



Understanding and Connecting With Jewish Teens Today



Funders and Partners



The [Jim Joseph Foundation](#) seeks to foster compelling, effective Jewish learning experiences for young Jews in the United States. Established in 2006, the Jim Joseph Foundation has awarded more than \$500 million in grants with the aspiration that all Jews, their families, and their friends will be inspired by Jewish learning experiences to lead connected, meaningful, and purpose-filled lives and make positive contributions to their communities and the world.



[Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah](#) helps Jews and fellow travelers apply Jewish wisdom to live better lives and shape a better world. In other words, we seek to help people apply particular Jewish wisdom to universal human questions.



The [Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation](#) (Schusterman) is a global organization that seeks to improve lives, strengthen communities and reduce inequality. Our philanthropic vision is grounded in a commitment to pursue justice, repair the world and treat all people with dignity and civility. We invest in efforts to improve public education in the United States, strengthen the Jewish people and Israel, and address the needs of marginalized individuals and communities.



For more than 100 years, [UJA-Federation](#) has brought New Yorkers together to solve some of the most pressing problems facing our community. Working with a network of hundreds of nonprofits—including The Jewish Education Project—UJA cares for Jews everywhere and New Yorkers of all backgrounds, responds to crises close to home and far away, and shapes our Jewish future, touching the lives of more than 4.5 million people each year.

The [Jewish Education Project](#) inspires and empowers educators to create transformative Jewish experiences, helping children, teens, and families thrive in today's highly complex and challenging world. In 2016, The Jewish Education Project wrote the report *Generation Now: Understanding and Engaging Jewish Teens Today*.



Founded in 2008, [Rosov Consulting](#) is a professional services firm helping foundations, philanthropists, and nonprofits in the Jewish communal sector meet their goals, assess progress, and make well-informed decisions to enhance impact. Working at the nexus of the funder and grantee relationship, our expertise includes evaluation and applied research, strategy development, launching new philanthropic initiatives, and systems coaching. We utilize our range of life experiences and knowledge to best serve our clients.



YOUTH-SERVING ORGANIZATION PARTNERS





Dear Colleague

We are pleased to share with you our latest findings about American Jewish teens. Based on data collected from what we believe is the largest study of American Jewish teens ever conducted (with 17,576 teens participating), these findings deepen our understanding of what it means to be a Jewish teen in the United States today by showing the complexities of teen life. We hope that this report provides youth professionals and other stakeholders with constructive insights that enrich their capacity to work with Jewish teens.

We believe that the most important message that communities and organizations can take away from this study is that youth-serving organizations are awesome. Teens who participate in a youth-serving organization score higher on almost every outcome the researchers measured. The implications for this finding suggest an imperative to invest further in youth-serving organizations as a model for teen engagement, both to champion the invaluable work that YSOs are already doing, and to imagine new possibilities, including opportunities that appeal to teens who are underrepresented and not yet engaged.

Beyond the considerable amount we have learned about American Jewish teens themselves, who they are and what they care about—and about the way the youth-serving organizations matter in their lives—this project serves as a paradigm for collaboration among funders, researchers, and practitioners.

This study would not have been possible without the goodwill of the 14 participating youth-serving organizations that mobilized as a field to advance research that prioritizes the teen experience over organizational needs. These 14 organizations from across American Jewish communal life represent a huge breadth of ideologies and interests. Their openness to work together to elevate the field and to enrich teens’ development beyond the walls of their own institutions is truly admirable—and indicates a continued, positive shift in organizational mind-set and approaches in Jewish teen engagement efforts today.

We offer sincere gratitude to the Jim Joseph Foundation, Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah, and the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation for their support in this long-term effort. Their vision and commitment enabled us to complete this complex and robust multi-year, multi-stage study, which we hope will serve as a model for Jewish communal and educational research in the future.

Throughout this entire process, we looked toward the team at Rosov Consulting for their expertise, unique skillset, and invaluable partnership to design the study, put it in the field, and make meaning of the data. We are forever grateful for their leadership and dedication to the work.

Finally, we at The Jewish Education Project would like to thank UJA-Federation for its ongoing support of our work to create transformational Jewish educational experiences for today’s youth.

Thank you for your interest in this important work,

Robert Sherman
Chief Executive Officer
The Jewish Education Project

Craig Padover
Chairman of the Board
The Jewish Education Project

David Bryfman
Chief Innovation Officer
The Jewish Education Project

From the Advisory Committee

This report represents the opinions of 17,500 Jewish youth. While social science researchers know that sheer numbers are only part of the story, 17,500 is inarguably an extraordinary sample size (for comparison’s sake, the 2013 Pew study was based on approximately 3,500 responses). To achieve these numbers, the researchers collaborated with 14 youth-serving organizations, each able to tailor a section of the survey to its own data needs. And while 14 may not appear to be as eye-popping as 17,500, those who have tried to get even two or three organizations to collaborate will find the number 14 to represent a major achievement. Before even looking at the results, we can see support for the idea that these organizations are appreciative of data about their participants, and that these participants, in turn, are eager to share their opinions.

The results themselves tell us much about Jewish youth and the organizations that serve them. As you read through, various findings will stand out as particularly comforting, confirming, challenging, and/or intriguing. Taken together, the findings contribute to an important thread within Jewish education and indeed within Judaism itself, a trend that is becoming ever-more central to the communal conversation. That conversation has been dominated by a perceived urgency to get youth “into” being Jewish for the sake of continuity, or to stem numerical decline. This study can be seen as supporting an alternate pathway, the importance of bringing Judaism into the lives of teens. At a time of increasing fragmentation, anxiety, depression, and stress, Judaism can offer, the study suggests, meaningful connections to peers and family as sources for personal growth and health.

The study raises questions for further exploration—for example, about the ways Jewish youth think about spirituality and its affordances within Judaism. We hope that this study is seen not as an end point (“we now know what we need to know about Jewish youth...”) but rather as the opening of a conversation. And, finally, we hope that this is part of a trend of providing opportunities for youth to have a voice in the communal dialogue. “We” should realize that “they” not only have important things to say about their lives, but also have ideas and insights to shape the experiences and organizations in which they participate.

We end by acknowledging and admiring the enormous efforts on the part of the research team and the creativity, persistence, and wisdom shown in carrying a project of this scope to its successful completion. Yashar Kochachem, it has been an honor to be part of the conversation along the way.

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GenNow Outcomes

One important result of the Generation Now initiative has been the development of the GenNow Outcomes Framework. The 14 outcomes define the ways that Jewish teen education and engagement experiences can help teens flourish.

- 1

Jewish teens have a strong sense of self.
- 2

Jewish teens feel a sense of pride about being Jewish.
- 3

Jewish teens have learning experiences that are both challenging and valuable.
- 4

Jewish teens engage in learning that enables them to be more active participants in various Jewish communities.
- 5

Jewish teens learn about and positively experience Jewish holidays and Shabbat.
- 6

Jewish teens establish strong friendships.
- 7

Jewish teens develop strong and healthy relationships with their families.
- 8

Jewish teens develop significant relationships with mentors, role models, and educators.
- 9

Jewish teens are able to express their values and ethics in relation to Jewish principles and wisdom.
- 10

Jewish teens develop the capacity (skills and language) that allows them to grapple with and express their spiritual journeys.
- 11

Jewish teens feel connected to various communities.
- 12

Jewish teens develop the desire and commitment to be part of the Jewish people now and in the future.
- 13

Jewish teens develop a positive relationship to the land, people, and State of Israel.
- 14

Jewish teens are inspired and empowered to make a positive difference in the various communities and world in which they live.

An account of the methodology that led to the development of these 14 outcomes can be found in the Methodological Appendix. All of the research reports associated with the development and testing of these outcomes can be found at <http://JewishEdProject.org/GenerationNow>.

Flourishing as a Framework

This study is animated by the vision that all Jewish teens in America will see their Jewish heritage as a source of wisdom, inspiration, and strength as they grow and discover their place in the world.

We are excited to share with you data from 17,576 Jewish teens between the ages of 13 to 19 who took the time to share with us who they are and how being Jewish matters to them through participating in a national survey. Over 800 of these teens also wrote comments about how they think about being Jewish. Additionally, our understanding was augmented by in-depth interviews with over 30 Jewish teens.

We began this project more than four years ago by talking directly with Jewish teens. In a series of focus groups, we invited teens to speak with us about what it meant to them to be Jewish, what they think of their Jewish activities, who they are now and who they want to be, the kind of world they want to live in, and the role they want to play in making that world a reality. These conversations with 139 Jewish teens led to the creation of the GenNow outcomes, published in 2016 as *Generation Now: Understanding and Engaging Today's Teens*, which framed the current study you will learn about in this report.

As we learned from our 2016 study, Jewish teens today want to form meaningful relationships with others, understand where they fit into the world, and be active participants in shaping a better future. As they seek greater independence, they still look to trusted adults for guidance and structure. The questions in our survey were designed to measure aspects of the GenNow outcomes, taking into account what Jewish teens say they need to grow and develop into their best selves. The 14 outcomes relate not only to more traditional Jewish communal concerns like Israel and Jewish peoplehood (which Jewish teens do think about) but also to how Jewish activities deepen friendships, expose teens to provocative new ideas, and equip teens to be changemakers in the world.

The term “Generation Now” reminds us that Jewish adolescents should be treated as a generation with the capacity to bring about personal, communal, and global change, not only in the distant future as the adults they might grow up to be but also as the teens they are now.

Importantly, our research is not framed around a “deficit-model.” It won’t tell you what’s wrong with American Jewish teens. We are not interested in measuring teens against normative checklists that dictate what a good Jew should do or feel. Rather we operate from a framework of thriving, which considers what conditions people need for optimal development. Thriving is not about seeking simple personal gratification; thriving is about deepening connections, fostering well-being, and developing a capacity to give back. These are all things teens want for themselves. This study helps us understand how Jewish teens see their Jewish activities helping them grow in the directions in which they tell us they want to go.

This study was designed primarily to learn about teens who have participated in Jewish youth-serving organizations; as such, we collaborated with 14 organizations representing diverse ideologies and approaches to Jewish life in the United States today. Our findings also give professionals and other stakeholders who work with Jewish teens in other settings new insights into the work they do and how it matters. Rather than only being able to measure how many teens show up for an activity, Jewish professionals can begin to consider opportunities for their programs to enable teens to flourish. The 14 outcomes are meant to help guide and inform a wide range of professionals who work with Jewish teens. Organizations will choose to emphasize some more than others.

We begin this report by sharing findings that are specific to the work Jewish youth-serving organizations (YSOs) do with teens.¹ We then shift to reflecting on what we have learned about the Jewish teens in our study more broadly.



Thriving
Jewish wisdom, and by extension Jewish education and engagement, has the capacity to empower Jews to thrive in this world. It can do so by a) giving Jews the capacity to be the best possible versions of themselves; b) connecting Jews to things that matter in their lives including transcendent powers, significant relationships in their lives, and to the communities in which they exist; and c) providing Jews with the tools to bring about a more equitable and just world.

David Bryfman, Ph.D.
Chief Innovation Officer
The Jewish Education Project
Author of Generation Now:
Understanding and Engaging
Jewish Teens Today, 2016

¹ We use the term “youth-serving organization” (YSO) instead of the more commonly used terms “youth group” or “youth movement” to remind us that the mission of these organizations is to benefit youth, not simply gather them.

About the Jewish Teens in Our Study

Our survey was designed in collaboration with 14 Jewish youth-serving organizations (YSOs) in North America. The questions we asked were crafted to understand how the work YSOs do can help today's teens thrive. Each of the participating YSOs helped us contact their teens and encouraged them to participate in the survey. By design, most of our respondents were teens who participated, at least a little, in one of these YSOs.

Ultimately we heard from over 17,500 Jewish teens between the ages of 13 and 19 living in the United States or Canada. We were able to learn a great deal about these teens, specifically about their attitudes toward Jewish life and Jewish activities. Much of the information we share in this report reflects the core population of our survey respondents: teens who are engaged in Jewish youth group activities. However, our sample includes a number of teens who never participated in any of the formal Jewish activities we asked about. We also conducted over 30 in-depth interviews with a diverse group of Jewish teens. In the interviews, we specifically cast a wider net and created a sample that offered perspectives less likely to be included among the survey respondents, in particular: teens from interfaith families, teens not engaged in a YSO, and teens who did not attend a Jewish day school or Hebrew school.

It's important to understand that our study primarily included teens who have some connection to Jewish communal institutions and programs. *This means that this report is better suited not to make claims about every U.S. teen today with some Jewish ancestry, but rather about American Jewish teens who have had a connection to, or interaction with, a Jewish institution or program—even if only enough to get on a mailing list.* Many of the teens we spoke with see themselves at the center of thick, densely woven webs of Jewish connectedness. Others have fewer or weaker ties to other Jews and Jewish communal organizations.²

In this report we first focus on teens in Jewish youth-serving organizations. Then we share more broadly about Jewish community-connected teens.

Key Findings Related to Jewish Youth-Serving Organizations and Teens

- 1. **Involvement in a Jewish Youth-Serving Organization Is Related to Positive Teen Outcomes.** Teens who reported participating in a YSO since seventh grade, compared to non-participating teens, rated themselves higher on almost all GenNow outcomes, even when controlling for earlier Jewish educational experiences. Participation in a YSO contributes not only to teens connecting to being Jewish but also to their feeling good about themselves, deepening relationships with family, friends, and mentors, and feeling empowered to make change in the world.
- 2. **Teens Get More from More Youth-Serving Organizations.** A little more than half the teens in the survey reported participating in more than one YSO, as opposed to being “loyal” to just one organization. Participation in multiple YSOs, instead of only one, predicted higher ratings on almost all GenNow outcomes.
- 3. **Jewish Content Lifts All Boats.** We asked teens to tell us whether the activities they participated in contained “Jewish stuff.” We found that reporting “Jewish stuff” in activities predicted higher ratings across *all* the GenNow outcomes, including the social-emotional ones. This finding was one of the strongest and most consistent predictors in our study.
- 4. **Youth-Serving Organizations Could Attract More Diverse Jewish Teens.** The portrait we have of teens engaged in Jewish activities does not match the portrait we have of American Jewish families on the whole. Notably there are far fewer teens who describe their families as interfaith or who describe themselves as having a diverse background than we may have expected. There were also fewer teens who describe themselves as gender fluid or nonbinary than in the general American teen population. We see this opportunity to attract more diverse teens as an area of tremendous growth for the YSOs (and the Jewish community as a whole).

² For information about our sample frame and survey respondents, please refer to the Methodological Appendix.



