
Union for Reform Judaism

URJ Youth Alumni Study: Final Report

February 2018

Background and Research Questions

For more than half a century, two frameworks have served the Union for Reform Judaism as incubators of leadership and of lives of Jewish engagement among young people: **NFTY** and **URJ Camps**.

Founded more than 70 years ago, **NFTY**, a congregation-based youth movement, provides a context for young people to forge identities in consonance with the goals and values of Reform Judaism. Operating today out of more than 500 congregations across North America, NFTY draws about 8,000 high-school teens to a mix of weekly and monthly programming.

The first Reform Movement overnight camp was founded in the decade after NFTY's launch, providing an extended summer experience infused with and inspired by the values of Reform Judaism. The **URJ Camps** founded across the continent over subsequent decades were likewise places where — away from the city — young people could experience communities grounded in the values of Reform Judaism. Today, incorporated as affiliated organizations, there are 17 URJ overnight camps enrolling approximately 10,000 young people and college students each summer.

These two youth-serving frameworks have long been viewed as sites from which the lay and professional leadership of the Reform Jewish movement will emerge. In recent years, due to changes in the social composition of both Jewish life and American family life, the value of these frameworks has become less well-understood by congregational leaders and parents. An increasing proportion of Reform congregation members did not grow up within the Reform Movement. Because they did not personally experience either of these frameworks, they may not fully grasp the often-intangible outcomes they can produce for individuals and the community. Compounding this trend, teens and their parents — confronted by an increasingly competitive race for college — have begun to question the usefulness of time spent in such youth-focused frameworks relative to resumé-building experiences like internships, competitive sports, or volunteer work in adult organizations.

Against this backdrop, leaders in the areas of youth and education at URJ turned to the team at Rosov Consulting with the goal of identifying, documenting, and quantifying the outcomes produced by participating in NFTY, and by attending URJ Camps, for adults over the age of 25. URJ leadership is interested in fostering a greater appreciation of these frameworks' lasting impacts among those who didn't experience these opportunities for themselves. Specifically, the following research questions guide this study:

1. In what ways do Reform teen experiences, including NFTY, Reform camps, and participation in congregation-based teen programming (sometimes called “Hebrew high”), shape participants’ worldviews, commitments, and behaviors into young adulthood (the college years) and beyond, in ways that are aligned with the Reform Movement’s goal of fostering a “more whole, just, and compassionate world”?
2. What factors bear upon these long-term outcomes?
 - a. How do different forms of Reform teen experiences (for example, NFTY relative to URJ Camps) compare to one another?
 - b. How does participation in congregational teen frameworks translate into long-term outcomes?
 - c. What, if any, are the special lasting consequences of having served as a teen leader?
 - d. What is the moderating influence of participants’ background on these outcomes (for example, coming from an intermarried household)?
3. In what ways does participation in Reform teen experiences support Jewish continuity, for example, in terms of choosing Jewish education for one’s own children?

See Appendix A: Study Methodology for details about how the survey was designed and distributed, and how the data gathered were analyzed.

Key Findings

Alumni care about being Jewish and feel that Jewish community is essential

Compared to the general Reform-identifying population (data about which came from the Pew Research Center's 2013 study of Jewish Americans), alumni of Reform teen experiences like NFTY and URJ Camps care more about identifying as Jewish and about being part of a Jewish community. They are twice as likely as the comparison group to see "Being Jewish" as very important (81% say identifying as Jewish is "very important" to their lives today, compared to 37% of the comparison group who say the same). Among alumni whose parents were intermarried, the difference is even more stark: 72% of alumni from intermarried households say that identifying as Jewish is "very important" to their lives, compared with 24% of people from intermarried households in the comparison group.

Beyond the great importance of identifying as Jewish, alumni of Reform teen experiences care deeply about identifying as *Reform* Jews. Even when accounting for the influence of background factors, such as Jewish education as a child and frequency of synagogue attendance as a teen, longer participation in NFTY and URJ Camps is associated with attributing greater importance to Reform identity (saying that being Reform is "very important"). The importance of identifying as Reform is greater for those who have played a leadership role in NFTY. (Having played a leadership role in a Reform camp does not seem to carry the same weight.)

