



# ONWARD ISRAEL COHORT III ALUMNI: WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

A Deep Dive into Onward Israel's Contribution to Alumni's Personal and Professional Trajectories

## INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in 2012, **Onward Israel** has provided thousands of young Jewish adults between the ages of 19 and 27 with immersive, eight-week-long resume-building experiences in Israel. Over the years, Onward's leadership team has collaborated with Rosov Consulting to assess the program's impact on participants' relationships to Israel and Jewish peoplehood, personal development, and professional aspirations. The earlier stages of this evaluation primarily focused on Onward's immediate outcomes, demonstrating that participants' connection to and knowledge of Israel, Jewish identity, and Jewish peoplehood increased following their participation in the program. As time has elapsed and the pool of Onward alumni has grown, our evaluation efforts have also expanded to probe Onward's longer-term impacts on its participants. Previously, through both quantitative and qualitative data collection, we returned to individuals nearly one year after their Onward program and found that the immediate outcomes produced by participating in Onward were largely maintained over time.

In the summer of 2017, for the first time, we surveyed and spoke with alumni three years following their participation in Onward (Cohort III alumni, from the summer of 2014). Given that most Onward participants are college students, three years later most have already graduated college and entered the "real world." These circumstances present a valuable opportunity to deepen our understanding of Onward's impact beyond the college environment. In this report, we explore where alumni are today – in terms of their professional involvement, personal skills and capacities, and engagement with Israel and Jewish life. We investigate the extent to which their Onward experience has contributed to their personal and professional trajectories over time.

As an important footnote: these alumni all participated in Onward during the summer of Operation Protective Edge, a period of military conflict in Israel. In our conversations with them, several interviewees reflected on their experience of the war, indicating its significance as a key aspect of their time on Onward.

## METHODOLOGY

The findings discussed in this report are based on an analysis of two sources of data:

**Quantitative Survey Data:** A three-year post-program survey was distributed to the 619 individuals who participated in Onward's North American Cohort III programs (Summer 2014). The survey instrument included similar items to those from previous surveys, in order to assess the extent of change or stability over time. The survey also included new items addressing Onward's contribution to individuals' personal and professional trajectories. There were 129 Cohort III alumni who completed

both this survey and at least one of three previous surveys (pre-program survey, two-week post-program survey, or ten-month post-program survey), a 21% response rate. Survey data were analyzed using SPSS, a quantitative data computation software.

**Qualitative Interview Data:** In-depth interviews were conducted with 30 Cohort III alumni. The interview protocol focused on alumni's professional and communal involvement, current engagement with Israel and Jewish life, and their reflections on if and how Onward contributed to where they are today in these respects. The sample of interviewees was intentionally designed to include alumni who participated in different types of Onward programs (community-based, national, and programs that combine internships with Jewish studies) and who currently are involved in a range of communal and professional fields. Interview data were analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software.

## ALUMNI PROFILES

Demographic characteristics of the 129 alumni who completed the survey are shown in Exhibit 1. As depicted in the table, these alumni are nearly 24 years old (on average), and more than two thirds of the sample are working full-time or close to full-time. Most of the survey respondents identify as Conservative, Reform, or "Just Jewish," and less than half had previously attended Jewish day school. Additionally, more females completed the survey than males. The demographic characteristics of the sample (e.g. gender, denomination, and prior Jewish educational experiences) were found to be statistically similar to the larger sample of those who had completed the pre-program survey (n=594).

Exhibit 1: Characteristics of the Survey Sample (n=129)

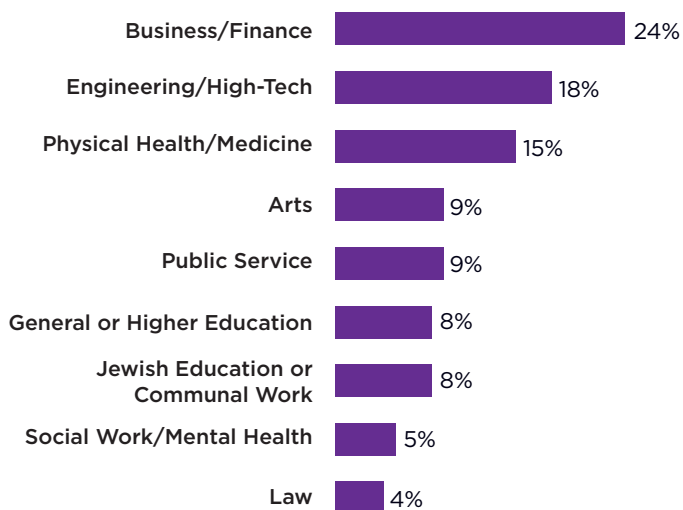
Average Age		23.7
Gender	Female	63%
	Male	37%
Employment Status	Working full-time (or close to full-time)	69%
	Working part-time	17%
	Not working	14%
Jewish Denomination (Pre-Program Survey)	Conservative	39%
	Reform	25%
	"Just Jewish"	25%
	Orthodox	11%
Prior Participation in Jewish Educational Experiences	Supplementary school	73%
	Overnight camp	63%
	Youth group	62%
	Day school	42%

# FINDINGS

## Professional Life

In the post-program survey, alumni indicated within which professional field they are either currently working or intend to work (for those not currently working), and the extent to which their professional work is associated with their Onward experience. As depicted in Exhibit 2, nearly a quarter (24%) of alumni are working or are interested in working in business and finance, and nearly a fifth (18%) of them are working or are interested in working in engineering and high-tech. Less than one tenth (8%) are working or are interested in working in Jewish communal work or Jewish education.