Key Findings About Jewish Community-Connected Teens

- 1. **Participation as a Teen Matters.** For some, the Bar or Bat Mitzvah is a graduation from Jewish educational experiences. This study shows that teens who reported involvement in Jewish activities as teens (including youth-serving organizations, day school, or camp) reported higher scores on all the GenNow outcomes, compared to those who did not participate, even when controlling for earlier Jewish educational experiences. Teens who began to participate in Jewish activities as teens rated themselves higher than teens who were involved in Jewish educational programs as children but stopped participating as teens.
- 2. **Jewish Teens Like Their Parents and Value Their Perspectives.** The teens in our study enjoy spending time with their family and often looked to their parents to help them make sense of the world. This finding is consistent with data about teens in general, which shows far less conflict and more positive relationships between adolescents and their parents than in past generations.
- 3. **Being Jewish Is Often About Family.** Jewish beliefs and practices are closely linked with family in the hearts and minds of teens. Being Jewish is not simply a religious or ethnic practice but also an expression of family bonds.
- 4. **Relig-ish?** Americans increasingly describe themselves as having “no religion.” In our data, a sizable minority of Jewish teens shared that they are atheist, agnostic, or Jewish culturally but not religiously. But even many “no religion” teens are interested in engaging with Judaism at certain points in their life.
- 5. **Jewish Culture Is Something to Celebrate.** The most commonly used word by teens to express what it means to be Jewish is “culture.” The concept of Jewish culture captures the elements of being Jewish that teens feel good about and leaves out those elements that they object to or are confused by. Jewish culture is an active word for teens. It's not something that they are given but something that they do.
- 6. **Jewish Teens Share the Troubles and Concerns of Other American Adolescents.** Teens in our study believe adolescents need help with social-emotional issues. In particular, they named coping with anxiety, academic pressure, self-esteem issues, and failure as the biggest needs of their peers.
- 7. **Jewish Teens See Positives and Negatives to Social Media.** Teens acknowledge that social media can cause them stress, but many also believe it can help them cope with stress, connect with friends, and organize for change.
- 8. **Anti-Semitism and the American Jewish Teen.** Many of the teens we interviewed report anti-Semitic experiences but do not feel personally threatened or see it as a primary lens to understand their experience in the United States today.
- 9. **Open to Israel.** Jewish community-connected teens are interested in Israel and believe that as Jews they have a special connection to the land and country. They want to ask trusted adults questions about Israel, and teens who have not traveled there hope to do so one day.
- 10. **Travel to Israel Is a Teen Peak Experience.** Travel to Israel as part of an organized group predicted higher ratings on most outcomes, including social-emotional outcomes. Teens who have visited Israel describe it as a peak experience. Teens who have not been to Israel would like to go.



Jewish Youth-Serving Organizations and Teens



Involvement in a Jewish Youth-Serving Organization Is Related to Positive Teen Outcomes

We found important differences between teens who reported having participated in a YSO and those who did not. After controlling for features of the teens' backgrounds, we found that teens who had been involved with a YSO rated themselves higher on almost every outcome measured. Regression analysis showed that participation in a Jewish YSO as a teen predicted higher scores on 11 of the 14 GenNow outcomes. We found that a teen's engagement in a YSO predicted higher scores on attitudes related explicitly to Judaism, Jewish identity, and Jewish practice, as well as attitudes related to social-emotional development and attitudes toward volunteering and making change in the world.



Descriptions of Family

In the survey we asked teens to describe their families. We found that almost 80% of the teens who had been engaged in a Jewish YSO selected “We are all Jewish” as the best label to describe their family. Among our survey respondents, teens who participate in a YSO are four times more likely to describe their family as all Jewish than other teens (80% versus 20%).

How Teens in YSOs Describe Their Families	
We are all Jewish	79%
Some of us are Jewish, some of us are not	20%
We are not Jewish/Not sure	1%

Note: All apparent differences are significant at $p < .01$

Given trends in interfaith marriage among American Jewish adults over the past few decades, these numbers were surprising to us. While interfaith families may be less likely to raise their children Jewish, the 2013 Pew study of American Jews suggests that the majority of interfaith families are raising their children Jewish in some way. The reports that YSO-engaged teens gave of their own families do not reflect these expected numbers.

It is important to understand that we cannot make claims of causality. We cannot say that participation in a YSO causes teens to rate themselves higher on the survey items. We have to acknowledge that selection bias may be at work. Teens who elect to participate in Jewish YSOs may be those who already hold strongly positive attitudes about being Jewish and engaging in Jewish activities. Additionally, teens who are members of YSOs may be inclined to be more sociable or have more positive relationships in general.

³ The outcomes mean is based on all scaled items on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is “Strongly Disagree” and 5 is “Strongly Agree.” While the chart shows the overall trend, the text gives a more nuanced description of the specific findings and the differences among the outcomes.

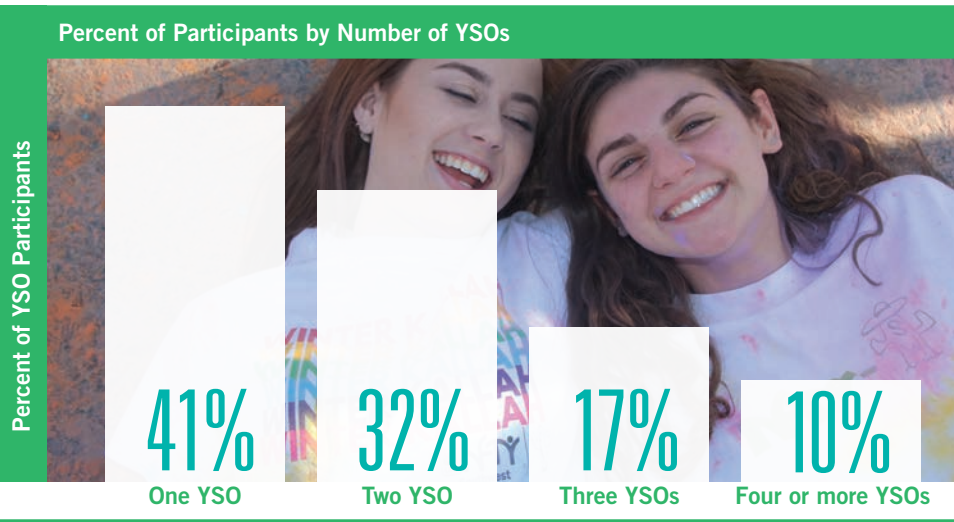
Rich Histories of Jewish Educational Experiences

Teens who participate in Jewish youth-serving organizations often have a rich history of Jewish educational experiences. Almost all of the teens in YSOs reported having had some kind of exposure to an intentionally designed Jewish learning program, be it through day school, supplementary school, or camp. A minority of teens engaged in YSOs reported having had none of these experiences.

Respondents by Jewish Educational Experiences as Children			
	Did not Participate in YSO	Participated in YSO(s)	Total Respondents
	%	%	%
Only Supplementary School	17%	12%	12%
Only Camp	7%	3%	3%
Only Day School	4%	2%	3%
Supplementary School + Camp	21%	36%	35%
Day School + Camp	20%	20%	20%
Day School + Supplementary School	4%	3%	3%
Day School + Supplementary School + Camp	12%	21%	20%
None	16%	3%	4%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Teens Get More From More Youth-Serving Organizations

Overall, we found that more than 50% of teens involved in a YSO are engaged with more than one.



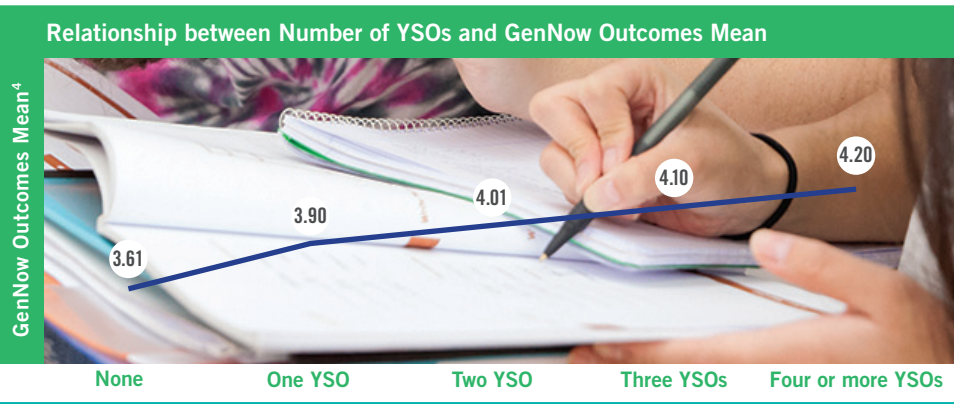
While some teens were “loyalists,” attending the programming of only one YSO, most teens in our survey demonstrated comfort moving from program to program, often participating in the offerings of organizations with different emphases and visions for contemporary Jewish life. Some teens were comfortable crossing denominational lines as well.

This more omnivorous approach to Jewish engagement has also been observed among Jewish college students who move among Hillel, Chabad, and other campus organizations (Rosen et al., 2016). Younger American Jews are comfortable seeking Jewish meanings and friendships from multiple sources and often do not carry the same sense of obligation to one group or brand that older generations may hold.

This trend is important to understand not only because it reflects preferences for how today’s teens want to participate in Jewish programs, but also because we saw a relationship between engagement in multiple YSOs and how teens rated themselves on the survey questions. One of

the strongest and most consistent predictors of higher scores was whether a teen reported that he or she was involved in more than one YSO. Participating in multiple YSOs predicted higher scores on 12 out of 14 of the GenNow outcomes.

This finding suggests that engaging with multiple organizations is not simply a preference teens have; it may be a positive development in their thriving as Jewish teens. Exposure to different perspectives and agendas seems to enhance teens’ experiences of their Jewish activities.

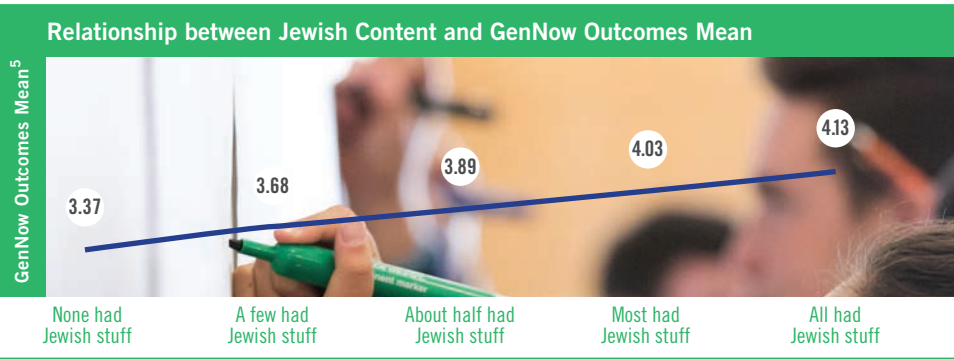


Note: The relationship between GenNow outcomes mean and the number of YSOs is significant at $p < .05$

Jewish Content Lifts All Boats

We asked teens engaged in YSOs whether the Jewish activities they participated in had any components they would call “Jewish stuff.” One of the most fascinating findings from our survey was the positive relationship between teens’ report of “Jewish stuff” in their activities and all of the 14 GenNow outcomes. This includes the more obvious outcomes we might expect to be related to Jewish content in activities, such as outcomes related to Jewish learning or to knowing about Israel. Intriguingly, Jewish content in activities predicted higher scores on even those less obviously related outcomes: those related to social-emotional development, such as establishing strong friendships; and those related to universal outcomes, such as being inspired and empowered to make a positive difference in the world.

This finding can be seen as exciting news for Jewish educators. These data suggest that there is a positive relationship between Jewish content and many of the outcomes we want to help our teens develop. It means there is some positive relationship between Jewish content and making friends, between Jewish content and feeling good about yourself, between Jewish content and feeling equipped to make change in the world.



Note: The relationship between GenNow outcomes mean and the Jewish content in activities is significant at $p < .05$

This association also raises a lot of questions for strategy and pedagogy: What exactly constitutes Jewish stuff for teens? Is it lighting a menorah at a Chanukah party, referring to a service project as “Tikkun Olam,” or studying classical Jewish text from a source sheet? Does the kind of stuff matter? Does the amount of stuff matter? Does the quality of the stuff matter? And is “Jewish stuff” a deterrent for teens who don’t attend YSO activities? We just don’t know.



^{4.5} The outcomes mean is based on all scaled items on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is “Strongly Disagree” and 5 is “Strongly Agree.” While the chart shows the overall trend, the text gives a more nuanced description of the specific findings and the differences among the outcomes.



Youth-Serving Organizations Could Attract More Diverse Jewish Teens



Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming Jewish Teens

We heard from more females than males in our survey, which is pretty common for survey research. It also reflects prior research that indicates that there are more females than males involved in Jewish YSOs. However, among the teens who responded to our survey, only 0.5% identified as nonbinary, gender nonconforming, or “something else.” This is lower than the close to 3% of the general teen population that research suggests identify as transgender or gender nonconforming. YSOs thus seemingly have an opportunity to more deeply engage transgender and gender-nonconforming Jewish teens (for chart showing gender breakdown of respondents, see Methodological Appendix).

Teens From Interfaith Families

Teens who participate in Jewish programs as children and continue to participate in Jewish programming as teens overwhelmingly (81%) describe their families as “we are all Jewish.”

By way of contrast, teens who had never participated in the kinds of Jewish educational programs we asked about on the survey were much less likely to describe their families as “we are all Jewish” (28%). Among teens who reported that they had participated in Jewish education as children and stopped doing so as teens, 57% described their families as “we are all Jewish.”

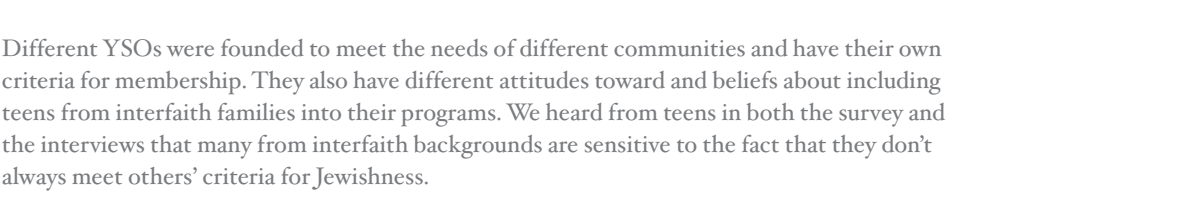
The reports of family makeup from respondents *not engaged as teens* (no matter their history of participation as children) would seem to be a much closer match to what Pew suggests we might find in the overall American Jewish population.

Why is there such a discrepancy between the families of teens who participate in high school and the families of teens who do not participate in high school?

Why do proportionally fewer teens from interfaith families seem to elect to participate as teens? Possible answers include: they are not welcome, they are not interested, or they had negative experiences in Jewish programs as a child.



How Teens Describe Their Families by Patterns of Involvement			
Always Involved	Involved only as teens	Involved only prior to high school	Never involved
81%	43%	57%	28%
say that all family members are Jewish	say that all family members are Jewish	say that all family members are Jewish	say that all family members are Jewish



Different YSOs were founded to meet the needs of different communities and have their own criteria for membership. They also have different attitudes toward and beliefs about including teens from interfaith families into their programs. We heard from teens in both the survey and the interviews that many from interfaith backgrounds are sensitive to the fact that they don’t always meet others’ criteria for Jewishness.