Alumni of Reform teen experiences are also three times more likely to say that "being part of a Jewish community" is an essential component of what being Jewish means (71%, compared to 23% of the comparison group). The same pattern is found whether alumni came from an in-married or an intermarried household.

RESEARCHERS' NOTE:

These findings speak to the special impact of Reform Movement teen experiences. Alumni's background – including whether their parents were intermarried or not, and the types and intensity of the Jewish education they have experienced as children – all play a role in shaping one's attitude toward Jewish life as an adult. Holding constant such background variables allows us to isolate the unique contribution of Reform teen experiences, the focus of this study.

Alumni care about finding meaning in Jewish rituals

Living Jewish life with meaning and intent is another value that alumni of Reform teen experiences (such as NFTY and URJ Camps) care deeply about. In fact, about two-thirds (65%) of alumni say that "choosing and adapting Jewish rituals that are meaningful to me" is an essential part of what being Jewish means to them. This emphasis on meaning is extended to a strong tendency to be reflective practitioners of Jewish living. Two-thirds of alumni (77%) say that they "often reflect on what being Jewish means to me." This thoughtful approach to Jewish living comes with a sense of personal well-being. Nine in ten alumni (91%) agree or strongly agree that "participating in Jewish activities makes me feel good about myself."

RESEARCHERS' NOTE:

These data bring into focus a signature outcome of Reform youth experiences. Finding meaning in choosing and adapting Jewish ritual – a value of great importance to Reform Movement leaders – is strongly related to the extent and intensity of alumni's experiences in Reform teen programs. Indeed, commitment to these values seems to be a kind of litmus test of the degree to which adults experienced Reform Movement programming in their youth.

Alumni care about doing good

Alumni of Reform teen experiences translate their Jewish values into social action. Not only do alumni agree that “doing volunteer work is important to me” (87% agree or strongly agree with this statement), but they also say that “Jewish concepts of contributing to the world (e.g., Tikkun Olam) inspire me to make the world a better place” (88% agree or strongly agree). And, indeed, two thirds (67%) say that they volunteer with Jewish service or social justice organizations at least “sometimes.”

Alumni provide Jewish education to their children

The outcomes of Reform teen experiences are carried over to the next generation, to the extent that alumni of Reform Movement teen experiences choose to enroll their children in some form of Jewish education. When comparing the sample of alumni of Reform teen experiences to the Pew Center comparison sample, it is clear that alumni of Reform teen experiences are much more likely to offer Jewish education to their children. Virtually all alumni (98%) enroll their own children in some form of Jewish education (formal or informal). Among the comparison group of American Jews raised in Reform households, just 39% provide their children with Jewish education. Moreover, nine out of ten alumni (89%) report that this Jewish education is provided in a Reform context.

Importantly, the association of this outcome with Reform teen experiences is even more pronounced for alumni who come from intermarried households. Nine in ten alumni who were raised in intermarried households (88%) provide their children with some form of Jewish education, compared to 21% of American Jews who were raised in intermarried, Reform-identifying households.

RESEARCHERS’ NOTE:

These findings highlight a sharp contrast that in turn points to a major organizational task. Jewish education is all but universal among the children of Reform teen experiences alumni. The outcomes of youth experiences seem, therefore, to be “paid forward” at least another generation. At the same time, there are clearly many American Jews who identify as Reform whose children do not have the same opportunities to experience Jewish education. Bringing such families inside the virtuous circle made vivid by these data constitutes a task of great importance.