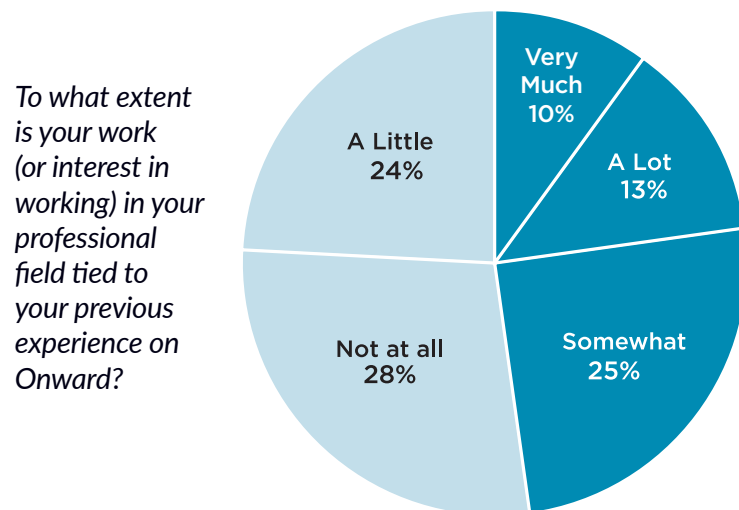
**Exhibit 2: Current or Desired Professional Field**



As illustrated in Exhibit 3, nearly a quarter (23%) of alumni indicated that their professional work was “a lot” or “very much” tied to their Onward experience; an additional 25% noted that their professional work was “somewhat” tied to their Onward experience. In particular, those working in the arts, Jewish communal work/education, and engineering/high-tech cited the strongest link between their current professional work and their Onward experience three years prior.

*“It was my first time working in what I was studying – environmental engineering. Having that experience on my resume made me a good candidate to the jobs I was applying for. It was my first real internship at a company; I learned a lot and it also allowed me to learn how to work in a professional environment.”*

### Exhibit 3: Connection Between Professional Field and Onward Experience



### ONWARD'S CONTRIBUTION TO ALUMNI'S PROFESSIONAL PATHS

As with previous analyses, the statistical technique of factor analysis was used to identify key dimensions (“factors”) in relation to which Onward’s impact can be assessed.<sup>1</sup> One of the outcome areas identified by the analysis was what we characterized as “knowledge about one’s professional field” (knowing the day-to-day activities related to one’s professional field of interest and knowing what it takes to succeed in one’s professional field of interest). As shown in Exhibit 4, there was significant growth in alumni’s professional knowledge a year following Onward, and there continued to be growth three years after the program.<sup>2</sup> **The percentage of alumni classified as having a high level of professional knowledge three years after Onward was more than double that of alumni who displayed a high level of professional knowledge before Onward.**<sup>3</sup>

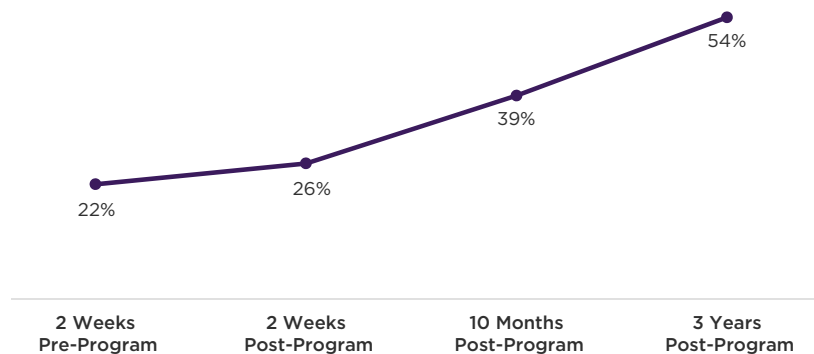
<sup>1</sup> Factor analysis is a statistical technique that reduces a large number of variables into a smaller set of variables (“factors”), making the data more manageable and easier to understand. Each factor is composed of variables exhibiting similar response patterns. A list of the factors generated by the analysis and the items of which they are composed is included in the Appendix.

<sup>2</sup> A repeated measures ANOVA statistical test was used to compare and assess significant change between factor scores from four time intervals: two-weeks pre-program, two-weeks post-program, ten months post-program, and three-years post-program. There were 62 alumni with sufficient data for all four time intervals.

<sup>3</sup> Factor scores were classified as “high-scoring” if they were above 4 on a scale of 1 to 5, or above 3 on a scale of 1 to 4.