Survey Respondent: *I think I’m Jewish. I’ve had my Bat Mitzvah and I go to synagogue. And it hurts when other people say I’m not [Jewish]. But my mother isn’t and never converted so [some people] wouldn’t see me as Jewish.*

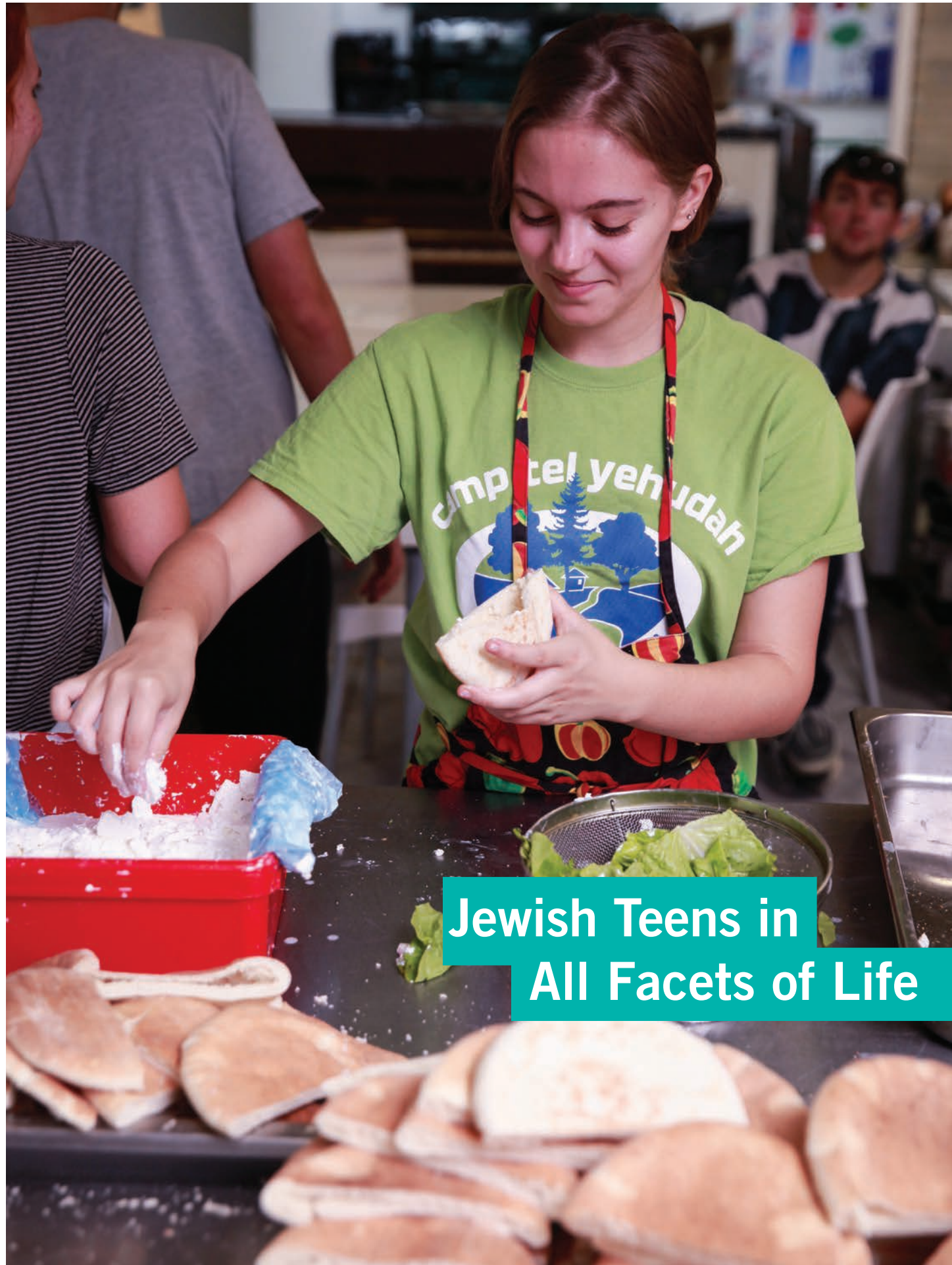
Do Jewish teens from interfaith families seek different points of entry to the Jewish community than other Jewish teens? Are the optimal pipelines for interfaith teens not in place?

Some teens raised in interfaith families simply consider themselves Jewish, without any equivocation. Many in our survey described themselves as Jewish-and-something-else. In our interviews, Jewish-and-something-else teens shared that they don’t want to be asked to choose one part of themselves over another. Some spoke about how they believed their lives were enriched by having a diverse background and insight into other religious and cultural traditions and perspectives.

Elizabeth was raised Jewish and Christian: *When I was younger, I don’t know how I got this idea in my head, but it’s almost funny to me but I had this idea that I was like, “Okay, I have to pick [one religion or the other] on my wedding day”. . . then I found out that wasn’t true and that you can just, I guess, pick when you want to. . . I can honestly see myself just being both and practicing both and doing both traditions, not stopping that.*

Elizabeth would be interested in going to Jewish YSO activities, but it seems to her that it’s hard to begin in high school: *[Teens in Jewish youth groups are] super tight-knit and it’s not really something that you can just walk into. I have some friends who are part of Jewish youth groups and things like that and it looks really fun. I’ve just kind of never considered doing it. I guess subconsciously I’m just like, “That’s their thing and they all know each other and love each other.”*

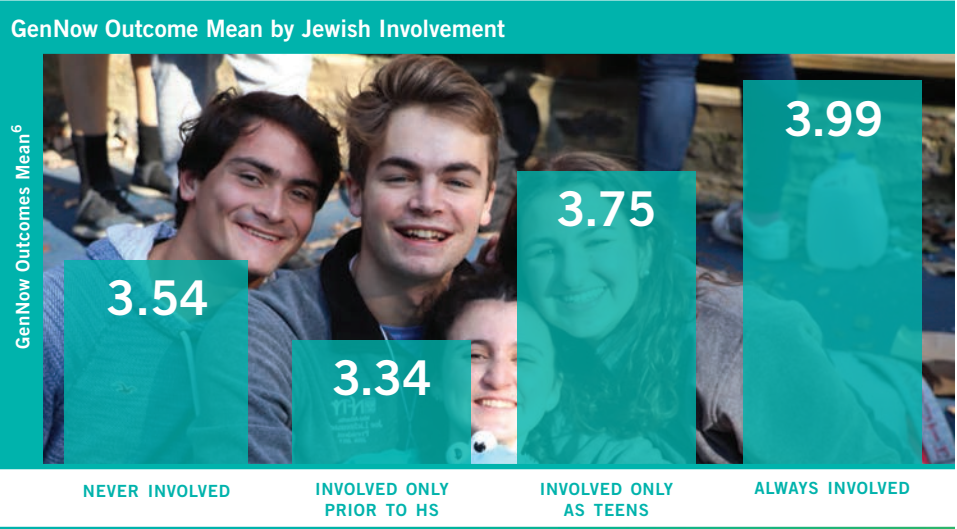




Jewish Teens in All Facets of Life

Participation as a Teen Matters

We were able to compare teens engaged in Jewish activities in high school (including YSOs, day school, and camp) with other Jewish teens. We found significant differences between these groups on all the outcomes we measured, even when we controlled for background differences.



Note: All apparent differences are significant at $p < .05$

We saw that teens who had been engaged *before* but *not during* high school reported similar patterns of response across most (10) outcomes as those teens who had *never been involved* in Jewish educational activities at all. And on four outcomes⁷, teens who had been engaged only as children rated themselves *lower* than teens who had *never* been engaged (either before or during high school).

Our analysis showed that participation *as a teen* contributed more to the differences we see in outcome ratings compared to experiences *before* high school, as children.

Our data suggest that teens engaged in Jewish programs as teens, no matter their backgrounds, have a different relationship to being Jewish than teens who were never engaged or engaged only before high school. They rated themselves higher on all of the outcomes we measured.

Parents and Family Life

Love and Respect for Parents

American Jewish teens share that overall they have warm, close, and low-conflict relationships with their parents. More than that, they report genuinely enjoying and enthusiastically spending time with their parents and feel secure that their parents love and respect them. Teens appreciate the structure their parents create for them and appreciate the values their parents try to instill in them.

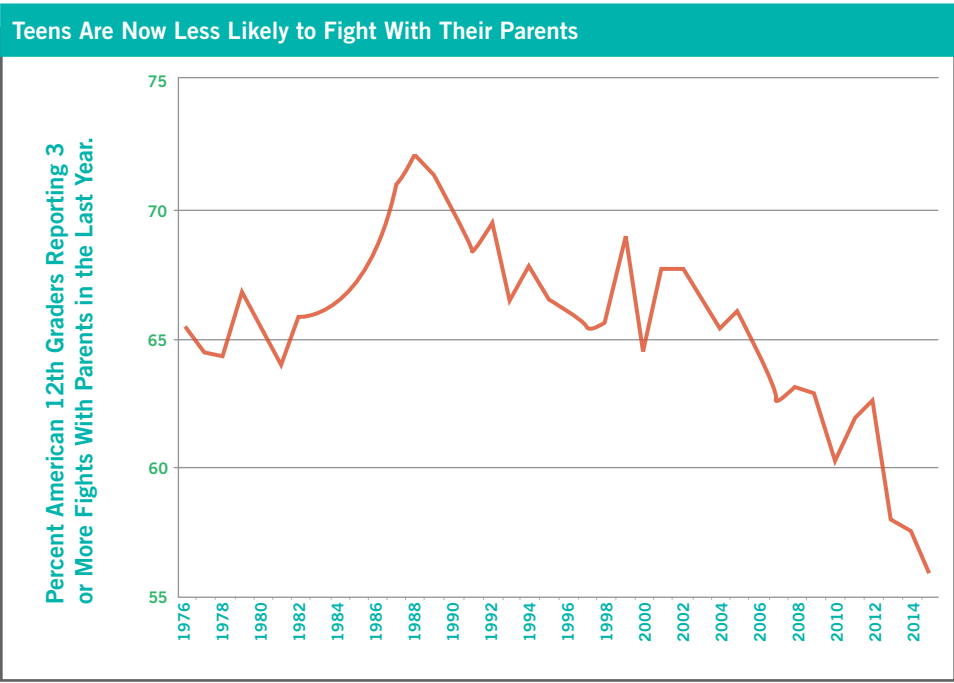


⁶ The outcomes mean is based on all scaled items on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is “Strongly Disagree” and 5 is “Strongly Agree.” While the chart shows the overall trend, the text gives a more nuanced description of the specific findings and the differences among the outcomes.

⁷ These four outcomes are: “Jewish teens have experienced learning that has been both challenging and valuable”; “Jewish teens learn about and positively experience Jewish holidays and Shabbat”; “Jewish teens develop the desire and commitment to be part of the Jewish people now and in the future”; “Jewish teens develop a positive relationship to the land, people, and State of Israel.”



For over a century our concept of adolescence has painted the teenage years as a period of “storm and strife.” More recent data on contemporary American teens show that rather than seeking independence from their parents, today’s teenagers are experiencing something akin to an extended childhood. They spend more time at home and are less likely to engage in some of the activities we might associate with being a teenager, like going to the mall with friends or having a driver’s license (Twenge, 2017).



Adapted from Twenge (2017) from her online appendix p14 Figure B.16. Percentage of 12th graders who have gotten into three or more fights with their parents over the last year. Monitoring the Future, 1976–2015.

Adam: I’d say [my relationship with my parents is] pretty perfect. They’ve given me the best opportunity I could ever ask for. They show respect. They correct me when I’m wrong. They discipline me when I’m wrong. But at the same time they’ve seem to have found the perfect balance, as I don’t feel restrained at all.

Marking Jewish Moments With Family

In addition to educational experiences with professional staff and formal curricula that take place outside of the home, like day school, supplementary school, and camp, the majority of teens in our study reported marking important Jewish moments that are often celebrated with family: 90% of respondents shared that they had a Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony. Additionally, 84% reported frequent attendance in a Passover seder before high school.

Jewish holidays celebrated with family at home, particularly Chanukah and Passover, were often mentioned by teens in the interviews as positive associations they had of being Jewish. They offered accounts of family gatherings as warm, lively, and engaging. Teens are happy to participate in these celebrations, see them as highlights of being Jewish, and imagine continuing to make them a part of their lives going forward.



Grandparents also play an important role in the lives of teens, including in observing and celebrating certain holidays.

Hunter: We do celebrate Jewish holidays at my grandparents’ house for sure. We’ll open presents a few nights out of Chanukah. But the big holidays, yes, we definitely do celebrate with our extended family. . . . [Holidays have] been such a big part of my childhood and adulthood. Just growing up, it’s really benefited me for the best. And I think passing it down to my kids and grandkids is definitely a thing that I would love to keep going.

Family Dinner

But beyond special occasions most teens in our interviews mentioned again and again eating weeknight dinner together as a core activity they engaged in as a family, which they very much value and enjoy. A few teens even marked weeknight dinners as a *Jewish* activity that they did as a family—either because they explicitly discussed Jewish topics or because the very act of gathering over food to talk seemed to be a Jewish activity.

Samantha: Then every night also, even if I have a ton of homework, we find the time to eat dinner together even if it’s just a box of pizza, or something; we spend that 10 minutes together talking about each other’s days and stuff like that.

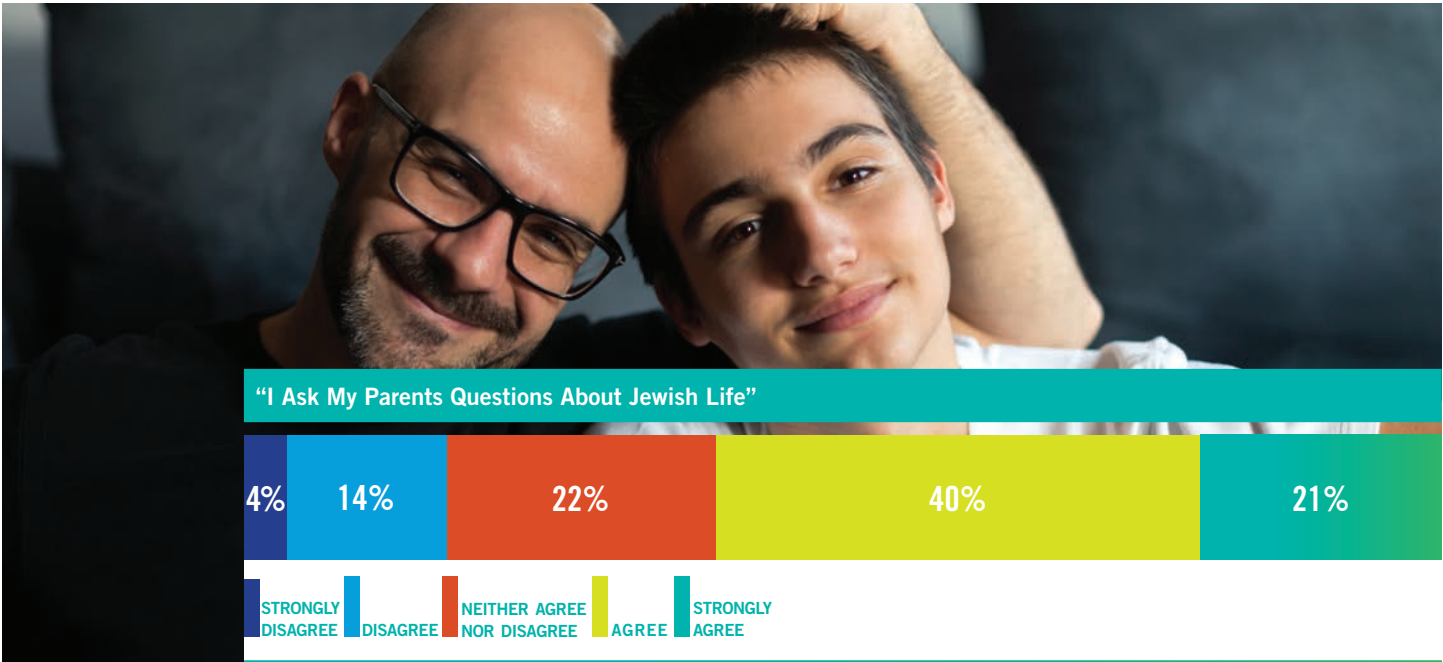
Ethan: It’s not like an explicitly Jewish activity, but we always had dinner together, and I think that was something that we thought of as a Jewish activity. We would always say blessings before meals. . . . We’d talk about Jewish things a lot. . . . My parents talk a lot about what Jewish values are, or what their Jewish values are, and making time for family was part of that. I think I see having dinner together as reflective of Jewish values.