Reform Movement teen experiences are translated into greater Jewish participation and engagement during the college years

Even when controlling for their Jewish background (pre-teen Jewish education, family’s synagogue attendance, intermarriage of parents) we find that Reform Movement teen experiences are associated with high levels of Jewish participation during young adulthood (ages 18 to 25). For example, more than half of alumni (58%) report participating in Hillel or Chabad on Campus events and programs during these years; under half (44%) take college Jewish studies courses for credit; and about a third (35%) study Jewish content informally. About one in five (20%) report volunteering for a Jewish organization or cause, and a slightly larger number (21%) report volunteering for organizations or causes that were not Jewish. About half of the alumni (52%) report having gone back to work at a Jewish summer camp during their college years, and over

one in four (28%) say that they have worked as a NFTY counselor or youth advisor while in college. Just under half of the alumni (45%) have gone on Birthright Israel.¹

Participation in multiple teen experiences seems to have a compound effect on college-age engagement. Even when accounting for possible differences in their home and Jewish background, having participated in NFTY, in addition to congregational teen experiences (“Hebrew high”) or a Reform camp, is associated with even greater rates of Jewish engagement. For example, almost three quarters (72%) of alumni who have participated in a Reform camp *as well as* NFTY have gone on to participate in Hillel or Chabad during college.

Alumni who played a leadership role as teens were more likely to have gone back to work as NFTY/URJ Camps professionals also as young adults. Two-thirds (66%) of alumni who were teen leaders worked at camp during college, and a third (36%) worked as NFTY counselors or youth advisors.

College-age engagement, in turn, is a catalyst for greater Jewish engagement later in life

Greater college-age engagement is associated with a variety of behavioral and attitudinal expressions of Jewish engagement as adults, even when accounting for differences in alumni’s backgrounds. Greater college-age engagement is associated with stronger Jewish feelings and identity today, and stronger attribution of Jewish feelings and identity to teen Reform experiences. These feelings include:

- a. Feeling a strong connection to Jewish heritage
- b. Feeling good about oneself when participating in Jewish activities
- c. Feeling that volunteer work is important
- d. Feeling inspired by Jewish concepts, like Tikkun Olam, to improve the world
- e. Reflecting often on what being Jewish means

Greater college-age engagement is also associated with a richer Jewish network (more Jewish friends) later in life, as well as higher engagement in a long list of Jewish practices, such as more frequently:

- a. Attending synagogue
- b. Participating in Israel-related events
- c. Following Israel-related media
- d. Following Jewish-related media
- e. Volunteering with Jewish service or Jewish social justice organizations
- f. Praying outside of an organized Jewish framework
- g. Participating in Jewish religious events or services

¹ This percentage is among the younger respondents — aged 25 to 39 — who would have had the opportunity to participate in Birthright. For the many older respondents, Birthright would not have been an option.

- h. Celebrating Jewish holidays
- i. Using Jewish dating apps or social media
- j. Engaging in Torah or other Jewish study
- k. Sharing meals with family on Jewish occasions
- l. Participating in Jewish cultural or social events
- m. Discussing Jewish topics with others

This greater engagement in later adulthood (after age 25) is associated with having played a leadership role as a teen. However, when holding constant one's college-age Jewish engagement, this association no longer holds true. That is, there does not seem to be a correlation between teen leadership and enhanced Jewish participation or engagement as older adults when Jewish participation was not an important part of respondents' college-age experience.

RESEARCHERS' NOTE:

These data reveal three patterns: first, a strong correlation between participation in teen experiences and greater Jewish engagement in college, suggesting that teen experiences lay a strong foundation for college-age engagement; second, alumni's college-age participation is an important predictor of their Jewish involvement later in life; and third, when accounting for the effect of college engagement, the impact of teen Reform experiences on Jewish engagement in later adulthood fades. Taken together, these patterns imply that to fully realize the potential long-term impact of Reform Movement teen experiences, it is important to ensure a continuum of opportunities for Jewish engagement during college and young adulthood.

Under certain conditions, Reform teen experiences have a direct impact on adult Jewish engagement, even independently of what alumni do during college

For certain, deeply committed sub-populations of our sample, their teen experiences have led to greater Jewish engagement as older adults — even independently of their college-age Jewish experiences.