*“Onward was the first real professional experience I had, and that laid a foundation for things like my resume, and experiences I could talk about in interviews. It was a big launchpad to get to the next thing and to where I am now. It also helped me understand what I wanted to work in and what I would like to do.”*

### Exhibit 4: Percentage of Alumni with a High Level of Professional Knowledge



Such growth in professional knowledge during the years succeeding Onward is very much aligned with being exposed to continued opportunities for learning, both inside the college classroom and outside of it, through additional internship and work experiences. It is therefore difficult to directly attribute alumni's higher level of knowledge three years after Onward to the Onward experience itself, but it is clear from alumni's reflections in the survey that Onward played a key role in shaping or launching their career path. Some alumni noted that they began Onward with a clear and specific career goal in mind, while others were uncertain and hoped to gain greater clarity and direction. In both cases, alumni found that their internships helped them make connections, build their resumes, identify their strengths and weaknesses in specific professional fields, and open doors that would have otherwise been closed to them.

These sentiments were echoed in our conversations with alumni, where a significant number of interviewees stated that their internship experience was influential in developing their career path. For the alumni who were already interested in a particular professional field prior to taking part in Onward, their internship experience helped them identify what was most interesting in the fields to which they were drawn. Since most of the alumni whom we spoke with had participated in Onward early in their college careers, their internship played a formative role in defining their

*“Before Onward, I was a volunteer at a nursing home, doing some health care volunteering. On Onward I was actually in the hospital, working with nurses and doctors, talking to them. It really helped me to focus and narrow it down. I realized I want to work in the hospital, not just generally in the health care field.”*

choice of majors, minors, and courses in which to enroll. In a few cases, the internship experience inspired participants to change their professional direction by exposing them to unappealing aspects of the field they had thought they wanted to pursue.

For the alumni who were largely undecided about their career paths prior to Onward, their internship experience was a valuable contributing factor in their decision-making process; some alumni even chose their college major based on their internship experience. In fact, for some alumni, the time they spent in Israel inspired them to pursue Jewish studies and future work in Jewish non-profits, which they had not considered prior to the summer.

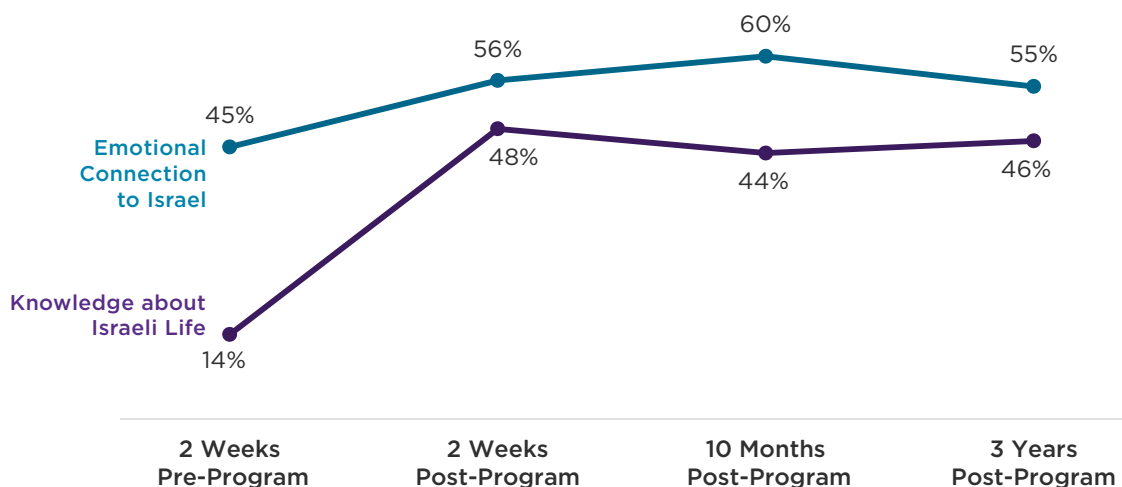
**Many interviewees shared that Onward strongly enhanced their resume.** They mentioned that they have regularly discussed their experience during job interviews, and some have been hired or promoted due to the unique skill-set they gained during Onward, including working in an international setting and in a foreign language. For many alumni, Onward was their first “real” professional experience, and they learned how to navigate an office environment and develop their goal-setting, planning, presentation, and communication capacities. In this way, alumni’s Onward experiences played a pivotal role in “readying” them for the workforce.

## Israel Engagement: Knowledge and Connection

In addition to inquiring about their professional life, the post-program survey asked alumni to indicate which kinds of communities and organizations they are involved in. Three years after taking part in Onward, slightly under a third (29%) of alumni indicated that they are currently involved with organizations concerned in some way with Israel. Overall, approximately one in five alumni (19%) indicated that their current involvement with Israel is “a lot” or “very much” tied to their Onward experience.

Two over-arching Israel-related outcomes were identified by the survey factor analysis: “knowledge about Israeli life” and “emotional attachment to Israel.” In both areas, Onward’s immediate impact – increasing participants’ knowledge of and connection to Israel – was sustained three years after the program. As shown in Exhibit 5, the percentage of alumni showcasing high levels of knowledge of Israeli life and a strong connection to Israel three years after Onward was found to be quite similar to that of alumni shortly after their return from their Onward program. While one might expect to see these elements fade over time since alumni are far-removed from their Onward experience, instead alumni’s knowledge of and connection to Israel have been maintained throughout the years.

