> Research done by Reboot, a Jewish group examining generational issues, discovered that 42 percent of Jewish college students talk with their friends about religion at least once a week, which is a higher percent than it is for mainline Protestants or Catholics.<sup>42</sup> According to a 2013 Pew Research Center study, nearly a fourth of millennial Jews are keeping kosher. That's almost twice the rate of their baby-boomer parents.<sup>43</sup> According to the Atlantic, *"Keeping kosher is considered trendy in certain circles, and some of the growth is perhaps in part due to the growing number of young people in the Hasidic, or ultra-Orthodox,*

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<sup>39</sup>Olmstead, Gracy. "Why Millennials Long for Liturgy." *The American Conservative*. N.p., 14 Jan. 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Evans, Rachel Held. "Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church." *CNN Belief Blog RSS*. N.p., 27 June 2013.

<sup>41</sup> Firestone, Wayne, and Mark J. Penn. "Op-Ed: Jewish Millennials Are Showing Increased Attachments." *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*. N.p., 15 Aug. 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Greenberg, Anna, and Sharna Goldseker. *"Grande Soy Vanilla Latte with Cinnamon, No Foam ...": Jewish Identity and Community in a Time of Unlimited Choices*. New York: Reboot, 2006. Apr. 2006.

<sup>43</sup> "Millennial Jews Do An About-Face, Start Keeping Kosher." *NPR*. NPR, 30 Sept. 2014. Web. 15 Feb. 2016.

*movement.*” Chabad is also experiencing a rise in popularity. Rabbi Shmuley Boteach wrote for the Jewish Journal that, “*Chabad Rabbis are having so much more success... because **their emphasis on Jewish observances** over Shul attendance makes people feel... like it’s an extension of a life of which they are a part and to which they belong.*”<sup>44</sup> This development can be found in the Messianic Jewish community as well. Jordan Levy writes for First Fruits of Zion that, “*The young adults in their 20s and 30s are interested in an authentic Judaism. We are interested in learning the traditions, being well-informed on halachah, even if there are particulars with which we disagree. We desire to change, but we want to do so within the already established frameworks and boundaries of Judaism. We see all the movements (Chasidic, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform) as guides for us... We want to have a Judaism with Yeshua at the center, but a Judaism that does not invalidate or throw out all other Judaisms... Authenticity is important to us. Consistency is important to us. **We gravitate toward more structured Jewish expressions**, but we are proud to be who we are—disciples of Yeshua of Nazareth—and we know that Judaism fits perfectly into our discipleship with him.*”<sup>45</sup> [Emphasis Added]

There is no doubt that secularism is on the rise. But this is often wrongly interpreted to mean that young adults are not interested in spiritual things. Consider the worldview of the millennial, in which spirituality is not compartmentalized to a religious affiliation. A college student or a young professional today may view themselves as secular, meaning they have made no formal commitment to a faith, but see no contradiction in still searching for meaning in religious expression or dabbling in sacrament and ritual. Messianic scholar Richard Harvey sees this trend for what it truly is: an open door for the gospel message. The Christian Post quotes

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<sup>44</sup> Boteach, Shmuley. "Why More Modern Orthodox Synagogues Are Taking Chabad Rabbis | Opinion." *Jewish Journal News*. N.p., 30 Mar. 2011.

<sup>45</sup> Levy, Jordan. "The Messianic Jewish Millennials." *First Fruits of Zion Discover*. N.p., 9 Sept. 2015.

Harvey saying that, *“While Jewish Millennials might be abandoning the Synagogue, they are hungry for belonging, community, identity and purpose, ...something we as believers in Yeshua (Jesus) should be modeling in a way that is infectious and engaging, rather than being irrelevant and out of date.”*<sup>46</sup>

What does the reality of a shrinking of the world mean for Jewish Evangelism? Because of syncretism, it means young people today are not turned off by a blending of Jewish and Christian elements to create a vibrant and fresh faith expression. Critics formally would attack Messianic Jews by saying that the movement was appropriating Jewish symbols to use in Christian worship, implying that this is inherently deceitful. Today, such a charge could be a compliment. Embracing our dual faith heritage can be a strong testimony if we do it with creativity and pride. Syncretism also means that millennials of all backgrounds may be attracted to churches that incorporate “Jewish roots” into their worship services. Instead of being territorial about our heritage, we might take this opportunity to bless the church by encouraging them to explore these Jewish roots in meaningful and powerful ways.

The growing interest among millennials in religious observance and liturgical styles of worship also has an implication for outreach to Jewish young people. In some Messianic circles, disregarding halachah is held up as a heroic flaunting of freedom in Messiah. But for young people hungry for the beauty contained in traditions practiced for hundreds of generations, observance and liturgy can powerfully demonstrate that our faith in Messiah is ancient and authentic. Richard Harvey exhorts us by saying, *“For Messianic Jews, the challenge to become more visible, and more relevant to those who are not looking for 'religion' so much as identity*

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<sup>46</sup>O'Neil, Tyler. "Secularism Among Jewish Millennials Presents an Opportunity for Christians to Share the Gospel, Messianic Jews Say." *Christian Post*. N.p., 3 Dec. 2013.



