

The logo for atra, consisting of the lowercase letters 'atra' in a white, sans-serif font. To the right of the text is a stylized graphic element made of several parallel, slanted lines in shades of yellow and light blue, forming a shape reminiscent of a large letter 'A' or a series of steps.

From Calling to Career

Mapping the Current State and Future of Rabbinic Leadership

November 2025

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Preface

This study serves as both a mirror and a map: reflecting the multifaceted reality of today's American rabbinate and charting pathways toward mobilization and collective action.

We know from Atra's previous study, *The Rabbi Effect*, and Atra's work with thousands of rabbis and scores of Jewish organizations that **the need for strong rabbinic leadership is immense**. Yet the rabbinic "pipeline"—how rabbis are identified, trained, supported, and retained—has shifted. Some seminaries face shrinking classes; congregations struggle to find rabbis who "fit"; many rabbis experience burnout and turnover.

To strengthen rabbinic leadership so that Jewish communal needs are met, we must first understand it comprehensively and collectively. That need sparked this research, commissioned by Atra: Center for Rabbinic Innovation, whose mission is to strengthen rabbinic leadership in the US and ensure that every rabbi has the training, support, and vision to lead thriving communities.

The call began not with a single institution but with a shared concern. In 2022, Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove of Park Avenue Synagogue delivered a sermon that crystallized what so many were feeling across movements and institutions: that the vitality of rabbinic leadership depended on a strong rabbinic pipeline, which was too important to ignore. Leaders, funders, and partners answered that call, giving rise to this study—a collaboration that has, in itself, strengthened the field.

The findings reveal both challenge and promise. Structural issues that demand action—around recruitment, training, career sustainability, and institutional design. But there is also immense opportunity. **More than 450 "would-be" rabbis told us they once considered this path but turned away because the deterrents, real or perceived, felt too great.** What would it take to bring even a fraction of them into the fold? To make the rabbinate more attainable, supported, and sustainable, without compromising on quality and the needs of the communities these rabbis serve?

Moreover, **97% of American rabbis surveyed find that their work is rewarding.** Ninety-seven percent, across denominations, rabbinic roles, ages, genders. How many professions can say that today? Even amid burnout, shifting career paths, and changing enrollment trends, the calling to serve as a rabbi remains one of the most rewarding forms of work in Jewish life—a sacred blend of purpose, service, and connection. Rabbis touch lives, sustain communities, and shape the Jewish (and wider) future.

Rabbinic leadership is the oldest, most enduring form of Jewish leadership. **We cannot let it wane on our watch.**

This report is not an elegy. It is a call to action and a foundation for a renewed commitment to rabbinic life. The rabbinate has always evolved, adapting to new eras and needs. Our charge is to guide its next evolution with clarity, courage, and collaboration.

It feels fitting that this study is being released in Cheshvan, a month without holidays yet rich with potential, when rain begins to fall and inspiration turns to cultivation. So too, this work invites us to turn reflection into renewal, to water the seeds of leadership that will sustain Jewish life for generations.

May this study guide us toward what is possible when we act together to ensure that the next generation of Jewish leaders—and the communities they will serve—can flourish.

Dr. Rebekah Tokatlilar, Research Specialist

Rabbi Shira Koch Epstein, Executive Director, Atra: Center for Rabbinic Innovation

Acknowledgements

This project reflects the contributions of many individuals and institutions whose insight, generosity, and collaboration shaped the work at every stage. We have endeavored to capture the range of voices throughout this study; any oversights and inaccuracies are unintentional, and we appreciatively acknowledge the many voices who informed this work.

Research Participants

Thank you to the nearly 2000 survey respondents—rabbis, rabbinical students, would-be rabbis, and engaged Jews who never considered the rabbinate—and to the 80 interviewees. We are also grateful to the 25+ institutions (rabbinical schools, rabbinical associations, national Jewish organizations, and rabbi-employer organizations) that contributed extant data, illustrating the most complete portrait of the US rabbinate in at least a generation.