Exhibit 5: Percentage of Alumni with High Levels of Knowledge of and Connection to Israel



In our conversations with alumni, many spoke about their heightened sense of closeness to and love for Israel, and the feelings of pride that were triggered by their exposure to Israeli life, culture, and politics in a real and immersive way. Some alumni also shared that their experience on Onward allowed them to further deepen their already-existing relationship with Israel, making it a more meaningful part of their personal identity.



In addition to discussing their strengthened connection to Israel, several alumni described a change in their understanding or perception of Israel. Many participants had already visited Israel through Birthright or on a family vacation and had “superficially” encountered Israel's culture and geopolitics. Onward provided them with opportunities to go below the surface and to grapple with some of the more challenging questions the country faces, in areas such as media misrepresentation, ethnic and religious diversity, and security. **Alumni largely attributed their gaining of a more nuanced view of Israel's complexity to the opportunities provided by Onward's educational programming.** Exposure to aspects of Israel's geography, demography, cultural diversity, security, and politics during Onward's travel days and seminars enabled alumni to develop more-informed opinions about Israel and to think more critically about the challenges and dilemmas that Israel faces.

For some alumni, the knowledge and perspective acquired during the trip resulted in a deep curiosity and desire to stay involved in Israel-related activities upon their return. Participants reminisced about their experiences on campus after Onward and their efforts to maintain a sense of involvement with Israel through participation in Israel clubs, internships, and a variety of opportunities centered around Israel. Several alumni noted that they emerged from Onward with an improved ability to participate in and lead better-informed conversations about Israel. They felt empowered to advocate for Israel, whether in personal, academic, or professional settings. Alumni also shared that they developed an approach to Israel that differed from what is commonly displayed in the media – and also learned how to be critical of the media's portrayal of Israel – due to their learning on Onward about geopolitical issues in Israel.

Alumni credited these various outcomes to distinct aspects of the Onward experience. First, the rich value of living for an extended period of time and working in Israel was strongly pronounced in our conversations with alumni. Alumni explained

*“We were living in an apartment and commuting to work, just like a normal internship, but in Tel Aviv. You're not on the bus every day or in hotels like on a school trip. We were settled... going out and enjoying the nightlife. We were living as if we were locals.”*

*“Onward's travel days and seminar were really helpful to define Israel when it came to politics. I learned how to form an argument and stand up for Israel. For people who are anti-Israel, I now know how to explain the other side, why Israel needs such an army and so forth.”*

that “experiencing Israeli life on a regular basis” allowed for a deeper familiarity with the country and a broader understanding of the culture. Participants used the independence and freedom provided by Onward to explore the country and interact with Israelis. Their time on Onward allowed and encouraged them to experience Israel as locals do.

Another dimension that played a significant role in participants’ impression of the country was Onward’s educational programming, including travel days and seminars. Alumni explained that seeing the country’s sites firsthand was more impactful than hearing and learning about it in a lecture-based setting. On multiple occasions, the travel days included meeting with locals in different regions and hearing opposing perspectives on the political situation of the country. **These experiences provided participants with deep insights about Israel that still contribute to the way they think about Israel today.**

While Operation Protective Edge was not an inherent component of the Onward program, it also strongly contributed to participants’ overall experience and the insights they gained about Israel. In addition to their memories of hearing the sirens and running to bomb shelters on a regular basis, alumni spoke about the opportunity to discover and feel how Israelis cope with these kinds of emergency situations in real time. As a result, alumni felt inspired by the country’s resilience in the face of constant security threats, and they came to realize that war is often an inherent part of life in Israel. Amidst the tension and fear, alumni also grew close with their Israeli colleagues and friends and personally felt the palpable unity across the society. Some alumni noted that their experience of the war contributed to a more critical and cautious approach to Israel’s representation in the media and a strengthened ability to speak about Israel and its security challenges. Thus, although it was an unfortunate and unexpected part of their summer, many alumni recognize and appreciate the insights they gained from living in Israel during Operation Protective Edge.

*“Specifically, I remember the trip to the Negev. A very surface-level tour would just be to visit the Negev for a night and leave the next morning, but we got to talk to locals that live there and see the challenges of living in the desert, such as not having access to enough food and water. We really were exposed to and learned about the challenges of living in that region, which I think would get lost on a 10-day trip where you wouldn’t be able to immerse yourself in that.”*

*“My experience on Onward is definitely something I’m holding onto forever, especially because of the war and the impact it had on me. It made me understand that it’s a part of life in Israel, that you never know when it will happen and that you always just need to continue on with life. ... It became the norm for us. It was a good eye-opening experience for me.”*

It is important to note that while many alumni spoke about their strengthened connection to Israel and more active engagement with Israel following Onward, some alumni described a more fluid relationship, with periods of stronger and weaker involvement with Israel. This often had to do with their surrounding environment, as college campuses usually offer much more Israel-related activities compared to the young professional communities that many alumni are currently a part of. Others explained that because of their exposure to the different sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during both Onward and subsequent visits to Israel, their perspective on Israel is more complex now than it was before taking part in Onward. There was also a portion of alumni who felt that Onward did not change the way they think about or relate to Israel, probably due to the solid connection they already had beforehand thanks to family and friends, or prior trips to Israel that had left a foundational impression.

