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Pew poll on American Jewry inspires 10 new short plays

Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK – David and Liz are fighting about whether they should go through with their newborn son's brit milah — with a cross-eyed mohel, family and friends already gathered in the next room. David is Jewish. Liz is not. And it is not at all clear, in the play "The Covenant" (or "Bagels and Butchery"), why they should offer up their son's flesh in what feels to them like an archaic biblical sacrifice.

"The Covenant," along with nine other new short plays, was performed last week at Judson Memorial Church, along the southern edge of Washington Square Park in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. The evening, titled "Pew-ish: Artists Responding to the New Jewish Identity," featured a cast of 18 people reading the plays, which were penned by 10 different playwrights — most of whom are Jewish, but at least two of whom are not (though they have some Jewish ancestry) — in response to the Pew Survey of American Jewry, with widely ranging results.

Nearly none of the playwrights had heard of the Pew study — which spawned countless articles, essays and speeches following its publication last October — before David Shmidt Chapman reached out to them, asking them to respond. A freelance theater director and a program coordinator for The Nathan Cummings Foundation, Chapman came up with the idea of commissioning the plays when he noticed that vibrant conversations around the Pew study were happening only among those "already in the loop," Jewishly speaking. (Among other things,



Chapman and the cast members of the 10 plays.

David Shmidt Chapman

the survey reflected a steep decline in American Jews' interest in religion and support of Israel.)

"It's great to have sociologists and rabbis and scholars and communal professionals talking about the Pew study. But if you really want to reach people, you need to use different language," Chapman told Haaretz. "I've always believed that artists are really important meaning makers, storytellers, for a community."

Chapman reached out to some 15 playwrights whom he knew from his work in independent theater. Just two had heard of the study, but all were keen to learn more. Chapman received \$2,500 in seed funding from the ROI Community, a project of the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation that works to create a global network of activists

who are "redefining Jewish engagement," according to its website.

Chapman, himself a member of ROI, then selected 10 of the plays, which were performed by 17 actors and a comedian, with guidance from him and four other theater directors.

Israel as hated uncle

Some of the plays are allegorical riffs, one on Samson and Delilah, another on the Passover seder's four sons. The more successful works confronted the ambivalence of many young, modern American Jews wrestling with what it means to claim the mantle of Jewishness today.

In Anna Ziegler's "The Spivaks," an extended family bickers about why — or even if — Jews should feel connected with Israel. Young Ivy says "Israel is like

an uncle I hate"; she has to see him, but she can't stand being related. Of course, she admits, the fact that her ex-boyfriend cheated on her during his Birthright-Israel trip "probably contaminated my feelings."

Moreover, Ivy's Uncle Jules married a Catholic woman and they have since been members of a Unitarian church. "Unitarianism is like being Jewish, but without the guilt," says Jillian, his wife. Although he has never been particularly engaged with anything Israel-related, Jules bristles when she says something critical, without being able to explain exactly why he feels defensive.

For his part, Chapman hopes to expand "Pew-ish" to include creators working in other genres, perhaps partnering with already-established Jewish networks like Asylum Arts. But what

form his initiative will take is not yet clear, he said.

Meanwhile, as David and Liz dicker over their son's foreskin in Ken Weitzman's witty "The Covenant," David muses about bribing the mohel to say the circumcision is done without actually performing it. "I'm not much of a believer in anything but the force," he says, wondering if he can choose "Yoda over Yahweh." Liz, a WASP, offers to "down three gin-and-tonics while you gorge on your bagel" and tell everyone to go home.

In the end, David decides they should proceed with the brit. Because "it's an act of defiance," he explains. "It is saying that we're not afraid if you come for us again. Even those of us who are neurotic and ambivalent and nosh on bagels while we cut our baby's dick. This is who I am. We are not afraid, and will never disappear."