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TO: Reform Movement leaders

**Pew Survey on Jewish Americans:
Preliminary Analysis for the Reform Movement**

This week the Pew Research Center released what is certain to be a much-discussed survey of American Jews. The following is our instant analysis of the summary of that survey, with special emphasis on its findings concerning Reform Jews. The summary portion of the report is more than 200 pages long; this quick take is intended only to provide Reform Movement leaders with a “heads up” as to some of the key findings that most affect our Movement. As the full data set becomes available, much will be said about the study in the coming months.

The Pew Research Center surveyed 3,475 Jews across the country from February 20-June 13, 2013, conducting phone (both landline and cell) interviews. These numbers and this approach follow those of the 1990 and 2000 National Jewish Population Surveys. Please note that the survey divides “Jewish” into two categories and both categories are counted in this survey:

- Jews by religion: People who say their religion is Jewish (and who do not profess any other religion)
- Jews of no religion: People who describe themselves (religiously) as atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular, but who have a Jewish parent or were raised Jewish and who still consider themselves Jewish in some way.

The survey contains a great deal of good news for the Reform Movement, including growth both absolute and relative to other denominations. It also highlights significant areas of concern that both the Reform Jewish Movement and the entire Jewish community face, with insights that can help address some of the key challenges.

Good News for the Reform Movement

- **Reform Judaism dominates the religious landscape of American Jewry.** More than one-third (35%) of all U.S. Jewish adults identify their denomination as Reform, while 18% identify as Conservative, 10% as Orthodox and 6% in a variety of other ways, such as Reconstructionist or Jewish Renewal. Indeed, of the 70% of Jews who identify with a religious stream, 40% identify as Reform. But 30% of American Jews (including 19% of Jews by religion and 66% of Jews of no religion) say they do not identify with any particular Jewish denomination.
- **The Reform Movement has the highest retention rate.** Fifty-five percent of those raised Reform stay Reform. Thirty-six percent of those raised Conservative stay Conservative, and 48% of those raised Orthodox remain Orthodox. (The latter statistic helps explain why the Orthodox community, with a higher birth-rate, has remained static in percentage of Jews in polls during the past three decades. The percentage of Orthodox Jews has ranged from 8-12% in national polls, albeit higher in local city polls, most particularly in New York. Other factors, such as high *aliyah* rates also have an effect on Orthodox numbers in the U.S.) At the same time, Orthodoxy has experienced a dramatic rise in retention rate such that now, Orthodox-raised young adults stay Orthodox far more than do Conservative or Reform-raised young adults.
- **If Jews change movements, they likely will switch to Reform.** American Jews switch denominational identification often. (Fifty-two percent of Orthodox, 64% of Conservative and 45% of Reform Jews report “switching” denominations.) Eleven percent of Orthodox Jews and 30% of Conservative Jews switched to join the Reform Movement. This percentage is far higher than the percentages of those who switched to join the Conservative or Orthodox movements. (One percent of Reform and four percent of Conservative Jews have become Orthodox; 15% of Orthodox and 6% of Reform Jews have joined the Conservative Movement.) One in five Jews of no religion describes him or herself as Reform, giving our Movement distinct access to many of these primarily younger Jews,

as well as the opportunity to connect them more fully with Jewish life.

- **The key strategic priorities of the Union for Reform Judaism are poised to be effective responses to the challenges illuminated by the survey.** Our work to Catalyze Congregational Change is critical in helping congregations become the type of welcoming and spiritually rich communities that the unaffiliated will find attractive. The low rate of synagogue affiliation seen in the survey (details below) reaffirm the crucial importance of our focus on Expanding our Reach beyond the walls of our congregations. The survey's findings that younger people score lower on almost every measure of Jewish engagement underscores our extensive new effort of Engaging the Next Generation. Even as we work to fully implement an array of new strategies, programs and activities, the survey provides empirical support for the priorities we have chosen.
- **Social justice – a major ideological and programmatic component of Reform Judaism – is of prime importance for American Jews.** When asked about activities or beliefs that are “essential” to their Judaism, the most common answer is “remembering the Holocaust” (73%); “leading a moral and ethical life” (69%) is second, and “working for justice and equality” (56%) is third. “Caring about Israel” (43%) was the fourth most popular response. Just 19% of the Jewish adults surveyed say observing Jewish law (halachah) is essential to what being Jewish means to them.
- **Support for Israel is in line with Reform Movement positions.** About seven-in-ten Jews surveyed say they feel either “very attached” (30%) or “somewhat attached” (39%) to Israel. At the same time, many American Jews express reservations about Israel's approach to the peace process. Eighty-nine percent of Jews say that being strongly critical of Israel is compatible with being Jewish. Only 38% say the Israeli government is making a sincere effort to establish peace with the Palestinians. (Fewer still – 12% – think Palestinian leaders are sincerely seeking peace with Israel.) Just 17% of American Jews (13% of Reform Jews) think the continued building of settlements in the West Bank is helpful to Israel's security, while 44% (50% of Reform Jews) say that settlement construction hurts Israel's own security interests.