## RETURNING TO ISRAEL

In the three-year post-program survey, nearly half (46%) of alumni indicated that they had returned to Israel at least once since their participation in Onward, with nearly a quarter (24%) of alumni noting that they had visited more than once. Of those who returned to Israel, more than half (58%) had returned as part of an organized program (including staffing programs such as Birthright), while others had returned to travel with friends or family. Overall, nearly all alumni, including those who hadn't returned to Israel, indicated that they plan to visit Israel again.

In addition, ten alumni reported that they had moved to Israel for long-term residence, or Aliyah. In our conversations with some of these individuals, they expressed that their Onward experience played a significant role in their decision to move to Israel and in the transition process that followed. Alumni's time on Onward provided them with a taste of what living in Israel would be like. In addition, it allowed for alumni to become familiar with Israeli life and gain confidence about integrating into Israeli society.

*"I was playing basketball once and the siren went off. We were in a big field. I felt like life went on, and that I was a part of the community. It was dark, and we started running, knocking on the doors. People invited us in and welcomed us to hide. We were there for a while, and we were all like a family. We didn't know each other, but you just look out for other Israelis. We're all Jewish. I never felt like that."*

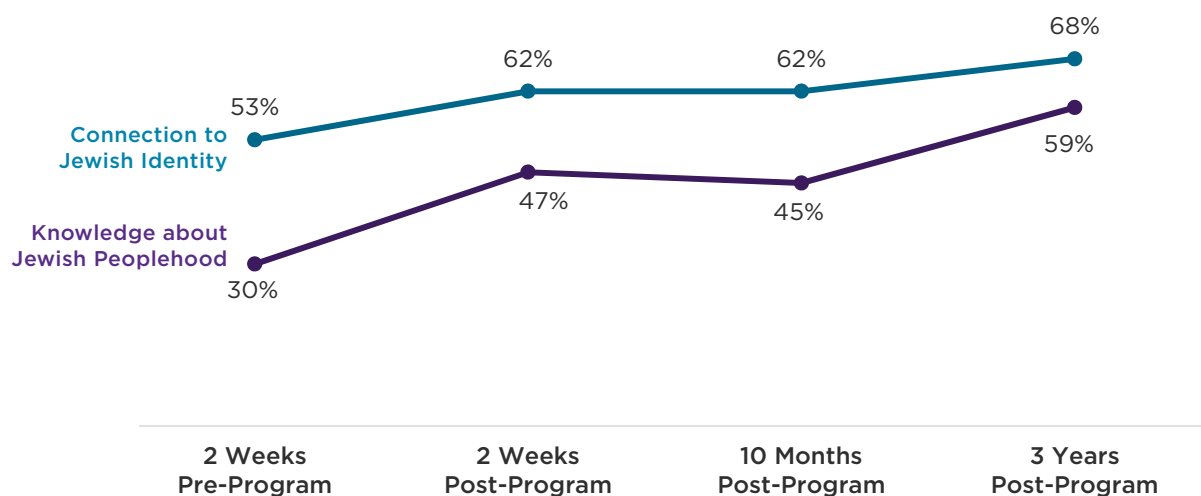
*"My connection to Israel is definitely stronger, now after being there several times, and the more I go there, the stronger I want to keep going there. I never knew about it, my family maybe went once or twice, but everything went over my head and I didn't care much about it. After spending time there and connecting to it, I have a high value for it and can't wait to go back."*

## Engagement with Jewish Life: Knowledge and Connection

Three years after taking part in Onward, nearly two-thirds (63%) of alumni indicated that they are involved in the Jewish community. Overall, approximately one in four alumni (27%) indicated that their current involvement in the Jewish community is “a lot” or “very much” tied to their Onward experience.

Two over-arching outcomes related to Jewish identity and peoplehood were identified by the survey factor analysis: “knowledge about Jewish peoplehood” and “connection to Jewish identity.” In both domains, Onward’s immediate impact – increasing participants’ knowledge of and connection to Jewish peoplehood and identity – was sustained three years after the program. In fact, alumni exhibited even further growth in their knowledge of Jewish peoplehood three years later, likely due to continued opportunities for learning. As shown in Exhibit 6, the percentage of alumni displaying a high level of Jewish peoplehood-related knowledge three years after Onward was significantly greater than that of alumni shortly after Onward. The percentage of alumni displaying a high level of connection to Jewish identity three years after Onward was found to be fairly similar to that of alumni shortly after Onward. One might expect some of these elements to fade over time, particularly since those who take part in Onward are not tremendously engaged in Jewish life from the get-go. **In actuality, alumni’s knowledge of and connection to Jewish identity and peoplehood have been stable (or have grown) throughout the three years since they completed the program.**

Exhibit 6: Percentage of Alumni with High Levels of Knowledge of and Connection to Jewish Identity and Peoplehood



In our interviews with alumni, many shared that they became more knowledgeable about Judaism and Jewish practices and gained a stronger sense of connection to their Jewish identity as a result of their participation in Onward three years previously. Some alumni spoke about their renewed sense of pride and ownership of their Jewish heritage, borne out of their Onward experience. They consequently became more curious and passionate about Jewish customs and rituals. Others spoke about gaining a “more global” perspective on Judaism due to their exposure on Onward to a more diverse Jewish population than they were previously familiar with, both within Israeli society and among their Onward peers.