Teens Talk to Their Parents, but Do They Talk About Being Jewish?

Another marker of teens’ relationships with parents is that they seem to talk to one another about their day-to-day lives and events and trust their parents to guide them in how to view the world.

Nate: Sometimes my dad and I read the same books. And we talk about them. That’s really interesting. I read some columns that my parents [read] in the Wall Street Journal or that sort of thing, that I discuss with my parents. . . . Political discussions at the dinner table . . . are a pretty big part of our family.

However, the teens in our study don’t necessarily talk with their parents about being Jewish. In our survey, we asked teens specifically whether they asked their parents questions about *Jewish* life. This was one of our lowest scoring survey items.

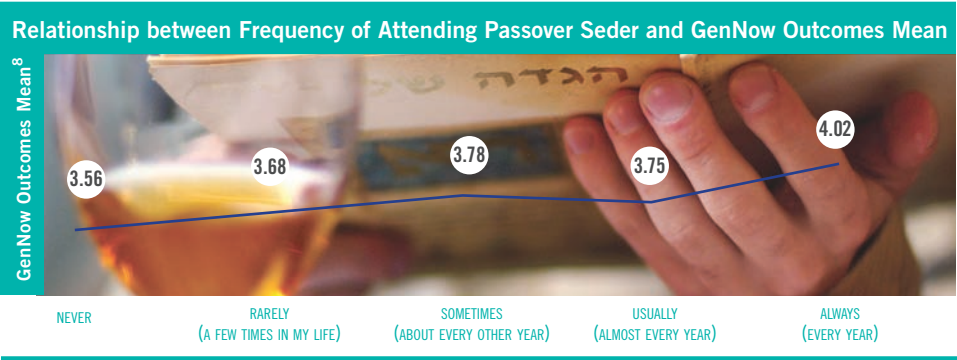


Jewish teens and their parents seem to know how to talk to one another. How can we help them find ways to center questions about being Jewish?

Ava says the one thing she would change about her family's Jewish life is that she would want her parents to be more active in it: *I would want my parents to be more involved in my Jewish education at temple, or just in general, because most of what I learned about being Jewish, religiously and just traditionally, was from Temple, and not really my parents.*

The Family Seder

The strongest predictor of teens asking their parents questions about Jewish life was the frequency of attending a Passover seder as a child. In fact, having attended a Passover seder regularly predicted higher scores on 13 out of 14 outcomes, making it one of the background variables that was most consistently related to higher scores for teens on the outcomes we measured.

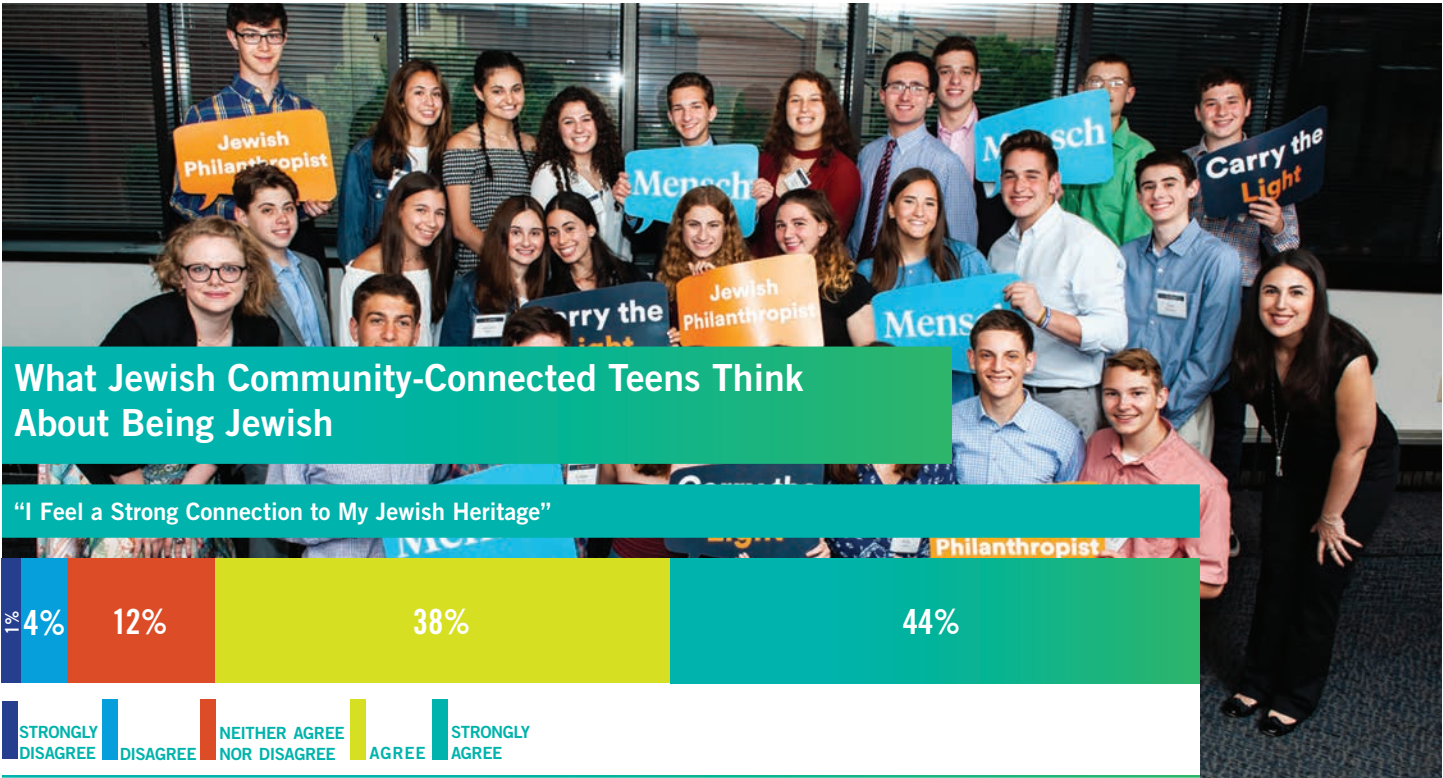


Note: The relationship between GenNow outcomes mean and frequency of participation in a Passover Seder is significant at p<.05.

The Passover seder is, in its essence, a curriculum for multiple generations to talk together about what it means to be Jewish.

Elizabeth: *[When I think of being Jewish] I immediately just think of the holidays that we celebrate together. I think of going to my Bubbie's and Zayde's house and things like Passover and Chanukah and Rosh Hashanah and things that we celebrate it together, and I love the history aspect of it. . . . I think it's really interesting, that reading back on it and hearing about our ancestors and things like that and seeing what we've worked for.*

⁸ The outcomes mean is based on all scaled items on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is “Strongly Disagree” and 5 is “Strongly Agree.” While the chart shows the overall trend, the text gives a more nuanced description of the specific findings and the differences among the outcomes.



What Jewish Community-Connected Teens Think About Being Jewish

“I Feel a Strong Connection to My Jewish Heritage”

Connected and Proud

The teens in our study shared that they felt a strong connection to their Jewish heritage. Of all the attitudes we measured in our survey, this was one of the items on which teens rated themselves highest. Being Jewish is something that teens feel good about and feel pride in and that matters to them. This generally positive attitude to being Jewish echoes a finding of the 2013 Pew study, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, which found that 94% of American Jewish adults agreed they are “proud to be Jewish.”

Teens are particularly proud of Jewish accomplishment throughout history, Jewish survival in challenging times, Jewish success in the secular sphere, and Jewish contributions to Western culture. To be Jewish means to be associated with the above features, which teens saw both as positive and special.

Ben: *I think like general resilience of the Jewish people is always inspiring and there's lots of stories of overcoming adversity and things like that that you can kind of point to throughout history that's inspiring. . . . I mean, like it's just when you can point to this tiny group of people that has accomplished so many things . . . when you're just a part of this very tiny group that has accomplished so much, like it's kind of a thing that you can just look back and say, “I'm a part of that,” and yeah. . . . It feels like . . . I don't know, it just . . . I don't want to say good but yeah, like it feels like heartwarming to say that I am a part of something bigger than myself that has been so successful.*

Along with a strong connection to Jewish heritage and history, teens also feel that their Jewishness is a connection to one's family and one's own immediate ancestors, which is subtly and importantly different from an ethnic identification with other Jews.

Ethan reflected on his experience at synagogue over the high holidays, noting, *Yesterday I was sitting in services and I'm thinking, what does this mean to me? What is my purpose in being here? And it really doesn't mean that much to me, besides the fact to know my tradition, and heritage, and pass it on to my children. I can't say I was there for any reason. We asked Ethan why he might want to pass something down when he wasn't sure what it meant to him. He answered,* *Because it's meaningful to my parents and my grandparents, and they have passed it down to me. So when they're gone, and I don't pass it down, all their hard work of raising me Jewish, and everyone's hard work before them, of raising all these generations of Jews, and going to services, and appreciating the holidays, and eating matzah, and keeping Passover, and fasting on Yom Kippur, in my eyes, if one generation doesn't pass it down, that can kill a whole line of Jewish heritage. And why would you want to do that?*



Ethan sees himself as part of vertical line passing along a tradition he has inherited to his own children. He isn't sure what the content means to him personally, but he takes his task of passing it along seriously. For some teens, being Jewish is a connectedness from one generation to the next. It is who they come from. They link themselves to Jewish ancestors of the past and are proud to make that connection. This does not always translate into a bond of loyalty or obligation to other Jews living today.

When teens do talk about connections to other Jews in the present, they tend to use the word “community” over people or peoplehood. They tend to draw connections to Jews they know and have met face to face, rather than abstract notions of other Jews in distant places with whom they share an ethnic bond. The word community carries a sense of volition. It consists of those who participate and are present. It is less tied to ethnic or genealogical ideas about who is included.

Sebastian: *In my family, religion and community are synonymous. For example, last night as a precursor to Thanksgiving, we had dinner with some family friends and we all happen to be Jewish, but I don't think religion or God, or any of that, was brought up once. . . . We had an awesome time.*

Talia: *As a Jew, I would consider myself less a religious Jew and more a part of like the Jewish community.*

Being Jewish Is About Family

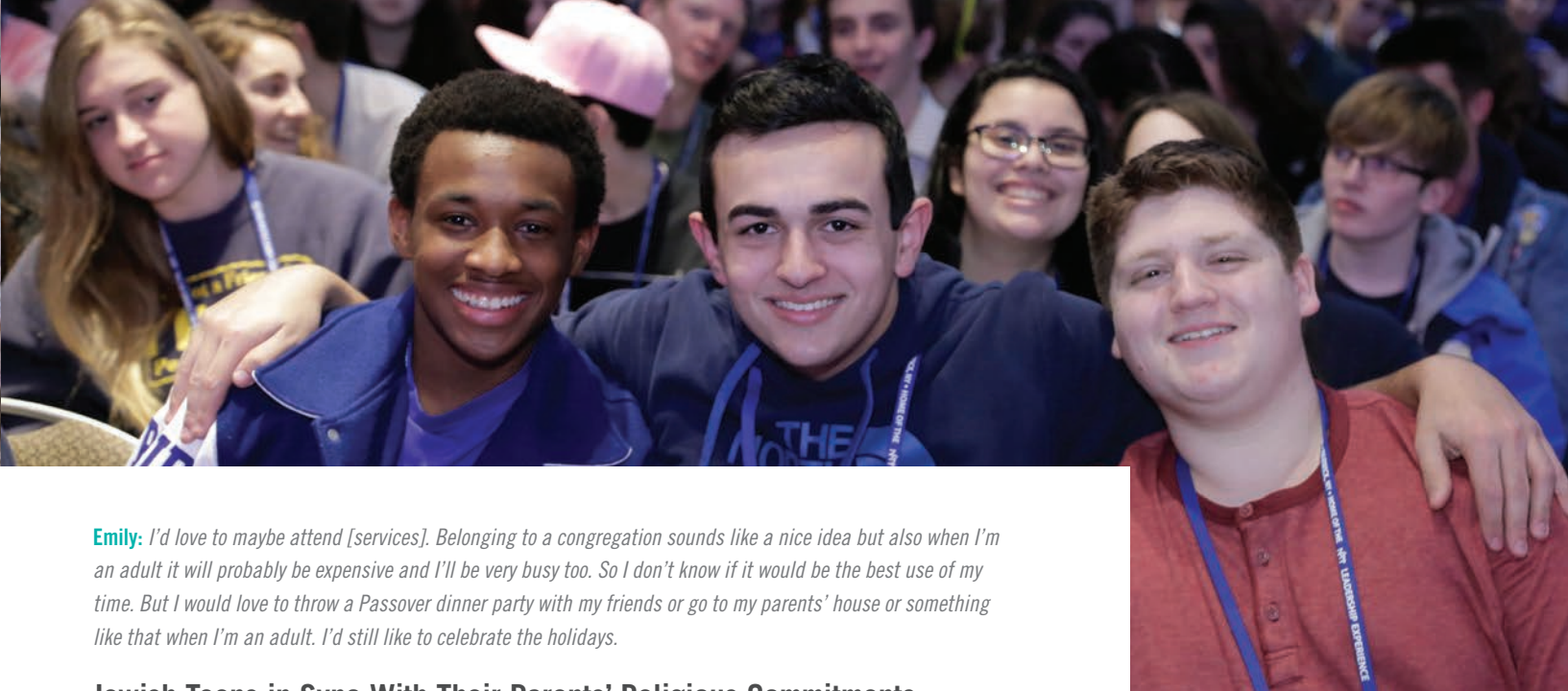
In analyzing the survey data, we used a statistical procedure called a factor analysis. This is an analytic tool for understanding which concepts seem tied together in teen response patterns.