*and purpose, needs to be taken seriously.*"<sup>47</sup> When we live recognizably Jewish lives, we become more visible and relevant to those who are seeking authentic expressions of Jewish faith.

### **Unprecedented Choices for Personal Identity**

The third area of commonality between the millennials and the boomers is that both generations faced an unprecedented amount of choices for personal identity. The sexual revolution of the 1960s had a strong impact on the generation of young people who lived through it. And yet, few baby boomers would be able to name the single invention that was the catalyst for this revolution, which was named the important scientific advance of the 20th century by the Economist. Unlike a jumbo jet or a police riot, this new innovation is so small that it's easy to forget about as it hides tucked away in millions of drawers, pockets, or—most likely—purses, around the country. In the year 1960, the FDA approved a pill so revolutionary it would quickly become known as: THE pill.

Today more people have taken the pill than any other prescribed medication in the world.<sup>48</sup> Its creator, a Jewish man named Gregory Pincus, could never have predicted that his careful combination of estrogen and progestin would inspire such broad social, economic and political change. Controlling contraception meant that women (and as a result, couples) now had more options and choices for their lives and identities than ever before in history. Women could choose to pursue a career and put off having a family. A couple could choose to live together and

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<sup>47</sup> O'Neil, Tyler. "Secularism Among Jewish Millennials Presents an Opportunity for Christians to Share the Gospel, Messianic Jews Say." *Christian Post*. N.p., 3 Dec. 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Cohen, Sandy. "The Religious Consultation on Population, Reproductive Health and Ethics revisiting the World's Sacred Traditions." *Birth Control Pills Helped Empower Women, Changed the World*. N.p., 7 July 2005.

not marry. A woman could choose to have multiple sexual partners, and a couple could choose to never have children. Within two years of its introduction, 1.2 million women were taking the pill every day. By 1968, 12 million women were on the pill, and the free love and second wave feminist movements were well under way.<sup>49</sup>

As American culture shifted to accommodate the new role of women and changing attitudes about families and sexuality, the door was opened for other groups to start throwing off traditional expectations and stereotypes. In the mid 1960s, the Black is Beautiful movement took Harlem by storm as jazz music, African art and fashion, and the afro became symbols of a new identity for African Americans.<sup>50</sup> Inspired by the slogan “Black is Beautiful,” gay civil rights pioneer Frank Kameny originated the slogan “Gay is Good” to try and counter the social stigma attached to the gay community.<sup>51</sup> The gay rights movement itself, which took off in the mid-1970s, was a success because of the changing perspective of the meaning of relationships and sexuality that started with the pill.<sup>52</sup>

This new freedom of personal expression has long been acknowledged as having paved the way for the Jesus movement which sparked a revival of both Jews and Gentiles to Yeshua. It was during these same decades that the modern “Messianic Movement” was born, as Jewish people joined the dozens of other groups questioning the conventional lifestyle they were raised to embrace. The majority of the Jewish baby boomers who came to profess faith in Jesus did so

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<sup>49</sup> Gibbs, Nancy. "The Pill at 50: Sex, Freedom and Paradox." *Time*. Time Inc., 22 Apr. 2010.

<sup>50</sup> Deloch-Hughes, Edye. "“Black Is Beautiful” 50-year Anniversary: A Movement That Went Viral Before Digital Technology." *Black Copy*. N.p., 01 Mar. 2012.

<sup>51</sup> "Frank Kameny." *LGBT History Month: Icons*. N.p., 2015.

<sup>52</sup> Bailey, B: "Prescribing the Pill: Politics, Culture, and the Sexual Revolution in America's Heartland." *Journal of Social History*, 1997, 30(4):828, 845.

during an era of unprecedented new choices for identity for people from all walks of life.<sup>53</sup> As the baby boomers grew up and the conservative Christian right became a dominant voice crusading for traditional family values, the national identity crisis seemed to have come to a close. But the last several years have seen a new surge of identity choices for young people, perhaps pointing us to another open door for the gospel among Jewish people.

Today, just ordering a drink at Starbucks is enough to demonstrate that we are living in an era when the options to customize one's experience are endless. So it should come as no surprise that the American Psychological Association reports Millennials to have the highest stress levels of any generation.<sup>54</sup> The magazine *Elite Daily* believes that, "*For Millennials, the main source of our stress is due to the high expectations we have placed on ourselves because of the seemingly limitless choices that surround us.*"<sup>55</sup> *Forbes* magazine puts a positive spin on this abundance of choice, specifically focusing on choices for identity.