Some alumni shared how their Onward experience contributed to the way they practically engage with Jewish life today, through observing Shabbat and holidays, attending Jewish community events and programming, and generally being more intentional in the way they “seek out Jewish life.”

There were certain aspects of the Onward experience that alumni perceived as being instrumental to bringing about these kinds of Jewishly-related outcomes. For example, many of the alumni who started observing or celebrating Shabbat after Onward attributed this change in lifestyle to being inspired by the ways in which Shabbat is integrated into Israeli society and culture, or more generally to learning about Jewish life during Onward. Some alumni spoke about experiencing Shabbat on Onward in the homes of local Israeli families, while others reminisced about the weekend “overnights” that were filled with Shabbat songs, Jewish learning and spirituality. The way “the country shuts down” at sundown every Friday evening left a lasting impression on many; they found it to be “magical.” In general, alumni appreciated exposure to a more diverse Jewish population than they were familiar with, and the opportunity to see how Jewish life is practiced in different ways. Additionally, participants who had fewer prior Jewish educational experiences benefited from learning about Jewish history and rituals during Onward’s seminars and hikes.

*“After my Onward program I was able to reconcile all of the aspects I learned and what I wanted to incorporate in my daily life, like Shabbat: I don’t observe it the full way, but my friends and I make a point to come together every Friday night and do Kiddush and Challah.”*

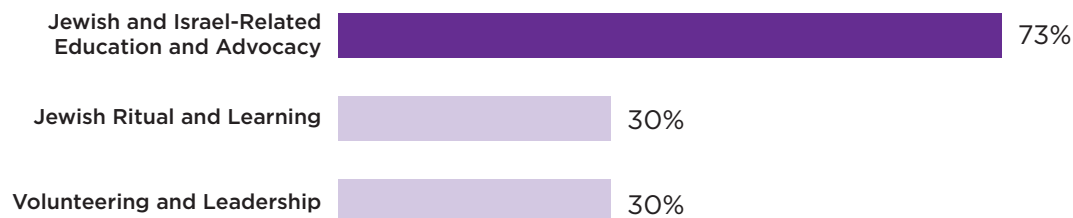
While the Onward experience left a significant mark on many alumni's Jewish development, their experiences since the program have also played a role in the way they relate to Jewish life today. Some participants explained that immediately after Onward, their connection to Judaism was the strongest it has ever been, but that this connection proceeded to fade with time. Others shared that although they are not as actively involved as when they were on Onward, or soon after, they are still trying to commit to certain Jewish practices, like observing holidays or keeping kosher. In addition, a portion of alumni also felt that Onward did not contribute to the way they engage with Jewish life today. Some attributed this to the program being more focused on Israel and less on Jewish content. Others explained that they already came into the Onward program with a stable sense of their Jewish identity and a commitment (or lack thereof) to Jewish practices.

*“Learning about the broad spectrum of beliefs, both in my own Onward house and by families in the community showed me how broad religion is. I think Onward gave me a base of what’s out there in terms of the spectrum of Jewish life.”*

## Finding One's Place: Challenges for Post-College Emerging Adults

While alumni's emotional connection and knowledge pertaining to Jewish identity, peoplehood, and Israel is largely maintained (or in some cases, strengthened) over time, the survey data show that alumni participation in certain Jewish and Israel-related activities tends to vary. A factor analysis of the behavior-related survey items produced three categories of these kinds of activities: (i) "Jewish ritual and learning," (ii) "volunteering and leadership," and (iii) "Jewish and Israel-related education and advocacy." As shown in Exhibit 7, three years after Onward, nearly three-quarters (73%) of alumni either maintained or increased their level of involvement in Jewish and Israel-related education and advocacy, while slightly less than a third (30%) of alumni either maintained or increased their level of involvement in Jewish ritual and learning activities, volunteering, and leadership activities, compared to alumni's level of involvement before Onward.

### Exhibit 7: Percentage of Alumni who Maintained or Increased their Involvement in Jewish and Israel-Related Activities, Three Years Later



In our conversations with alumni, many individuals spoke about their heightened awareness and outreach about Israel and Judaism, particularly in the realm of Israel advocacy. Alumni described a strong desire to bring their Onward experience back home with them, and to share it with others on campus. Many alumni mentioned that they became more involved in anti-BDS activities with Hillel and Chabad on campus once they returned from Onward. In the years that have followed, alumni tend to remain informed about Israel through social media, news and personal connections with friends and family, more so than through institutions or activities.