Participating in multiple Reform Movement teen experiences has a multiplier effect that can be detected beyond the college years. Thus, alumni who have participated in *both* a Reform camp and NFTY are more likely to do the following as adults (age 25 and older):

- a. Participate in Jewish religious events and services, including more frequent synagogue attendance
- b. Follow Jewish media
- c. Volunteer with Jewish service or justice organizations
- d. Pray outside of an organized Jewish framework
- e. Discuss Jewish topics with other people

Alumni who played a leadership role as teens seem to experience long-term gains in terms of their leadership skills later in life. These former teen leaders are more likely than others to agree that “my participation in Jewish activities as a teen has helped me to develop leadership skills.” This is true even when holding their pre-teen Jewish background and their college-age Jewish engagement constant.

Similarly, adult friendships are also associated with the intensity of participation in youth experiences. More years in these teen frameworks and playing a leadership role as a teen are associated with more friendships with people from that period of one's life.

Participation in congregational teen frameworks ("Hebrew High") has an additive effect

In addition to participating in NFTY or URJ Camps, some of the respondents to the survey also participated in other congregational teen frameworks (sometimes referred to as "Hebrew High"). While it is not possible to quantify the unique contribution of these experiences as separate from that of participation in NFTY or Reform camps, it is clear that they do have additive impact, and this holds true even when holding constant background factors like age or gender, childhood Jewish education, teen synagogue attendance, and whether one came from an in-married or intermarried household. Alumni who participated in such experiences as teens are more likely (compared to those who have not) to feel that identifying as Jewish is very important, to feel that being part of a Jewish community is an essential part of being Jewish, to stay involved in Jewish life during college, and to continue to be Jewishly involved later in life. For example, 58% of alumni who have participated in "Hebrew High" experiences have enrolled in Jewish studies classes in college, compared to 40% of alumni who have not had these experiences. Four in ten (39%) of these "Hebrew High" alumni engage in Jewish study as adults, compared to 23% of those who did not have the same experiences. A third of "Hebrew High" alumni (35%) volunteer with Jewish organizations as adults, compared to 25% who did not participate in "Hebrew High" frameworks as teens.

Alumni of Reform Movement teen experiences exhibit similar social and behavioral outcomes to alumni of other Jewish movements

Over the past decades several studies have been conducted to look at the long-term effects of Jewish youth movements and summer camps on their alumni. These include studies of Young Judea (Cohen and Ganapol 1998), Habonim Dror (Cohen and Fink 2013), and Camp Ramah (Cohen 2017). While these studies vary somewhat in their methodological approach and research questions, they offer several points for comparison to our study. Overall, it seems that alumni of Reform Movement teen experiences share similar levels of Jewish engagement outcomes with alumni of other movements:

- a. Identifying as Jewish is very important to 82% of Reform alumni, compared to 83% of Ramah alumni, 82% of Young Judea alumni, and 67% of Habonim Dror alumni.
- b. Two thirds (66%) of Reform alumni report having mostly, or all, Jewish friends, compared to 79% of Ramah alumni, 64% of Young Judea alumni, and 62% of Habonim Dror alumni.
- c. More than eight in 10 (83%) alumni of Reform Movement teen experiences marry other Jews, compared to 93% of Ramah alumni, 95% of Young Judea alumni, and 81% of Habonim Dror alumni.
- d. Four of five Reform alumni (82%) belong to a synagogue, havurah, or minyan, which is similar to Ramah (80%) and Young Judea alumni (79%), and higher than Habonim Dror alumni (48%).
- e. Six of 10 alumni of Reform Movement teen experiences (58%) reported attending synagogue at least once a month, compared to 64% of Ramah alumni, 58% of Young Judea alumni, and 28% of Habonim Dror alumni.

Conclusion

Across different types of experiences, the Reform Movement delivers youth programs that have long-lasting impact. Having had Reform Jewish experiences as a teen — be it in the context of NFTY, URJ Camps, or other congregational teen experiences — is strongly associated with an array of Jewish outcomes later in life. These outcomes include Jewish identity and behavior, an emphasis on volunteering and social action, valuing the ongoing adaptation of Jewish ritual, and carrying forward a high level of commitment to Jewish continuity, as illustrated by the provision of Jewish education to one's children.