Fascinatingly, teens' survey responses suggest that items related to religious *beliefs* and *practices* are most closely tied to those related to *family*. This insight elucidates how feelings about family are linked to teens' attitudes about Judaism. There is a strong connection for teens between the practices and beliefs of Judaism and what happens in their own homes. These elements are intimately woven together in the hearts and minds of teenagers in our study.

Studies in the psychology of religion (Kirkpatrick, 1998, Ullman, 1989) suggest that our own religious expression can be rooted in how we feel about our parents and how closely we feel tied to them. This research highlights a possibility that for teens, being Jewish is not simply a religious or ethnic practice but also an expression of family bonds. Being Jewish is something teens connect to their parents, grandparents, and those who came before them. Being Jewish and planning to continue being Jewish as an adult is a way teens show their love for and connection to their family and honor their ancestors.

Noah: *Definitely for me first, with Judaism, definitely family because I feel like family holidays are . . . we always are able to meet up with each other during a Jewish holiday. We never miss a Jewish holiday and we never neglect one or skip it. We always celebrate a Jewish holiday and we never celebrate it by ourselves. We always celebrate it with family, at least one family member or multiple. But definitely family is the first big word.*

For many teens, being Jewish is something they do with their families. They often imagine that any Jewish practices they continue in the future will also be primarily family and home centered. Teens talk about wanting to keep these domestic holiday celebrations going into adulthood more than other elements of Jewish practice, like synagogue membership, for example.



Emily: *I'd love to maybe attend [services]. Belonging to a congregation sounds like a nice idea but also when I'm an adult it will probably be expensive and I'll be very busy too. So I don't know if it would be the best use of my time. But I would love to throw a Passover dinner party with my friends or go to my parents' house or something like that when I'm an adult. I'd still like to celebrate the holidays.*

Jewish Teens in Sync With Their Parents' Religious Commitments

Despite perceptions of the teenage years as a period of experimentation and self-discovery, research on American teens in general has shown that most teens are not interested in spiritual seeking and charting new religious paths.⁹

In our study, some teens told stories of intensifying or decreasing religious interest in Judaism, but most teens describe their own religious commitments as being stable and in sync with their parents' own beliefs and practices.

Spiritual Seeking?

Based on the data we collected, we did *not* find evidence of a trend among Jewish teens for spiritual seeking outside of Judaism—that is, experimentation with other religious traditions or New Age spirituality. In the interviews and open-ended responses on the survey, teens did not talk about looking for religious meaning outside of Judaism. Nor did we find teens describing themselves as spiritual but not religious; teens were more likely to say they were spiritual *and* religious. While teens can recount spiritual feelings and experiences, they rarely use “spiritual” as a category of identity to describe themselves.

Teens raised both Jewish and Christian did express a sense of openness to religion and the possibility that they would like to learn more about their inherited religions at some future point in their life.

Sierra was raised both Jewish and Christian. She wants to learn more about religion and spirituality as she makes decisions about her own faith and practice. She intends to begin first by learning about her own inherited religions: *I definitely don't see myself as religious. I sometimes see myself as spiritual. I don't know. I recently started trying to navigate that a little bit and think about it more. I haven't fully gone there yet but I've started thinking about it. I think my mom is super spiritual. . . . [In the future] I would probably try a whole bunch of different religions. I would go to church. I'd go to temple. I'd go to the religions that I have access to and if there was one I really enjoyed I would probably do that for a little while. And if not I would see what pieces of each one I liked and try to incorporate that into my life a little more.*

Elizabeth imagines one day she will want to do more research about Judaism and Christianity, relying on the internet to help her make decisions: *[I'll] definitely [go on] the internet obviously, just googling it and looking around on different sources, maybe some personal blogs of people who are religious and also some historical things and some factual information.*

A few teens told stories of increasing their commitment to Judaism over their lifespan. In two cases the changes were in tandem with their parents' religious change. In another two cases, the changes were motivated by the teens' own interest, with the teens seeking more Jewish connections on their own.

⁹The National Youth and Religion Study has found that, when relationships are positive, teens generally follow in the religious path set by their parents. Christian Smith, director of this longitudinal study, noted that while parents are often encouraged to outsource their teen's religious education to experts, parents are usually the biggest determinant of a teen's religiosity. He says, “No other conceivable causal influence . . . comes remotely close to matching the influence of parents on the religious faith and practices of youth.” As Smith puts it, “Parents set a kind of glass ceiling of religious commitment, above which their children rarely rise.”



Claire: About two years ago I wanted to become more religious so I went online. I found this synagogue near me and I went in and just met with the rabbi and then I started going. . . . I googled “Reform synagogue near me” and then my zip code. **Later in the interview, Claire shared her impetus to find a synagogue:** My younger sister has a very rare, very serious heart condition and one reason I wanted to become more religious is I’ve always prayed to God for her to be healthy and for her to be kept safe, and I felt like it would be more meaningful and more important doing that if I were more religious.

Losing Their Religion?

Jews of No Religion by Generational Cohort		
Jewish Identity, by Generation	Jews by religion % ↓	Jews of no religion % ↓
Greatest (born 1914-1927)	93	7
Silent (born 1928-1945)	86	14
Boomer (born 1946-1964)	81	19
Gen X (born 1965-1980)	74	26
Millennial (born after 1980)	68	32

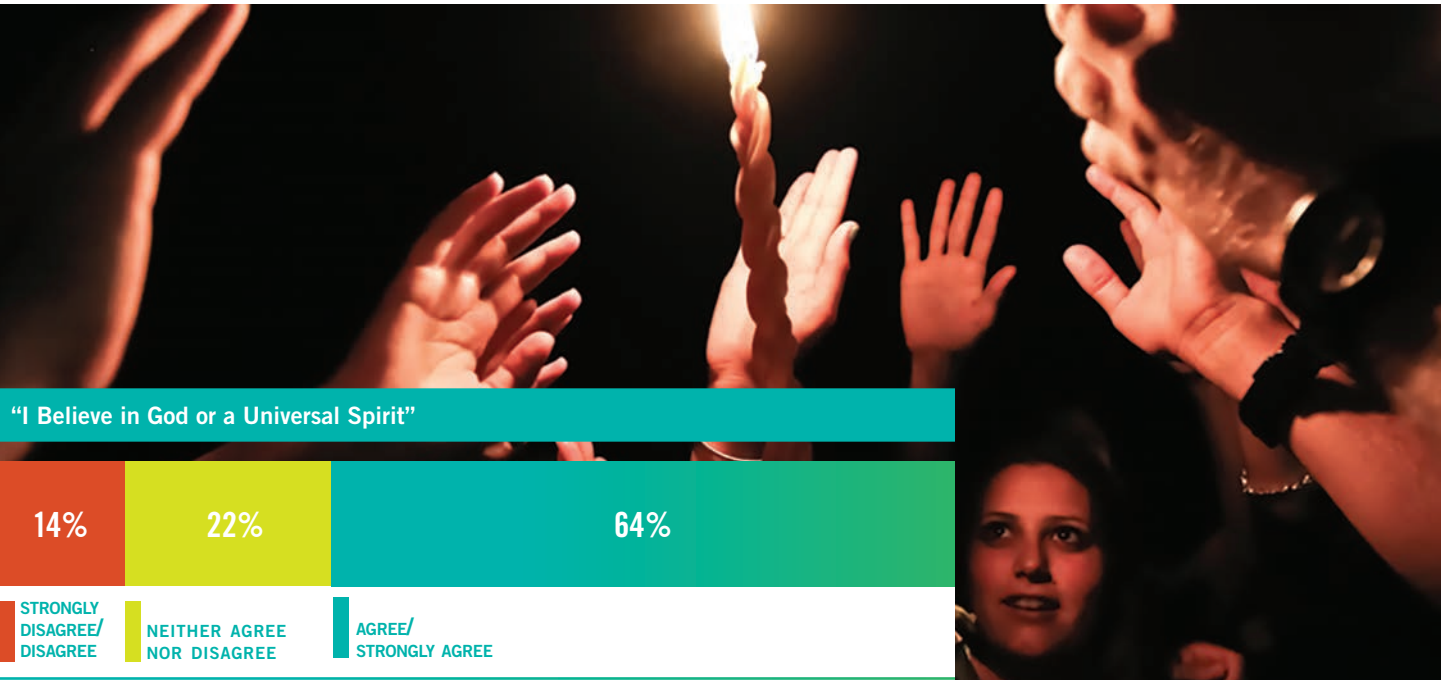
Adapted from Pew 2013, p. 7

The fastest growing religious group among adults in the United States today are “Religious Nones”—sometimes referred to as those with “No Religion” or, more specifically, those who profess no particular religious affiliation. Younger Americans are more likely to be Religious Nones than older Americans are. The 2013 Pew study found a similar pattern among American Jewish adults.

What we do know about today’s American teens in general (not only Jewish teens) is that they may be continuing this trend. According to analysis conducted by Jean Twenge, today’s teens are both less religious *and* less spiritual than earlier generations. She argues that this is not an artifact of being younger that they will age out of, but rather represents a profound cultural shift. There is very little data about what it means to today’s youth to have “No Religion.” Generally though, it’s important to understand that American “Religious Nones” are *not* without religious beliefs, moral frameworks, or any religious practices.

In our survey, we asked teens how they thought of themselves Jewishly. We provided six options: I am Jewish; I am Jewish culturally, but not religiously; sometimes I think of myself as Jewish, sometimes not; It’s complicated; I’m Jewish and something else; I’m not Jewish. The vast majority of teens, 75%, selected “I am Jewish.” The next most popular answer was “I’m Jewish culturally but not religiously,” which 16% of teens selected.

GenZ Now Teen Responses by Jewish Identity Option	
I’m Jewish	75%
I’m Jewish culturally, but not religiously	16%
Sometimes I think of myself as Jewish, sometimes not	3%
It’s complicated	3%
I’m Jewish and something else	2%
I’m not Jewish	1%



The majority of engaged teens who responded to our survey unequivocally identify as Jewish and also report belief in God. Still we find a sizable minority who might map on to an adult concept of Religious Nones: those who are “culturally, but not religiously Jewish” and those who are agnostic or atheists. We also heard from teens who were concerned that because they do not believe in God they could not consider themselves Jewish.¹⁰

Survey respondent: *I’ve recently started questioning my belief in God and I don’t know if I’m considered Jewish because of it.*

This minority is substantial enough that it is worth paying attention to and respecting. How do we show teens that the concept of Jewish can hold many orientations to religious belief and practice?

Relig-ish

Whether “cultural but not religious” teens or teen agnostics become adults of No Religion remains unknown. But our study led us to conclude that it would be a mistake to automatically assume that culturally Jewish, agnostic, or atheist teens have “No Religion.” Interestingly, we found that overall the Jewish teens we interviewed do not hold a negative impression of religion.

Dylan doesn’t think of himself as religious (he describes himself as a “realist”) but he’s not opposed to religion: *I think religion is good for people in the world because it gives people purpose so if you are lost in any way and you need something to pick you up I think that if you want to start believing in a religion that that will give your life purpose and meaning so it can help people get through tough times.*

According to the teens in our interviews, religious people believe in God, care about rules, and have religious values. Teens often had the expectation that to be religious one had to strictly meet *all* three categories *all* of the time. Many teens in our study were proud to call themselves religious.

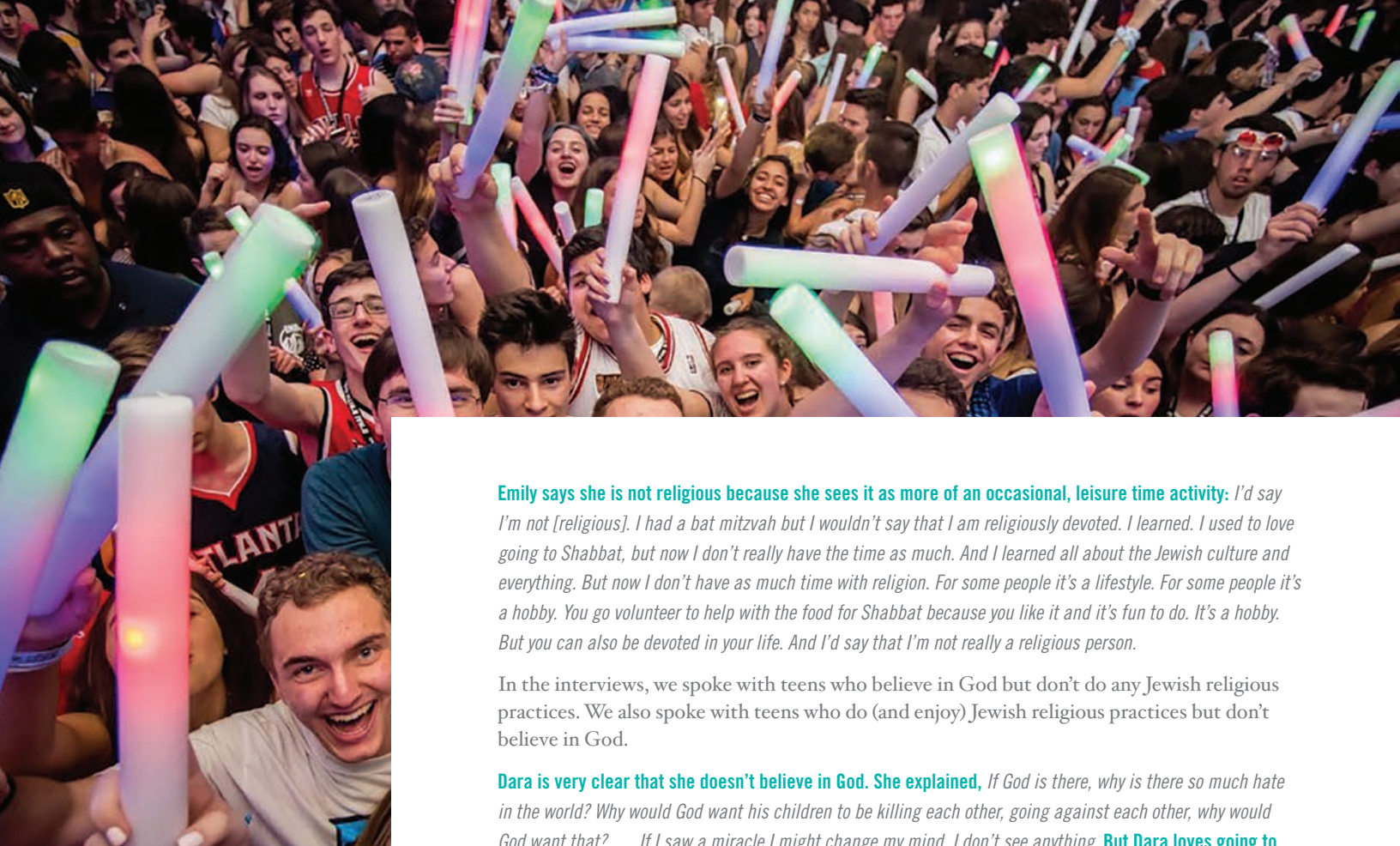
However, in the interviews and in the survey responses, we learned that teens sometimes hesitated to label themselves religious. They recognized that Judaism played an important role in their life and they enjoyed some elements of Jewish religious practice *sometimes*. But they didn’t see themselves as measuring up to what they believed were the rigorous criteria for being religious.