With regards to alumni's lesser involvement in activities pertaining to Jewish ritual and learning, volunteering, and leadership demonstrated by the survey data, it is highly possible that this finding is reflective of the unique time and place in which these alumni find themselves. Three years after Onward, most alumni are no longer in college, and therefore have less access to the kinds of Jewish

and Israel-related activities that were previously at their fingertips, due to the efforts of student organizations such as Hillel and Chabad. There are fewer opportunities for them to be involved than when they were in college, and if they are interested in being involved, they must seek out these kinds of opportunities on their own. Both dynamics — less access and the need to take greater personal initiative — limit the Jewish and Israel engagement of alumni.

Additionally, in our conversations with alumni, several shared that they would like to be more involved, but simply don't have enough time. Many were pre-occupied with adjusting to the new circumstances of recent graduation, moving to a new location, and/or starting a new job. As such, they felt that their ability to be involved with Jewish institutions was more limited, compared to when they were on campus or in their home communities. Others felt like they hadn't yet found a community that appeals to them, and that they plan to get more involved once they feel more settled. Many of these alumni shared that it can be challenging and time-consuming to find or build a new community. For those who have made an effort to reach out to new communities, Moishe House, OneTable, Tribe 12, and young professionals' groups seem to be popular and appealing options.

*"I felt I was more knowledgeable about Israel and I was able to back-up my experience with real tangible evidence. I was more informed about Israel and I had anecdotes that related to the conversation."*

*"I think Onward gave me a push to bring people together and explain more about Israel in a way where I could use my knowledge. I was a lot more informed. Maybe before, I could have also done it, but it gave me more confidence."*



## THE IDENTITY-ISRAEL CONNECTION

Interestingly, one of the most valuable findings that emerged from the interview data pertains to how alumni perceive of their connection to and involvement with Israel and Jewish life, and the overlap between the two. When asked how they relate to Israel today, some alumni would begin speaking about their connection to and involvement with Jewish life. For example, some alumni spoke about gaining a greater appreciation for different ways of practicing Judaism, finding meaning in Shabbat, or viewing their attendance of High Holiday services with newfound importance. Alumni explained that their experience in Israel inspired them to think more about their own Jewish identity and where they see themselves in the Jewish community. At the same time, when asked how they relate to Jewish life and their Jewish identity today, some alumni would begin speaking about their connection to and involvement with Israel. For example, a few alumni spoke about their increased knowledge about Israeli society and politics, how they speak to others about Israel, and about the camaraderie they felt in Israel. Here too, the link between relating to Israel and relating to Jewish life is evidenced by alumni's reflections about their time on Onward and experiences thereafter.

There are two significant take-aways from these findings. **First, three years after participating in Onward, alumni seem much more aware of a clear, strong bond between Israel and their Jewish identity**, compared to what we've commonly heard in our conversations with participants at the onset of their program: that Israel and Jewish identity are somewhat disparate entities. Prompted by their time on Onward – with Israel serving as a platform for personal and communal Jewish exploration – and through subsequent experiences, it seems that alumni gradually meld this bond between Israel and Jewish identity on their own. Secondly, the overlap in how alumni interpret their relationships with Israel and Jewish life may indicate points of opportunity for engaging this population. If the organized Jewish community is interested in appealing to these individuals, then it must first understand what speaks to them. One potential way to cultivate greater appetite for involvement is to emphasize this powerful bond between Israel, personal identity, and collective Jewish identity in engagement initiatives. Ironically, while many are concerned about the increased distance from Israel among this generation of young Jews, for this population, Israel serves as a point of entry to Jewish life.

## Growing the Onward “Network”

The three-year post-program survey asked respondents to indicate how interested they are in various alumni engagement opportunities. As demonstrated in Exhibit 8, half (50%) of alumni expressed interest in being part of an online alumni network to learn about professional opportunities and opportunities in Israel, and nearly half (47%) noted that they’d like to keep in touch with their peers from Onward. Additionally, more than a third (39%) indicated that they would like to attend events organized for Onward alumni. These findings may have useful implications for the development and implementation of Onward’s new “app” for alumni engagement.

### Exhibit 8: Percentage of Alumni Interested in Alumni Engagement Opportunities

*“How interested are you in each of the following?” (% of respondents who selected “a lot” or “very much”)*

Being part of an online alumni network to learn about professional opportunities, opportunities in Israel, etc.	50%
Keeping in touch with Onward Israel peers	47%
Attending events organized for Onward Israel alumni	39%
Receiving updates about Onward Israel happenings	27%
Being involved with Onward Israel in a professional or volunteer capacity	26%
Donating money to Onward Israel, either currently or in the future	22%

Our conversations with alumni demonstrated that they are strong advocates and promoters of Onward. Those who enjoyed their experience tend to talk about it with friends and family, on campuses, and at events, not only immediately after the program but also several years after. They have assisted potential applicants with navigating the application and interview process, and they have spoken with applicants about identifying and balancing their expectations of the program. For Onward’s recruitment purposes, these alumni-applicant relationships can be leveraged as a valuable resource.

Even though most of the feedback about staying in touch with Onward was positive, many alumni mentioned that they were never offered any elaborate opportunities to be involved with Onward after their trip. They either have never received or do not recall receiving any communications from Onward after their trip. However, most of them are open to being more involved; they expressed interest in joining professional networking events, being involved in structured recruitment, and speaking about their experiences in a more organized way. As such, retaining a large and active alumni network might be beneficial for Onward in many ways.