Just as teenage Jewish experiences cannot stand on their own without the backbone provided by earlier Jewish education, so in turn the longer-term impacts of teen Jewish experiences are weaker without the boost provided by Jewish engagement during college-age years. Our research points to a continuum of influence that starts during a person's childhood and youth, continues through their college years, and sees expression in Jewish engagement and identification during adulthood, even many years later.

Appendix A: Study Methodology

At the beginning of September 2017, a survey was fielded to alumni of Reform teen experiences and others connected with the Reform Movement through a variety of distribution channels. The survey's design was shaped by eight focus groups with Reform Movement volunteer and professional leaders — more than 40 people in total. These focus groups helped especially in articulating the outcomes expected to be produced by experiences in Reform Movement youth programs, that were in turn translated into survey items for exploration.

Solicitations to participate in the study were emailed to over 18,000 contacts via URJ listservs, including Reform congregational leaders, NFTY parents, NFTY alumni, and various Reform camp alumni. To reach the broadest Reform audience possible, shareable survey solicitations were posted on the URJ and ReformJudaism.org Facebook pages; included in ReformJudaism.com e-newsletters; and distributed through the personal networks of URJ and Rosov Consulting staff. Additionally, social media advertisements were served to approximately 24,000 people in mid-September. The survey was closed on October 8, 2017, by which time 3,296 people had responded. 2,491 people completed the entire survey, and 2,180 were alumni of Reform teen experiences.

Post-sample weights were applied to correct known biases in the sample in terms of age and gender. The data collected by the Pew Research Center in its 2013 study of Jewish Americans was used for this purpose, as it is presumed that the Pew data offer a reliable representation of the age and gender among all raised-Reform individuals in the United States.

The Rosov Consulting team has undertaken two parallel approaches to analyze and make meaning of the data collected:

1. **Comparative sample:** The URJ Alumni Study sample was matched with a comparison group, derived from the Pew Center 2013 study of Jewish Americans and made up of individuals raised in Reform-identifying households by two Jewish parents, and who have experienced some form of formal Jewish education.
2. **Multiple hierarchical regression analysis:** A series of multiple hierarchical regression analyses were performed to better understand the contribution of different factors to outcomes observed in the survey responses. Specifically, we sought to clarify to what extent observed variance in outcomes for our sample were attributable specifically to respondents' Reform Movement teen experiences, and to what extent those outcomes were attributable to the respondents' background characteristics (such as their families' level of Jewish participation, or their Jewish education in pre-teen years). We have taken a two-step approach to this analysis, treating outcomes reported for young adulthood (ages 18–25) separately from outcomes reported for later adulthood.

Appendix B: Sample Characteristics

As is the case with any opt-in survey, there is no way to know the extent to which this sample is in fact representative of the entire universe of alumni of Reform teen experiences. In other words, we do not know how survey respondents differ from others who did not choose to respond to the survey.

Age	Unweighted	Weighted
25 to 29	17%	10%
30 to 39	21%	18%
40 to 49	26%	18%
50 to 59	22%	24%
60 and older	14%	30%

Gender	Unweighted	Weighted
Women	76%	50%
Men	24%	50%

For the remainder of variable characteristics, weights were used. This replicates the treatment of the sample for analysis:

Geographic region where lives now:	
Northeast	37%
Midwest	20%
South	22%
West	17%
Canada/Israel/FSU/Other	5%

Type of Teen Experience (these percentages do not add to 100% because some respondents may have participated in NFTY and camp and Hebrew High or some combination thereof):

NFTY	78%
Camp	62%
Hebrew High	36%

Teen Leadership	
Some Leadership Role as Teen	62%

Parents Intermarried	
Raised in in-married households	91%
Raised in intermarried households	10%

Marital Status	
Married or partnered	78%
Single, and have never been married	13%
Divorced, separated, or widowed	10%

Intermarriage - Of respondents who are married	
Married to a Jewish spouse	85%
Intermarried	15%

% with Children	
Have children	75%

Ages of Children - Of those with children	
Oldest child was between 0 and 4 years old	9%
Oldest child was 5 to 12 years old	14%
Oldest child was 13 to 18 years old	21%
Oldest child was 19 to 22 years old	10%
Oldest child was over 22 years old	47%



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