For many teens in our study, the word “religious” seems to mean that one is orthodox (in the technical sense, meaning their beliefs are in line with their religion’s professed creed) and orthopraxis (meaning they strictly adhere to all religious practices). Teens often demurred that they are not “religious” even as they talked about elements of religious Judaism they valued.

Denominations “Don’t Make Sense”

We did not include a question in our survey that asked teens which Jewish denomination they were raised in or identified with. When testing the survey instrument in an earlier pilot study, we found that many teens did not relate to this question or found the categories to be confusing.

¹⁰ Different survey instruments ask about belief in God in different ways, which can make direct comparisons tricky. By way of providing some context for understanding our teens’ responses, we offer some data from other national surveys. A Gallup 2016 survey found 89% of American adults believe in God or a higher power. The National Study of Youth and Religion Wave 2 showed a decline in belief in God among teens from 84% (2002/2003) to 78% (2005). PEW’s 2013 study of American Jews reported that 68% of American NET Jewish adults between 18-49 believe in God.



Emily says she is not religious because she sees it as more of an occasional, leisure time activity: *I'd say I'm not [religious]. I had a bat mitzvah but I wouldn't say that I am religiously devoted. I learned. I used to love going to Shabbat, but now I don't really have the time as much. And I learned all about the Jewish culture and everything. But now I don't have as much time with religion. For some people it's a lifestyle. For some people it's a hobby. You go volunteer to help with the food for Shabbat because you like it and it's fun to do. It's a hobby. But you can also be devoted in your life. And I'd say that I'm not really a religious person.*

In the interviews, we spoke with teens who believe in God but don't do any Jewish religious practices. We also spoke with teens who do (and enjoy) Jewish religious practices but don't believe in God.

Dara is very clear that she doesn't believe in God. She explained, *If God is there, why is there so much hate in the world? Why would God want his children to be killing each other, going against each other, why would God want that? . . . If I saw a miracle I might change my mind. I don't see anything. But Dara loves going to synagogue. She is taken with the music, the aesthetics, and the community. I love our cantor, she has a very beautiful voice. I enjoy the music . . . the candle holders that we have are so big and so pretty. I love looking at them, it's a little weird but I just love looking at the candle holders. I'm not gonna lie. The people there are really friendly, a couple of my friends go there. I don't go there just because they're going. I just like the environment because it's really happy.*

We heard from dozens of teens who wanted to explain to us how they were *both* religious *and* not religious. We heard from teens who claimed that they sometimes approached Jewish activities with a cultural lens and sometimes with a religious lens.

Survey Respondent: *I'm Jewish as my culture and my heritage. I do Jewish religious things, like going to shul and celebrating Shabbat, but I don't believe much of the religious aspects.*

We have come to think of these Jewish teens as **relig-ish**, representing a more flexible approach to what Americans often imagine is a strict bifurcation between the religious and the secular. Many American Jewish teens appreciate some facets of Judaism as a religion but simultaneously hold a-religious or “cultural” perspectives as well. Teens were not only able to acknowledge how religion played a role in their life *sometimes* and in *some* ways, but also wanted those tensions expressed on the record.

Jewish Culture Is Something to Celebrate

The Pew study of American Jews found that the majority of American Jewish adults believe that being Jewish is mainly a matter of culture or ancestry. Teens in our study, in both the interviews and the over 800 write-in comments on the survey, used many words like *blood, ethnicity, people, heritage, history, community, culture*, and *tradition* to describe what it meant to be Jewish. But certainly a key concept teens used was “Jewish culture.”

American Jewish teens are enthusiastic about Jewish culture. Unlike religion, God, or Israel, when it comes to Jewish culture there is everything to celebrate and little to feel ambivalent about. The term *Jewish culture* captures all of the good stuff about being Jewish and none of the confusing stuff.

For teens, Jewish culture is not related to “high culture” like literature or film festivals. Most teens frame being Jewish as one big dance number from *Fiddler on the Roof*. They use it to mark celebration, liveliness, joy, food, talk, family, friends, sociability, community, a shared sense of history, a talent for survival and success, a sensibility of questioning and curiosity, and values that support being a good person.

Importantly, *culture* is an active word to teens. It’s not something that marks who they come from, something that they have passively received, or expectations others have of them. Jewish culture is something that teens themselves do, in their lives actively and willingly.

The Challenges of Teen Life Today

Jewish Teens Share the Struggles of Other Teens in Today’s America

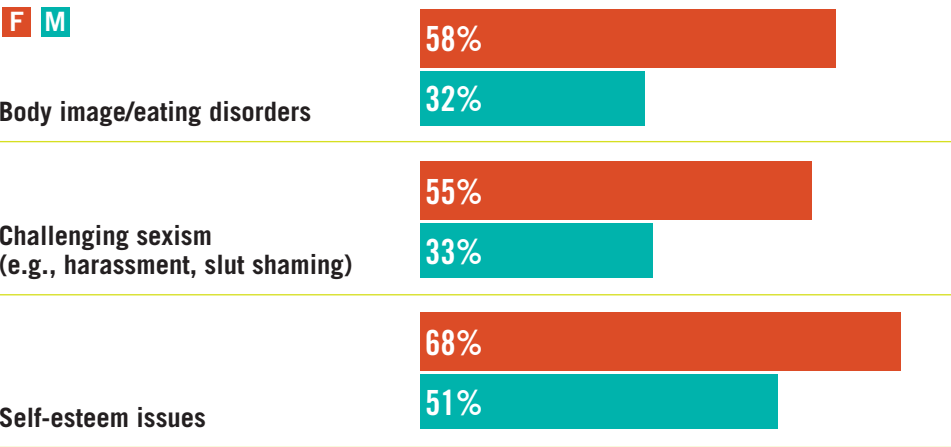
Teens in America today report unprecedented levels of stress. National organizations like the American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics both claim our nation is currently experiencing an epidemic of teen anxiety and depression.

Jewish teens agree that emotional well-being is a major concern for today’s adolescents. We asked a subset of the teens in our survey which problems the teens they know need help with. Overwhelmingly they told us that teens in their circles need help primarily with social-emotional issues. In particular they named coping with anxiety, academic pressure, self-esteem issues, and failure as the biggest needs of their peers.

“Teens I Know Need Help With”	Top Five Responses
Managing anxiety or depression	69%
Coping with academic pressure	64%
Self-esteem issues	61%
Dealing with failure, setbacks, and disappointments	55%
Learning how to speak to others face-to-face	51%



“Teens I know need help with.” Greatest gender disparities.





School pressure was frequently mentioned in the interviews. The pressure to get grades for college was part of their larger school culture, and many seemed to believe that their grades in high school have tremendous, irrevocable life consequences.

Ashley explained, *People have told me that high school, these four years, are the most important time to work your hardest because they kind of affect the rest of your life. Well, not the rest of your life but they affect where you wanna go to school, and what your options are gonna be. And I know that I want to be a doctor and I have to really keep my grades up if I wanna do that.*

Teens sometimes see the college admissions race as an all or nothing endeavor that will set their life path forever. They see their future adult success as hinging on their high school academic performance. Feeling stress is now part of growing up for teens and, while felt as individuals, may reflect anxieties in the larger American society.

Adam: *Everyone wants to be the best. All the students always strive for A's, everybody needs to be the best with honors. It can just be very demoralizing sometimes. Like you'll get a 91 on a test, you'll be like, "Wow. I'm above average." But then you realize you are the average, when you get that kind of a grade.*

Not every Jewish teen sees their high school years as a direct path to college. **Megan, a student in a vocational program, gave insight into the struggles of Jewish teens for whom college might be financially out of reach. She explained that among her friends it wasn't simply a question of getting into college (she takes AP classes and gets good grades) but of whether college was ultimately a good financial risk at all, because it's so expensive, people are nervous about wanting to go (to college) if they're not a million percent sure what they want to go for. They're worried about wasting a ton of money about that.**

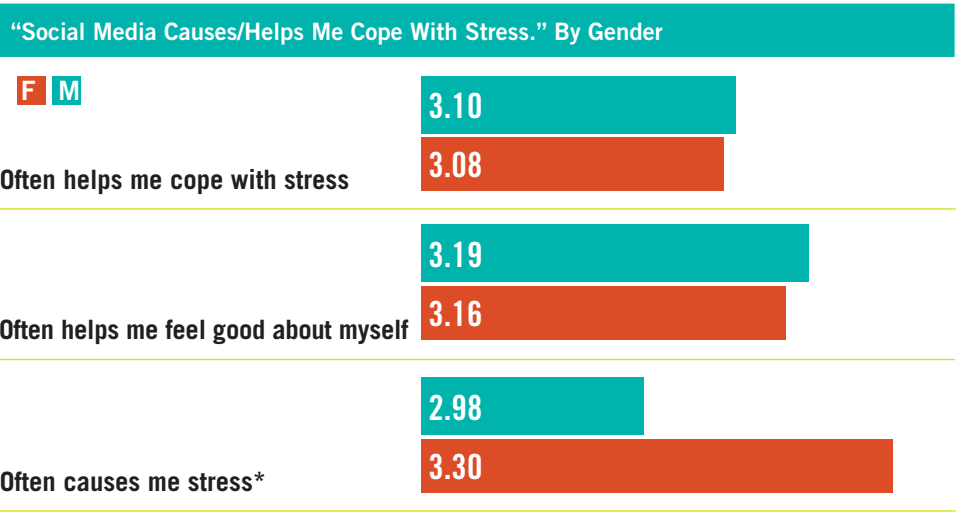
Social Media, Technology, and Jewish Teens

American teens spend a lot of time online. According to a recent Pew study (2018), 45% of American teens say they are online “almost constantly.” It’s probably not surprising that Jewish teens do the same. While there is a great deal of data that suggests the negative impact of social media on teens (Palfrey and Gasser, 2016), we also heard from teens about how technology enhanced their lives and relationships. In the interviews, girls spoke primarily about using their online time to engage with friends over social media—particularly Snapchat and Instagram. Boys talked about gaming and watching YouTube videos. Being on their devices was among some teens’ favorite activities—especially for boys for whom video gaming was an important source of entertainment and relaxation, a kind of oasis in their day. Typically, teens were online for a few hours a day, often while doing other things as well. **Matt explained,** *It helps me relax a lot. When I'm playing video games, [it] helps me destress after a long day, so I feel like it's positive mostly.*

We asked a subset of the survey participants to share whether they thought social media caused them stress or helped them cope with stress. The results were mixed, which falls in line with similar studies of American teens. Jewish teens see social media as having the capacity for positive and negative influence in their lives.

Teens today are the first iPhone natives. They are at the forefront of an enormous social experiment as society tries to understand how to harness the power of these new technologies. The teens we spoke with were generally very self-aware about their own online habits and alert to some of the possible dangers. They could articulate not only why they enjoyed going online but also make the counterargument for how it might negatively impact their well-being. The biggest critique teens had about their own online time was that it was a waste of time and created unrealistic expectations.

Social media was also an opportunity for teens to strengthen Jewish connections. Many specifically mentioned that they relied on social media to help them stay in touch with friends they made through Jewish YSOs, camps, and teen tours. Some of these friends were on different continents, some in a nearby town.



Note: *Difference on this item is statistically significant at p < .05.

Talia was a very enthusiastic social media user. She explained how she used Snapchat to stay in touch with Jewish friends she had made through an international Jewish teen program, I use social media tons. My parents will tell you that I am always on Snapchat. . . . I like talking to people who live in Tennessee and in Ohio and in Florida and on the East Coast and on the West Coast and in like Bulgaria and Argentina and all over the world because I have access to this app that will let me talk to whoever I want, whenever I want. In gaining unlimited connections to her Jewish YSO friends, Talia feels a sense of power and possibility. Talia decided it would cause her stress to not be on social media.

Sarah-Rosalind grew up in a small town with few Jewish people. When she came out as gay she felt doubly isolated. As a teen she found Tumblr, which connected her with other gay and minority teens: [Tumblr]’s kind of the chosen gathering place of people who didn’t have friends in middle school. . . . Yeah, so, a lot of the same kinds of people as me end up on there, and end up forming the same kind of Jewish communities that I’m familiar with, the same kind of gay communities that I’m familiar with.

Maayan is not a fan of social media but she saw how it enabled her to do the communal organizing she was passionate about: *I organized a March For Our Lives [in my state] last year. Communicating with everyone on social media was very instrumental to making it happen . . . [to] be able to share something with them like a March For Our Lives event or something like that. I think that it definitely has benefits, and I’ve seen that, but I’m not obsessed.*

Anti-Semitism in the Eyes of Jewish Community-Connected Teens

A subset of the teens who took the survey were asked about problems they thought teens they know need help with. Forty-five percent of teens selected anti-Semitism as a problem for today’s teens, ranking it as the twelfth most frequently observed problem out of 18 options provided.

In the interviews few teens mentioned anti-Semitism as a pressing personal problem. Many teens, however, reported behavior in which they felt negatively singled out for being Jewish. They generally registered these anti-Semitic comments as a nuisance or even as confusing and unsettling rather than as threatening or scary.





Ashley mentioned a boy in her school who made comments she characterized as “jokes” about her being Jewish. For example, he said when they were discussing math homework, *Shut up, you’re Jewish.* Ashley never felt this pattern of interaction warranted getting a teacher involved. She didn’t want the drama. And while she described the behavior as annoying and aggravating, she clarified that it doesn’t feel like he’s actually targeting me.

Adam was wary of a pattern he had observed in which he saw Jews as focused on their own suffering. He shared that, *Like it’s true that Jews have suffered a lot throughout history. And so, it’s very easy for us to kind of . . . use that to play the victim a lot. And I’m not a big fan of playing the victim.* Later in his interview he spoke about a boy in his middle school who *got up in my face because I’m Jewish.* Adam mentioned twice that it wasn’t that big of a deal but also that at the time I was kind of shaken by it.

Ben: *The one that sticks out is a kid at my high school, like in school. . . . I told the kid to stop and that was it. And there wasn’t. . . . I haven’t personally experienced violence or horrible anti-Semitic tirades or anything. . . . I was kind of disgusted, like obviously. Yeah, like I said, it wasn’t like a scarring memory or anything. It kind of was a moment and then it passed and that was kind of it.*

Only three teens from our interviews believed they had been personally impacted by anti-Semitism.

Our interviews took place between September and November of 2018, with the tragedy at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh occurring when we were halfway through the interview process. All of the teens we interviewed after the massacre in Pittsburgh had heard about the synagogue shooting. But they formed different conclusions about what it meant for contemporary society and for American Jews. Some saw it as a particularly Jewish tragedy that illustrated that anti-Semitism was a serious and lethal threat in the United States today. Others saw it as primarily reflecting other problems in the United States that were not related specifically to Jews or anti-Semitism, including the rise of political extremism and gun violence.