Challenges for the Reform Movement

- **Synagogue membership is declining overall.** Roughly four-in-ten U.S. Jewish adults (39%) say they live in a household where at least one person is a member of a synagogue. Fifty percent of Conservative Jews belong to a synagogue, and only 34% of Reform Jews belong to a synagogue. (The survey did not ask respondents if they have been or plan to join at some point in their adult lives, e.g., when they have children. Furthermore, these results represent a snapshot at this moment. Over the course of their lifetimes, many more Jews will join a synagogue.)
- **Intermarriage is increasing and leading to generations of religiously disconnected Jews, especially among the Reform population.** Rates of intermarriage vary considerably among the major U.S. Jewish movements or denominations. Virtually all Orthodox Jews who are married have a Jewish spouse (98%), and most married Conservative Jews also have Jewish spouses (73%). Half of Reform Jews who are married have a Jewish spouse. Among married Jews who have no denominational affiliation, 31% have a Jewish spouse. The survey suggests that intermarriage is much more common among Jews who are themselves the children of intermarriage. Among married Jews who report only one Jewish parent, fully 83% are married to a non-Jewish spouse. By contrast, among married Jews who report two Jewish parents, 63% have a Jewish spouse, and 37% have a non-Jewish spouse
- **Reform Jews are generally less involved in Jewish life than Conservative or Orthodox Jews.** Lack of involvement in Jewish life is, of course, a central challenge for us and much of the work of the URJ aims to deepen engagement in the richness of Jewish life. Most other polls have found that synagogue members are more engaged in Jewish life than non-synagogue members. However, the Pew data that distinguish synagogue members from non-members who identify with a particular movement are not yet available.

- **Too many Reform Jews leave the Movement and Judaism entirely.** Although the survey finds that approximately one-quarter of people who were raised Orthodox have since become Conservative or Reform, and 30% of those raised Conservative have become Reform, it also finds that 28% of those raised Reform have left the ranks of Jews by religion entirely, identifying as Jewish only ethnically or culturally. This migration from Judaism is a challenge for the other movements as well, with 11% of Orthodox Jews and 17% of Conservative Jews leaving the ranks of Jews by religion. Fewer than one in five Reform Jews (16%) say religion is very important to them. Forty percent report that religion is somewhat important. Compared with older Jews, younger Jews are more likely to have no denominational attachment. Four-in-ten Jewish adults under age 30 (41%) have no denominational affiliation.

Larger Trends in American Religious Life

American Jews overwhelmingly say they are proud to be Jewish and have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people, but the survey also suggests that Jewish identity is changing in America, where one-in-five Jews (22%) now describes him or herself as having no religion. This shift in Jewish self-identification reflects broader changes within this country's public. Americans as a whole – not just Jews– increasingly eschew any religious affiliation. Forty-five percent of “nones” (those who say they have no religion) believe in God, so it is not that they want no religion; they simply are wary of religious institutions. Indeed, the 22% of U.S. Jews who say they have no religion is similar to the share of religious “nones” in the general public (20%), and religious disaffiliation is as common among all U.S. adults ages 18-29 as among Jewish millennials (32% of each).

Polls addressing the “nones” rarely ask this cohort if they intend to rejoin a church or synagogue once they have a family. Much of the URJ's Youth Initiative is aimed at increasing young people's attachment to their synagogue and our Movement, as well engaging with Jews in their 20s and 30s in a way that will make them feel more comfortable and add meaning to their lives as they grow older and return to the synagogue.

Needless to say, these survey results are being covered widely in the press, with responses and reactions emanating from all segments of the Jewish and at-large communities. We will, of course, follow the conversation, and continue to analyze additional data as they become available.