*"Millennials grew up in an expanding world of choice and options for just about everything they ever needed or wanted,"* marketing expert Patrick Spenner writes for *Forbes*. *"Because of this, they view life very differently. They don't see just see one path available to them—they see limitless possibilities ... they know they have a lot of alternative options for what adulthood looks like."*<sup>56</sup>

Young people today may be exposed to an overwhelming array of personal and professional choices in the information age, but they also have an area of identity to define that

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<sup>53</sup> Ariel, Yaakov (2006). "Judaism and Christianity Unite! The Unique Culture of Messianic Judaism." In Gallagher, Eugene V.; Ashcraft, W. Michael. *Jewish and Christian Traditions*. Introduction to New and Alternative Religions in America.

<sup>54</sup> "Stress in America." *American Psychological Association*. N.p., 2012.

<sup>55</sup> A, Moose. "Paradox Of Choice: Why Millennials Are The Most Stressed-Out Generation." *Elite Daily Paradox Of Choice Why Millennials Are The Most Stressed Out Generation*. N.p., 31 July 2015.

<sup>56</sup> Spenner, Patrick. "Inside the Millennial Mind." *Forbes*. *Forbes Magazine*, 16 Apr. 2014.

previous generations never needed to consider—their gender. You don't have to be just male or female on Facebook anymore. The social media giant has added a customizable option with 58 different terms people can use to identify their gender as well as three preferred pronoun choices: him, her or them.<sup>57</sup> Facebook said the changes are aimed at giving people more choices in how they identify, such as androgynous, bi-gender, intersex, gender fluid or transsexual.<sup>58</sup> Questions about gender identity and sexual orientation have been added to admissions applications used by the University of California system, including no less than six choices for students when checking off their “gender identity.”<sup>59</sup> Millennial celebrity Miley Cyrus is hard at work advocating for acceptance beyond the traditional boy-girl norms. In 2015, Cyrus told Time Magazine that she personally identifies as “gender fluid,” and captured the spirit of the times when she stated, “*You can just be whatever you want to be.*”<sup>60</sup>

If individuals are customizing their gender, it’s natural that they would assume the right to customize their cultural and religious identities as well. In a study titled “*Grande Soy Vanilla Latte with Cinnamon, No Foam...*” *Jewish Identity and Community in a Time of Unlimited Choices*,” researchers found that young Jews see their Jewish identity as one among many identities.<sup>61</sup> Even Jewish leadership is becoming inclusive of a wide range of identities within its ranks. Sharon Brous of IKAR, named the most influential rabbi in America in 2013, is a 36-year

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<sup>57</sup> Goldman, Russell. "Here's a List of 58 Gender Options for Facebook Users." *ABC News*. ABC News Network, 13 Feb. 2014.

<sup>58</sup> Edwards, Chris. "Facebook Provides Opportunity for Lesson in Gender Identity." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 14 Feb. 2014.

<sup>59</sup> "University of California Offers Six Choices for 'Gender Identity' | Fox News." *Fox News*. FOX News Network, 28 July 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Steinmetz, Katy. "Miley Cyrus: 'You Can Just Be Whatever You Want to Be.'" *Time*. Time, 15 June 2015.

<sup>61</sup> Greenberg, Anna, and Sharna Goldseker. “*Grande Soy Vanilla Latte with Cinnamon, No Foam ...*”: *Jewish Identity and Community in a Time of Unlimited Choices*. New York: Reboot, 2006. Apr. 2006.

old mother of three children, all under the age of six.<sup>62</sup> In 2015, Brandeis University conducted an extensive study on the Jewish children of intermarriage and found that, *“For American Jews in Generation Y, being Jewish is not their sole identity... Today’s young Jews have multiple identities shaped by many factors, including intermarriage in their families, diverse social networks, and dynamic boundaries around geography and other identity characteristics such as gender and sexual orientation. Being Jewish is part of a larger identity mosaic for today’s Jew.”*

The interfaith and interracial marriage boom of the 1980s and 1990s is no doubt a significant contributor to this view of identity as something fluid and evolving instead of fixed and innate. When Brandeis asked Jewish children of intermarriage what their parents told them about their religious identity when they were growing up, 17 percent were told that they were both Jewish and another religion, 18 percent were told that their religious identity was their choice to make, and 18 percent were raised with no religion whatsoever. Eighty-six percent celebrated Christmas growing up and roughly half report that they attended Christian religious services at least a few times a year. Think about that. That means one quarter of Jewish young adults in the U.S. grew up attending church a few times a year—just as often as many American Christians! Brandeis said of their research subjects, *“Home observance of holidays from multiple faith traditions did not seem to confuse these children of intermarriage... Children of intermarriage who identify as Jewish reject the idea that their Jewish identity is diluted or*

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<sup>62</sup> Fox, Julie Gruenbaum. "How Different Is IKAR; Rabbi Sharon Brous Inspires Change and Controversy." *Jewish Journal News*. N.p., 22 June 2010.