Sarah-Rosalind, who had experienced anti-Semitism in her high school, saw the events in Pittsburgh primarily through the lens of anti-Semitism around the world: *I think that it was definitely a wake-up call for people who had never thought they even needed an alarm clock before. . . . I saw a lot of people on the onlines, who were like, “Oh, [expletive], Jews need allies, too?” And I was like, “You’re just realizing this?” . . . Where was that from the non-Jewish people, when [Jewish] people were getting murdered in Europe in the past four years? Where were they when, a few years ago, everyone was leaving France because of the straight-up pogroms? Like, it’s really reasonable to panic at there being a pogrom here, but it’s not unfamiliar, and it’s not unexpected.*

Some teens offered that while they believed anti-Semitism exists, they feel just as, if not more, threatened as high school students as they do as Jews in America. That is, they see the events in Pittsburgh, while tragic, as no more dangerous or disturbing to them personally than school shootings.

Annabelle believes that the shooting in Pittsburgh feels the same for her as other mass shootings in the United States. She rejects the idea that she should care more because the people killed were targeted as Jews: *The big thing for me is gun control. . . . It keeps happening [gun violence]. It has to stop happening. It’s crazy. . . . I don’t feel super differently about [Pittsburgh] than I did about like Marjory Stoneman Douglas, or anything like that. Like, yes I’m a Jew, it’s a shul, but I’m also a high school student, and that was a school. I also have gay friends, and the [alluding to Pulse nightclub]. . . . Like each one of these has a group where it resonates more, so . . . really the big thing is gun control. I don’t think that we are supposed to care about this one [shooting] more than any of the others, because we’re Jewish. I think it resonates more, but that’s a bit of a problem that you care more for somebody like you than you do for a group that you don’t necessarily have as*

much of a connection to. It has been treated a little bit differently. I don’t really know what changes by being a Jew . . . Jewish students are both Jews and students, to me if I were a teacher in a Jewish school, I would be approaching Pittsburgh in the exact same way that I did with Marjory Stoneman Douglas, or any of the others. Like I don’t really see the huge difference. They’re all horrible, and I think they’re all equally horrible regardless of how many people it kills, or what gun they used, or who the people were. It’s all the same thing. Yeah.

Jewish Community–Connected Teens and Israel

Open to Israel

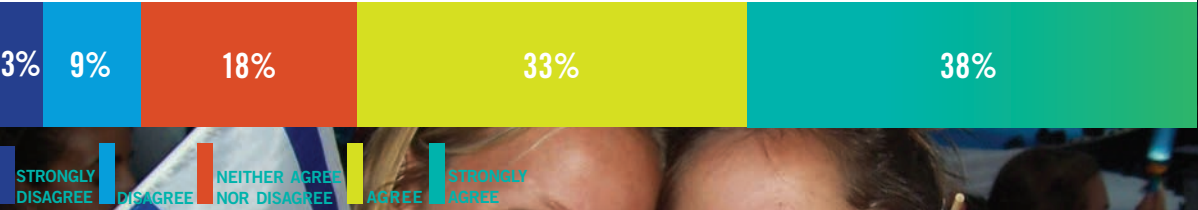
Pew’s 2013 study of American Jews found that younger American Jewish adults report weaker ties to Israel than older adults do. We do not make intergenerational comparisons, but we found that the teens in our study had a positive orientation to Israel. The majority of the teens in our study feel connected to Israel. In the interviews, teens saw a link between being Jewish and the land and State of Israel. They believe that Israel has something to do with them.

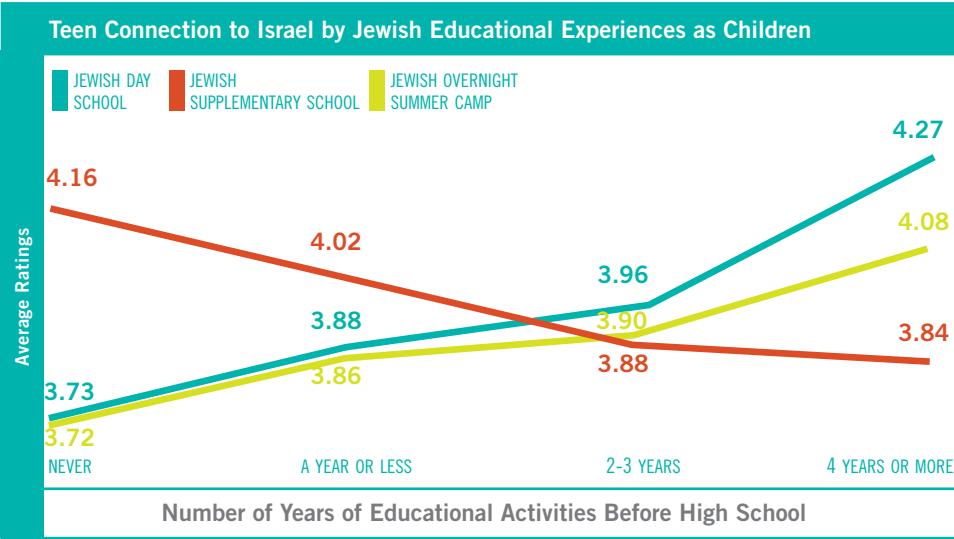
Teens often had questions about Israel and they wanted to trust educators to guide them in accessing information. They wanted to learn and grow in an environment where it was safe to ask questions and make mistakes, not in highly charged political conversations. Traveling to Israel made a difference in a teen’s life. It gave that teen a connection to Israel beyond political debate and it enriched his or her own sense of what it could mean to be Jewish.

Connections to Israel

The majority of the teens in this study agree that they feel not just a connection, but a *strong* connection, to Israel. The intensity of teens’ connections toward Israel varied; in the interviews some expressed mildly positive feelings, some strongly positive feelings, but only one teen we spoke with held a perspective we assessed as overall negative in tone. Some teens saw themselves as defenders of Israel, some as concerned friends, others as mildly curious observers. For many teens Israel was not a central concern or facet of being Jewish, but they still believed that Israel matters to being Jewish. They were inclined to see the Israel-Palestine conflict through a lens that foregrounded the Israeli experience.

“I Feel a Strong Connection to Israel”





Note: There is a significant positive relationship between years in camp and years in Jewish day school (before high school) and teens’ connection to Israel, $p < .001$; there is a significant negative relationship between years of attending supplementary school (before HS), $p < .001$.

Hunter: I feel good [about Israel]. So, personally . . . I’ve never been nor have I learned much about it. I definitely plan on going to Israel at some point. It’s not like I’m the most strong or passionate person about Israel. But it is nice to know, to have that sense of a homeland.

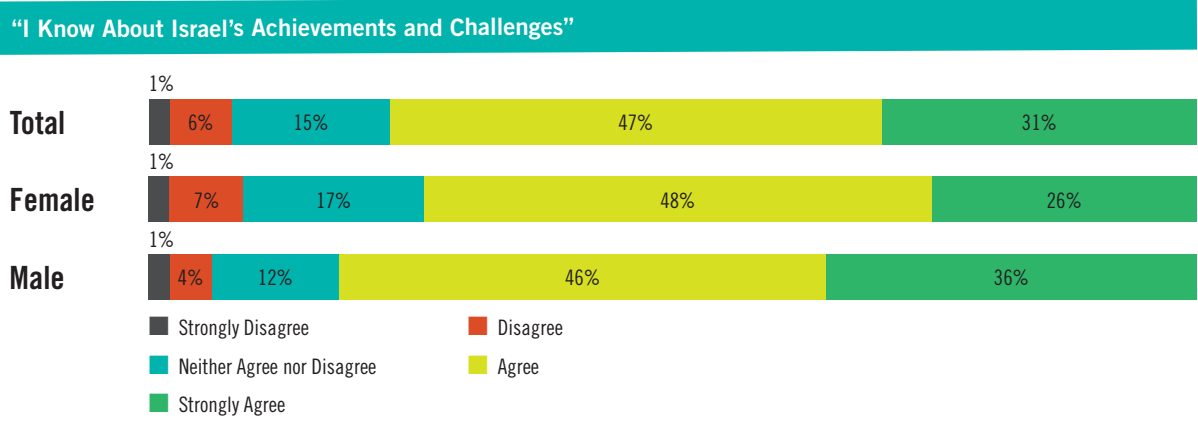
Ava: I get frustrated a lot, because I think a lot of people are uneducated and they just blame Israel for putting rockets in Gaza and the West Bank. The other day, I don’t know if you saw, there was like 400 rockets launched into Israel by Gaza. It’s not a one-sided conflict. And a lot of people say it’s all Israel.

Nate: I don’t think Israel has always made the right decisions. I think they’ve made a lot of mistakes. But, at the same time I think it’s really hard to see the country of Israel as like the villain in this situation. Not that necessarily Palestine is the villain. I think Hamas is clearly the villain.

How Confident Are Jewish Teens in Their Knowledge About Israel?

In the interviews teens were often hesitant to assert their own knowledge about Israel. Some teens (often those with relatively robust knowledge about Israeli history) suggested that they did not have enough information to form a strong opinion about the conflict. This item was the only one in the survey where female respondents rated themselves lower than male respondents.

Many teens were aware that there was conflict associated with Israel but generally seemed comfortable either leaning toward Israel or being an outright unflagging supporter of Israel. For example, Emily, one of the youngest teens in the study, knew there was a conflict between Israel and “Pakistan” (sic) but she didn’t know much about it and still had overall sympathy for the Israeli perspective: [Israel] came up on the news last year about conflicts between Pakistan [sic] and Israel. I honestly thought, I heard about it and we discussed it in my history class. I was thinking that maybe the way the Israelis was treating the Pakistanis wasn’t the best thing ever because it seemed a little bit like segregation. . . . I’m still totally interested in going [to Israel]. I think that the way they handled that wasn’t the best, but I don’t think it’s a bad country. I don’t think Israel is a bad country. I think that it’s dealing with a very delicate issue right now in that. The U.S. definitely has done worse though.



Connected With Questions

While a minority of teens voiced political opinions they saw as out of sync with the current Israeli government, most teens, even those who raised critiques, shared a sense of connection to Israel. They could have concerns and still feel connection.

Annabelle switched from a Jewish day school to a public school for high school. She was surprised to learn there was another perspective on the Israel-Palestine conflict; through asking questions and engaging with students who held different viewpoints she came to change her own opinions. She has critiques of the Israeli government but still feels connected to Israel the country. In making that distinction she references a trip she took to Israel as part of an organized group that helped her distinguish between Israel the place and people and Israel the government. But Annabelle wondered why her Jewish education did not offer her more information about the ongoing conflict. Particularly she noted the absence of any exposure to the Palestinian narrative: I got to ninth grade and nobody at my school likes Israel, because of the whole Palestinian thing. I just felt stupid. I was like, “Why has nobody ever taught me this?” I’ve been learning about Israel for years, but I’ve never heard anything about the other perspective. . . . I don’t think Israel’s an awful country. I’m definitely more pro-Israel than a lot of people are, but it’s like, you just, you hear the stuff and you can’t ignore it.

Annabelle doesn’t understand how her Israel education, which was so robust in so many ways, failed to present her with all the information she felt she needed for the conversations she would have in high school. Now Annabelle works alone to integrate the new material into her old understandings. In struggling to integrate new information into her own narrative about Israel, Annabelle relies on her personal experience of traveling to Israel as a young teen. I’m not super in favor of their [Israel’s] politics, but I just like it there [in Israel]. I’ve only been for two weeks. I went on my like eighth grade Israel trip that a bunch of Jewish schools do, and it’s just a nice place. Like, the people were super friendly, and the food is great, and the weather’s perfect, and there’s a bunch of stuff to do, and there’s all this history. I like Israel as a place . . . I don’t think I know enough to really argue for one side or the other. I’m kind of in the middle, and I’m okay with being in the middle.

Often teens with the most robust Israel education voiced the most questions about Israel. Dara is planning on going to Israel with her eighth grade class trip later this year. She describes herself as someone who wants to defend her homeland. She is a student in a Jewish day school but makes use of her interview time to ask her interviewer questions she feels she can’t ask at her school. They don’t really like us to talk about politics. Some of the kids in my school do; they do get in trouble for it which I don’t think is right, but they do. It’s not really mentioned. I would love to talk about it with someone but we’re not allowed to. Dara is looking for someone who can answer her questions about Israel, all of which are rooted in concerns she has about what the country is like and none of which are related to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Dara wants to know if migrant workers’ children are being deported, if the country is overrun with cats (I heard there’s a ton of cats, like an abnormal amount of cats in Israel.), and whether a girl in Israel can have a Bat Mitzvah.

Here, Dara’s questions are not about “the conflict” but about human rights, religious pluralism, and the day-to-day experience of being in Israel. Her questions are good questions. They reveal how much Dara already knows about Israel, far beyond what you might see in a five-minute news segment. Dara doesn’t feel she has a trusted adult who will answer her questions, so she asked her interviewer—a stranger.

Teen Travel to Israel



Note: Difference is significant at $p < .05$

The strongest predictor of teens rating themselves highly on the Israel-related outcome was having attended an organized trip with a group. This was an even stronger predictor than speaking Hebrew at home. But beyond the Israel-related outcome, travel to Israel with a group was a predictor of higher scores on 12 out of the 14 GenNow outcomes, including those related to social-emotional domains. Travel to Israel seems to generate teen responses related to world politics (which often dominate communal concerns) and related to what it means to be Jewish in a way that feels generative and exciting to teens. Teens who have been to Israel often described it as a peak Jewish moment in their life that can transform how they think about being Jewish.

David: When I went to the Kotel in eighth grade, that was the most connected I ever felt. I broke down in tears. I didn’t expect it at all. . . . I went there and I was like “Wow, I feel it.” That really sparked my decision to go to Jewish high school.

Hiro explained that his dad signed him up for an Israel trip the summer before his junior year of high school. He hadn’t wanted to go but the trip changed his attitude about being Jewish: It started off with the amazement of people and what people can do, seeing these thousand of years old buildings and remnants of the past and seeing all these people gathered together, united from one core value that they hold to themselves with being Jewish. . . . Right now Israel has every single one of its neighbors trying to kill it, or at least wanting to and somehow we survived. That was the biggest point that really questioned my atheistic beliefs. It turned it from thinking there is no God, then to how can there be no God if we’re still around?

Teens who haven’t been to Israel are interested overall in going, often at the encouragement of their parents. But their travel plans can be fuzzy.

Ashley: Well, my mom’s always wanted to go so we might go. I know that me and my friends wanna go when we turn 18. Or is it 18 or 21 with Birthright? . . . It’s just lighthearted talking, but they’re not serious plans but I definitely wanna go. . . . [Israel] doesn’t come up a lot. It doesn’t come up a lot in school or sometimes I hear about it on the news. But it doesn’t come up very often . . . whenever I hear about it I’m like, “Oh, we need to go there.” And I always wanna go and then I think about it for a while and how I wanna go.



¹¹ The outcomes mean is based on all scaled items on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is “Strongly Disagree” and 5 is “Strongly Agree.” While the chart shows the overall trend, the text gives a more nuanced description of the specific findings and the differences among the outcomes.

Implications for Practice and Questions for Consideration

This section of the report was co-authored by David Bryfman, Arielle Levites, and Susan Wachsstock.

