

## CHAIRMAN'S MESSAGE

# Don't be a Stranger

BY PETER J. WEIDHORN

The recent Pew Forum survey of religious life in America doesn't mention one group that we hear about often as we talk with congregational leaders: those parents who get close to but rarely enter the temple's door. How do we get "drive by" parents to step

into the building and into the congregational community instead of simply dropping off their children?

Our congregations are trying different approaches: drop-in coffee centers, parenting groups, or other parent-centered programs that increase the chances that they will remain involved in temple life as their children grow older. To learn from the experiences of the Reform synagogues that have successfully met this challenge, visit the Union's Membership website, [www.urj.org/membership](http://www.urj.org/membership).

An even larger group of Jews doesn't even drive by the synagogue. Once they were temple "regulars" for their children's sake; now they come only for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, or *yahrzeits*. The richness that Judaism offers is not on their radar screen, except for the compelling message of the High Holy Day season. At the holidays' end they drift off again, not to be seen for a year—unless they have a lifecycle event or other reason to step across the temple threshold.

In many of our Reform congregations, the majority of members are empty-nesters and seniors. According to the Pew Forum survey, 72 percent of all Jewish households have no children at home—and more than half of us are over the age of 50.

Why, then, the emphasis on what Rabbi Larry Hoffman, professor at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, calls "pediatric Judaism"?

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"We have planned for our children only," he wrote in 1996. "In our understandable anxiety to pass on Judaism as their heritage, we have neglected its spiritual resources for adults, leaving ourselves with no adequate notion of how we too might draw sustenance from our faith as we grow up and grow older."

That same year, in his inaugural sermon, Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, declared that today's Jews are in "need of tran-

scendent meaning" and "searching for the poetry of faith." And so he launched what has become one of the hallmarks of his presidency—a focus on adult Jewish literacy. Since then, I am pleased to report, thousands of adults have risen to the challenge of learning to chant Hebrew, and synagogues throughout the Union report dramatic growth in their Torah study groups. We have also witnessed a transformation in worship reflected in the creation of our Movement's new prayerbook, *Mishkan T'filah*.

During the upcoming High Holy Days our sanctuaries will be filled to overflowing. We will take time to reflect on who we are, our joys and disappointments, our successes and failures. We will pause from the pressures of our everyday lives and think about our hopes and dreams for the coming year both as individuals and as Jews.

My wish for you this year is that you heed Judaism's eternal pull. Let yourself respond to the shofar's call. And, most of all, don't be a stranger. Our community needs you—and, more importantly, you need the community.

Joan joins me in wishing you and your loved ones *L'shanah tovah*. □

### Editor's Note

On this page, starting with the next issue, you will find a Point/Counterpoint exchange—two differing perspectives on an issue of concern to Reform Jews.

The addition of Point/Counterpoint will be just one of the many changes you'll see in our Winter '08 edition. We are developing a section on modern Reform Judaism that will not only encom-

pass some of your favorite columns, but allow us to focus on one theme each quarter—beginning with the healthcare crisis—exploring what Reform Jews, congregations, and the broader Movement are all doing to make a difference.

Look for the new "News & Views of Reform Jews" in late November/early December.