*inferior and view their multicultural background as enriching, enabling an appreciation of diverse cultures and practices.”*<sup>63</sup>

Even the definition of what it means to be a Jew is more open to interpretation than ever before. The Jewish community Mishkan in Chicago says on their website that they welcome “*queer Jews, people in interfaith relationships, spiritual seekers, Jews of color, Jews by choice*”.<sup>64</sup> Brandeis professor of contemporary Jewish studies Leonard Fein wrote for the Forward in 2013 that, “*It has become routine to claim that these days, all Jews, at least in America, are Jews by choice. And if we are all Jews by choice, it follows that our relationship to being Jewish — the importance we attribute to being Jewish and our relevant beliefs regarding the implications of being Jewish — is also inherently a matter of choice.*” Fein’s piece for the Forward was written in response to Yossi Beilin, the former Israeli Minister of Justice, who stated that, “*We must... give people... who wish to be identified as Jews the right to join the Jewish people on the basis of their own self-definition.*”<sup>65</sup> For a young person coming of age in the twenty first century, being Jewish is a matter of self-definition. You decide if you are Jewish or not—nobody can decide for you.

Like the young adults of the 1960s and 1970s, millennials have access to unprecedented new choices for their identities, including their Jewish identities. But this does play out differently for the two different generations. Baby boomers were willing to consider a radical new identity with all the risk and rejection that might come with it. Millennials instead see identity as a mosaic, something to be carefully curated. And if being Jewish is just one tile of the

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<sup>63</sup> Sasson, Theodore, Leonard Saxe, Fern Chertok, Michelle Shain, Shahar Hecht, and Graham Wright. *Millennial Children of Intermarriage: Touchpoints and Trajectories of Jewish Engagement*. Brandeis U, 2015. Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies.

<sup>64</sup> "The Concept + Core Values - Mishkan Chicago." *Mishkan Chicago*. N.p., 2016.

<sup>65</sup> Fein, Leonard. "Are We Jews by Choice or Blood?" *The Forward*. N.p., 14 Jan. 2013.

mosaic, there is no contradiction if Jesus is another. The old hang-up that a person cannot be Jewish and believe in Jesus no longer applies if being Jewish is a matter of self-definition in the first place. Jewish evangelism has long relied on being provocative as a way to engage with unbelievers. We say who we are and what we believe and wait for a dramatic response, and so when Millennials say “so what?” we write them off as not open or just indifferent to spiritual things. But Millennials are open to the gospel; they just don’t experience cognitive dissonance when confronted with the idea of Jewish people believing in Jesus. Being Jewish has always been just one piece of their complex identity puzzle. Young adults today are searching for spiritual harmony between the different fragments of who they are.

These new identity choices have important implications for how we train people to do Jewish evangelism in 2016. If being Jewish is only a part of a person’s larger identity with endless possible combinations, we can no longer train people to witness to “Jews” as if that is a monolithic group. Maybe instead of teaching people “Jewish” objections to Jesus, we should provide training in how to counsel interfaith couples and families. Perhaps in place of imparting coaching on provocative debate techniques, we need to teach young ministers how to create environments where Jewish people can interact with what an identity in Jesus could mean for their own lives. Let us thoughtfully and prayerfully consider the tools with which we will equip the workers that the Lord will send into the harvest of the next generation.

## **Conclusion**

Growing up in both Jewish missions and the Messianic movement, I have had the unique opportunity to spend my life observing this field, and how methodology changed or did not

change with time. There is one tactic which I have seen employed many times over the years. It goes like this: someone asks you, a person in Jewish ministry, what you do for a living. And in order to buy some time, soften the blow, or employ reverse psychology you answer, “*You don’t want to know.*” To those of you who have ever said this—please stop, at least with my generation. Jewish young people today DO want to know. They want to know about Jewish people believing in Jesus because like their parents once were, they are disillusioned with the American establishments and institutions, especially those within Judaism. They want to know because the world has shrunk and the places where different faiths intersect and where ancient practice applies to modern life is interesting and cool. And millennials want to know about Jewish people believing in Jesus because an identity made up of diverse cultures and practices makes sense to them.

The wise King Solomon said, “*Generations come and generations go... What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun*”.<sup>66</sup> Across all generations, God is always at work to invoke a hunger and longing for Himself. It’s our job to be students of where He has worked in the past, how history is repeating itself, and how to find relevant paradigms for connecting people to the One who can fill that void. May we see His kingdom established in our lifetime, and in our days, and in the lifetime of these generations of the household of Israel.

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<sup>66</sup>Ecclesiastes 1:4a and 9.



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