## Significance of the Onward Experience

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In our conversations with alumni, most described their time on Onward as one of the most significant life experiences they've had. Many consider their time on Onward as a "coming of age experience," with motifs of self-development and personal growth due to several contributing factors. First, the freedom and independence to "navigate a new lifestyle" enabled participants to learn about themselves and gain confidence. Leavened by a good dose of introspection, this was a transformative experience for many participants. Another contributor to the personal growth of alumni was the newness or unfamiliarity that permeated much of their time on Onward. For many participants, Onward was the first time they lived in a foreign country and had the chance to explore new surroundings. For others, Onward marked their first professional experience. **These "first-time" experiences were important personal "milestones." They contributed to a feeling of breaking out of the familiar, beyond one's comfort zone.**

Based on what participants shared with us, it seems that Onward's design included a smart balance between providing a formal framework (made up of the internship, hikes, and seminars) and the freedom to explore a new country and grow through an array of meaningful experiences. Participants recognized and appreciated the sense of independence and self-discovery that the program facilitated. These aspects played a significant role in their personal growth, both during the program and beyond.

A third element that contributed to the significant impact of the Onward experience was its social dimension. When asked to share what was most meaningful about the program experience or what were the take-aways that still resonate today, many alumni talked about their program cohort, the sense of community, and the lifelong friendships that they made during the trip. Many pointed out that they are still in regular contact with the friends they made during the program, either via social media, speaking on the phone, or meeting together in-person.

*"Living in a foreign city and working there made me grow like a person and become more mature. I was only 18. I had done a year in college, but it's a sheltered environment. In Israel, I had to grocery-shop, cook, be self-sufficient, get to work on time every day and manage everything while] being far away from home, with not much support. I learned a lot on my own. It put me in a situation where I could grow."*

*"One of the big take-aways was the importance of community, the community they tried to form among the 40-50 of us; it was a very important part of the programming and now I understand that more. It was also about realizing that there aren't that many Jews in the world, so community is important. Now even in my daily life in Philadelphia I realize it's important to foster that."*

## SUMMARY AND QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

As evidenced by the data, the Onward experience plays a pivotal role in alumni's personal and professional trajectories. In large part, alumni emerge from the program as more independent and self-aware individuals, equipped with a greater sense of professional direction and skills. Additionally, the short-term outcomes displayed by alumni, such as increased emotional attachment to and knowledge of Israel, Jewish identity, and Jewish peoplehood, are mostly maintained three years after the program's end.

Notably, the decline of alumni involvement in Jewish and Israel-related activities three years after Onward raises some important questions about Jewish engagement for this population. While many individuals participate in these kinds of activities on campus, once they graduate college, their activity wavers and often seems to peter out. What kinds of measures or opportunities could help better sustain alumni's involvement with Jewish life and Israel post college, in the "real world"? What kind of environment could successfully build upon and deepen the impact Onward has on its participants, and how can the larger Jewish community provide this kind of environment to these individuals?

These findings present both a challenge and opportunity for Jewish leadership, particularly for those focused on millennial engagement. It would be wise to wrestle with this question, and search for ways to more effectively appeal to this demographic, and to provide the kinds of communities that welcome them, encourage their involvement, and allow for greater, sustained impact.

## APPENDIX

### Program Outcomes - Factors and Items

<b>Connection to Israel and Israelis</b>	I feel a strong connection to Israel and Israelis
	I feel at home in Israel
	Caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew
	I feel proud of Israel
	I can articulate to others what Israel means to me
	I feel a sense of responsibility to Israel and Israelis
<b>Knowledge about Israel</b>	I know about day-to-day life in Israel
	I know about diversity in Israel
<b>Connection to Jewish Identity and Peoplehood</b>	I have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people
	I feel connected to other Jews around the world
	I feel connected to other Jews at home or at school
	I am interested in learning more about Judaism and my Jewish heritage
	I feel connected to Judaism and my Jewish heritage
<b>Knowledge about Jewish Peoplehood</b>	I know about different ways of being Jewish
	I know about Judaism and my Jewish heritage
	I know about Jewish communities around the world
<b>Professional Knowledge</b>	I know about the day-to-day activities related to my area of professional interest
	I know about what it takes to succeed in my area of professional interest
<b>Participation in Jewish ritual and learning activities</b>	Studying traditional Jewish texts
	Attending Jewish learning programs
	Attending Jewish religious activities
	Celebrating Shabbat with family or friends
	Attending Jewish social events
<b>Participation in volunteering and leadership activities</b>	Attending Jewish social justice/volunteering activities
	Attending social justice/volunteering activities not directly related to the Jewish community
	Taking a leadership role in volunteer work in my community
	Taking a leadership role in Jewish life in my community
<b>Participation in Jewish and Israel-related education and advocacy</b>	Following news about Jews and Jewish communities around the world
	Following news about Israel
	Participating in conversations about Judaism
	Participating in conversations about Israel



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