1 From Surviving to Thriving This research is predicated on a belief that Jewish education should primarily be about thriving and not just surviving. It is built on the premise that Jewish wisdom, values, and tradition can enable our youth to become the best versions of themselves—significant contributors to their communities who also help make the world a better place. There are many in the Jewish community who are grounded in a defensive posture that view Judaism merely as a vehicle for Jewish continuity, without consideration for one’s development both as an individual and citizen of the world. What would it take to ensure that all stakeholders realize that Jewish education is a powerful tool for the development of communities of meaning, connection, and justice that matter in the world—and that this new orientation is the key to Jewish thriving in 2019 and beyond?

2 Becoming Teen Focused, Not Organization Focused Teens today are growing up in do-it-yourself environments and expect to have some agency in designing their own experiences and navigating multiple possibilities. Jewish community-connected teens benefit from—and want exposure to—different ideas and expressions of how to be Jewish. This notion suggests that an important way to serve teens is to encourage them to explore other outlooks, organizations, and opportunities. Such a viewpoint will require organizations to shift from equating success purely with numbers in attendance; they need to move to a model of success built on teen thriving. How can Jewish institutions promote their own vision but also make room for teen exploration within Jewish tradition?

3 Offering Teens a Full Spectrum of Jewish Ideas and Expression Teens connected to the Jewish community want to seek meaning within Jewish tradition. How can we ensure that we offer them access to the depth and breadth of Jewish expression? In some cases, there are already robust offerings that teens might not know about. In other cases, there may be a need to create new programs. There already exist many organizations that center on a religious approach to being Jewish. What teen-centered programs exist that allow teens to explore Jewish *spiritual* beliefs and practices? What programs for teens make *secular* Jewish culture the centerpiece of the curriculum?

4 Designing for More Kinds of Thriving In our survey, we saw fewer teens from interfaith families than expected given national studies of Jewish adults. We also found fewer teens who described themselves as gender-fluid or nonbinary than national studies of American teens in general. Welcoming diverse teens may not be enough if the programs they are invited to join were not designed with them in mind. What can we offer Jewish-and-something-else teens and gender nonconforming teens so they know that there are Jewish spaces designed for them to flourish? What would it look like to see Jewish activities that assume the participation of diverse teens and their friends and family members, including those who are not Jewish?

5 Reimagining the Role of Parents and Family With some exceptions, there is no real corpus of curricula or best practices for working with parents and families of Jewish teens. What we know about teens today suggests it may be worthwhile revisiting this opportunity. Today’s teens feel warmly about their parents, enjoy celebrating Jewish holidays with their families, and are more likely to see their lives as following in their parents’ footsteps than as rebelling against them. How can we help parents and teens share with one another what being a Jewish family means to them? Additionally, research suggests that parents are impacted by their children’s engagement with Jewish activities (Pomson and Schnoor, 2008). When parents know about and see what their children are doing and learning, it can change their own narratives about their Jewishness—whether this is true of parents of adolescents remains to be seen. How can we help teens share their experiences in Jewish activities with their families? Can we build stronger communities for parents of Jewish teens? What new ideas for family engagement in the teen years have not yet been explored?



6 Teens Seeking Support From Trusted Adults Stress is nearly ubiquitous in teen culture. What would it mean for organizations to see teen well-being as central to their mandate, perhaps even the primary goal of their mission? What competing goals receive priority over this value and why? If teen well-being is a core goal, how do our organizations need to re-imagine what we do? Many of the teens we spoke with are ambitious and motivated. How can we help our teens learn how to manage stress and cope with setbacks? As adults we must realize that teen well-being reflects the larger society adults have designed for them. How can we help teens frame for themselves alternative models of what success looks like in a life shaped by Jewish values? How can we help them build a world in which flourishing is in reach for all people? What would it take to equip youth educators with the knowledge and capacities to be able to identify and support Jewish teens in need, so that they can identify early warning signs of mental illness and direct teens to appropriate venues to seek professional treatment? How do we create a culture that helps those who work with teens become the trusted adults who teens need, working together to support teen flourishing?



7 Using Social Media: For Good and Bad We are all familiar with the negative aspects of social media and adolescents, be it cyber-bullying, sexting, or video game addiction. But we are also witnessing unprecedented positive opportunities through social media and technology, including the development of support groups for teens, exploration of different identities, and the mobilization of tens of thousands of teens to literally try to change the world. Professionals who work with teens should be better trained to advise teens on the potential pitfalls of social media and simultaneously be equipped with the skills and knowledge to empower teens to continue to leverage this technology for the good. How can we push the boundaries of our online presence to creatively connect with teens, build communities, and reach teens in new ways?

8 Israel Education Spaces Allowing Every Question Jewish community-connected teens are interested in and have questions about Israel. They want trusted adults to help them navigate these questions in educational spaces where every question is allowed. They do not want to feel that adults hide information from them. They do not want to learn about Israel in highly polarized climates of political debate. How can organizations create opportunities for open conversations about Israel in educational environments that center on teen learning, not politics?

9 Enabling Travel to Israel for More Teens Jewish community-connected teens know Israel has something to do with them and would like to travel to Israel one day. Traveling to Israel as part of an organized group is a peak experience for Jewish teens and predicts higher scores on a number of outcomes, including the social-emotional. Today, teens are exposed to multiple perspectives on Israel and are formulating their own opinions and beliefs about Israel. Teens value travel to Israel because it connects them to Jewish history and to Israeli people and culture; for them, such travel stands out as a highlight of their own Jewish narrative. How can we enable more Jewish teens to travel to Israel?

10 Investing in YSOs For many years the Jewish community has invested heavily in different interventions that have been said to “work” in terms of developing teens into particular kinds of Jewish adults. The most common examples have been in the settings of Jewish day schools, summer camps, and to a lesser extent the Israel experience for teens. Our research shows that YSOs work. Teens in YSOs rate themselves higher on almost every GenNow outcome we measured. And teens tell us their YSO activities and relationships matter to them and to who they are today. Yet YSOs have generally not garnered the same level of community support and enthusiasm as other programs for teens. What would it take for the Jewish community to invest significantly in a YSO infrastructure that offers diverse teens a full spectrum of Jewish ideas and opportunities?

Looking Ahead to Further Research *This research project has galvanized 14 Jewish youth-serving organizations to advance a common agenda and improve their collective and specific practices. And yet, this research also proved to be a case of the more you know, the more you realize you need to know. What further research can be developed and conducted that will continue to support and advance the work of YSOs and all others who engage Jewish teens?*

Methodological Appendix

About the Study: The Generation Now project is the result of years of collaboration among funders, researchers, and practitioners in youth engagement and education in an effort to create shared outcomes, indicators, and measurement tools to understand Jewish teens involved in Jewish activities. This report, *GenZ Now: Understanding and Connecting With Jewish Teens Today*, was designed to use these outcomes to improve practice among professionals in Jewish youth-serving organizations. The full dataset will be made public through the Berman Jewish Policy Archive in the summer of 2019.

Study Design: In designing this study of today’s Jewish teens in the United States and Canada, we chose to pursue a *program-focused model*, partnering with 14 Jewish youth-serving organizations to reach their teens. Because of this important feature of our study design, the majority of teens reached by the survey are those who have been involved in at least one Jewish communal organization.

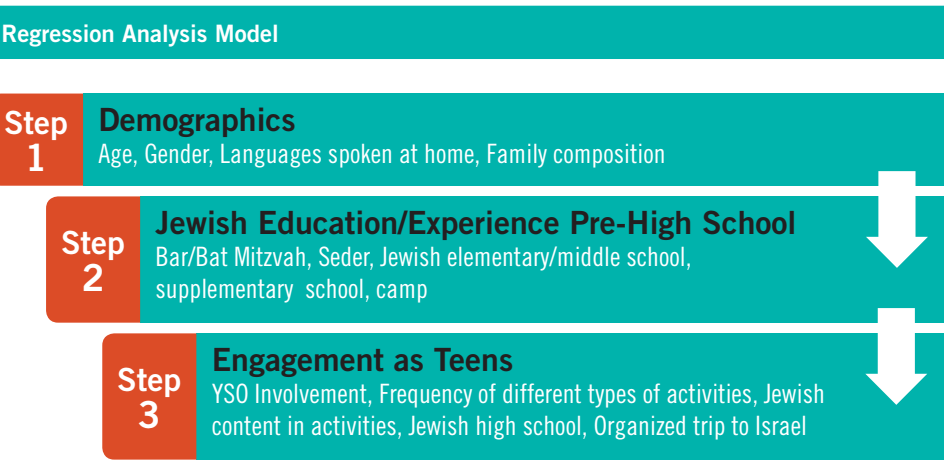
Leadership and Participating Organizations: This study was co-planned by The Jewish Education Project and Rosov Consulting, carried out by Rosov Consulting, and funded by the Jim Joseph Foundation, Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah, and the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation. Importantly, the study’s success was the result of the unique collaboration with and among 14 Jewish youth-serving organizations across the spectrum of the field in North America, including BBYO, Bnei Akiva, Bronfman Fellowship, CTeen (Chabad), Diller Teen Fellows, Habonim Dror, JCCA, Jewish Teen Funders Network, Moving Traditions, NCSY, NFTY, Tzofim (Israeli Scouts), USY, and Young Judea.

The Survey Instrument: The survey instrument had 58 questions covering four core components: demographics, Jewish background, current engagement, and the Teen Jewish Learning and Engagement Scales (TJLES). These questions (piloted with a smaller group of YSOs in early 2016 with 5,300 respondents) have been in regular use as part of community-based evaluation studies sponsored by the Jewish Teen Education and Engagement Funder Collaborative. Additionally, each YSO was able to include three to five unique questions, which only appeared to those teens who indicated involvement with that YSO. Cognitive tests of the instrument were conducted with 40 teens, whose contacts were provided by the YSOs.

About the TJLES: The Teen Jewish Learning and Engagement Scales were developed by a team of social science researchers in consultation with other field experts to assess teens’ progress toward the 14 GenNow outcomes. See <https://www.jewishedproject.org/genznw> for information on the development of the TJLES. While the TJLES items don’t capture all dimensions of the outcomes they seek to measure, they provide researchers and professionals who work with Jewish youth a reliable and valid way to assess how and to what extent a teen’s engagement in Jewish activities can promote adolescent thriving.

Fielding the Survey: The survey was in the field from December 11, 2017, through January 21, 2018, through Qualtrics, an online platform. Participants were recruited through two major pathways: YSO participant lists and an anonymous link circulated on social media. Teens were incentivized to take the survey through offers for 763 Amazon/VISA gift cards ranging from \$50 to \$1,000.

Response Rate: A total of 88,649 email invitations to the survey were sent. After the data were cleaned of incomplete responses, duplicates, and suspicious responses, there were 17,576 respondents. Because of how the survey was distributed, we cannot know how many teens saw the anonymous link or were verbally invited to take the survey via text message. Therefore, we cannot calculate an overall response rate. We can calculate response rates based on the emailed survey invitations for the 12 YSOs that supplied a list of email contacts. YSO response rates ranged from 12% to 42%, with a mean of 23% and a median of 23.5%.



Eligibility for the Study: Any teen in the United States and Canada between the ages of 13 and 19 years old was eligible to complete the survey. Teens did not need to participate in a youth-serving organization, identify as Jewish, or come from a Jewish family to participate. Teens who responded both that they themselves were not Jewish *and* that their family members were not Jewish were excluded from all analyses in this report. For more information about the survey respondents, including gender, age, geographic distribution, and other demographic information, please see: <https://www.jewishedproject.org/genznw>.

Data Analysis: To compare outcomes for different groups of respondents (for example, those who participated in YSOs versus those who did not participate), we used the method of *Analysis of Covariates (ANCOVA)*, controlling for background and earlier educational experiences. Means reported based on this analysis are adjusted for these background variables and represent estimates for the population of Jewish teens. Statistically significant differences are noted in the charts. We used $p < 0.05$ as the threshold for statistical significance in this report, meaning that the likelihood that the differences we see are due to chance are less than 5%. We also report on findings from a *regression analysis*. In particular, we used hierarchical multiple linear regression models with three steps: demographics, experiences before high school, and experiences as teens. This approach allows us to understand the extent to which elements of teens’ background and experiences predict TJLES scores and how much each set of predictors (i.e., each step) contributes to understanding the variability in teens’ outcomes.

Finally, some of the information presented in this report relies on a *factor analysis*, a statistical technique that uncovers how survey items organize into underlying, overarching latent constructs. We found that the TJLES items fell under four main constructs (factors). We also found the factors to have good to excellent reliability (as measured by Cronbach’s alpha) with all four factors having internal consistency greater than α of 0.75.

The Interviews: After preliminary analysis of the survey data, we conducted 31 open-ended interviews with teens who met the survey eligibility requirements. Teens were recruited from two main pathways: respondents to the 2018 survey and teens who saw information posted about the interviews from cooperating organizations (Interfaithfamily.com, Bechol Lashon, and *jGirls Magazine*). A purposive quota-based sample was selected using key variables, including gender, age, U.S. region, Jewish family composition, and formal Jewish educational experiences. Approximately half of the teens in our sample were from families teens described as “some of us are Jewish, some of us are not.” Approximately one-quarter of our sample reported having attended a Jewish day school. Approximately half were engaged in a YSO since seventh grade.

The full survey instrument and a frequency report for each item are here: <https://www.jewishedproject.org/genznw>

Slides with additional data and analysis are here: <https://www.jewishedproject.org/genznw>

This report should be cited as Levites, Arielle and Sayfan, Liat (2019). *GenZ Now: Understanding and Connecting With Today’s Jewish Teens*. The Jewish Education Project and Rosov Consulting.

TJLES Survey Items by Factor

Factors	Survey Items
Self and Relations	Participating in Jewish activities makes me feel good about myself.
	Jewish programs are among my most favorite activities.
	I feel a strong connection to my Jewish heritage
	The things that I’ve learned about Jewish life make me want to learn much more.
	My participation in Jewish activities has helped me develop skills that I can use in my life.
	I’ve made some really good friends in Jewish activities.
	I have had close supportive conversations with counselor or other staff whom I met at Jewish activities.
Jewish Peoplehood and Israel	Going to a Jewish program/activity makes me feel that I belong somewhere.
	I feel very close to the Jewish people worldwide.
	I have a special responsibility to take care of Jews in need around the world.
	I feel a strong sense of connection to Israel.
Social Action	I know about Israel’s achievements and challenges.
	I learned from Jewish activities how I can work or volunteer in similar programs in the future.
	I am a leader in my community (congregation, school, youth organization, other extracurriculars)
	Jewish concepts of contributing to the world (for example, Tikkun Olam) inspire me to make the world a better place.
	Participating in Jewish activities has helped me become a more caring person.
	I see community service and volunteering as part of my Jewish life.
Jewish Life	Doing volunteer work is important to me.
	I believe in God or a universal spirit.
	I often reflect on what being Jewish means to me.
	It is important to me to make Shabbat feel different than the rest of the week.
	I like spending time with my family around the Jewish holidays.
	I ask my parents questions about Jewish life.

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