Research Team

This report would not exist without the brilliance, dedication, and persistence of the team at **Rosov Consulting**, who in over 2,000 hours of work designed this rigorous study, gathered and analyzed extensive data, and translated complex findings into actionable insights. Just as remarkable as their expertise was the generosity, warmth, and good humor they brought to every meeting and collaboration. With gratitude to:

Dr. Wendy Rosov, Founder, Principal and Lead Researcher

Dr. Frayda Gonshor Cohen, Managing Director, Qualitative Research Lead

Kierstin (Cy) Miller, Lead Data Analyst

Dr. M. Laurel-Leigh Meierdiercks, Research Operations Assistant

Annie Jollymore, Senior Project Lead, Interviews

Yaakov Malomet, Project Lead, Interviews

We are grateful to **Dr. Rebekah Tokatlilar**, who led and managed this research project from its inception to completion as managing consultant, overseeing it from concept to completion. She collaborated with the Atra team to secure funding, lead the RFP, proposal review, shape the study design and analysis, inform survey development, contribute to the report's writing, and guide its dissemination to the field. She galvanized the field to participate, and with persistence brought institutional partners to the table—even those hesitant to share data or unsure their systems could. Her strategic leadership, intellectual rigor, and relentless follow-through ensured the study's success.

We also thank **Emma Kraft**, Project Manager of the Rabbinic Pipeline Initiative, whose exceptional coordination made it possible to align this research with Atra's broader effort to mobilize the field. She managed logistics, communications, and project planning that turned complex, multi-stakeholder work into cohesive progress and prepared the groundwork for translating research into action.

Institutional Partners

We appreciate the institutions that shared data, perspectives, and networks, collaborating throughout this process. Their participation does not imply endorsement, however their collegial spirit and commitment to strengthening the rabbinic field is a beacon of hope for what we can achieve together.

Academy for Jewish Religion (AJR)

Academy for Jewish Religion, California (AJRCA)

ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal (ALEPH)

Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR)

Foundation for Jewish Camp (FJC)

Hadar Advanced Kollel

Hebrew College

Hebrew Union College– Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR)

Hillel International

Honeymoon Israel

International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism (IISHJ)

International Rabbinic Fellowship (IRF)

Jewish Community Centers Association of North America (JCCA)

Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA)

Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS)

Leading Edge

Moishe House/Base

Orthodox Union (OU)

Orthodox Union’s Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (OU JLIC)

Prizmah: Center for Jewish Day Schools

Rabbinical Assembly/United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (RA/USCJ)

Rabbinical Council of America (RCA)

Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA)

Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC)

Shalom Hartman Institute North America (SHI NA)

Union for Reform Judaism (URJ)

Yashrut

Yeshiva University, Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (YU RIETS)

Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (YCT)

Yeshivat Maharat

Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, American Jewish University (Ziegler, AJU)

Atra Staff

We are grateful to the Atra staff for their insight, flexibility, and unwavering support throughout this project. Their thoughtfulness, attention to detail, and collaborative spirit enriched both the process and the final product.

Atra Research Advisors

We extend heartfelt thanks to our research advisors, who partnered closely from the outset—offering feedback on research partner selection, study design, report drafts, and implications, and offering wise guidance throughout.

Janet Krasner Aronson, PhD is the interim Director of the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies and Steinhardt Social Research Institute at Brandeis University. She is interested in emerging trends in Jewish engagement and how best to measure, understand, and respond to these trends.

Wendy Cadge, PhD is the President and Professor of Sociology at Bryn Mawr College. She is an expert in contemporary American religion, especially related to religion in public institutions, religious diversity, religious and moral aspects of healthcare, and religion and immigration.

Bethamie Horowitz, PhD recently served as Director of Professional Learning Communities for CASJE (Collaborative for Applied Studies in Jewish Education) at The George Washington University as well as the Research Director of the Mapping Jewish Chaplaincy project (Chaplaincy Innovation Lab). A sociopsychologist, she has published widely on the sociology of American Jews in terms of population, identity, community, and education.

Rabbi Shirley Idelson, PhD is the Director of the Zelikow School of Jewish Nonprofit Management (Zschool) at the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC–JIR). Prior to that, Dr. Idelson served as the Director of the Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program at Brandeis University from 2020–2023. A historian, rabbi and journalist, Dr. Idelson published *We Shall Build Anew: Stephen S. Wise, the Jewish Institute of Religion, and the Reinvention of American Liberal Judaism* in 2022, exploring how Rabbi Stephen S. Wise changed the trajectory of American Reform Judaism over the course of the 20th century and well into the 21st century.

Jon A. Levisohn, PhD is an educational theorist with a particular interest in the desired outcomes of Jewish educational institutions and initiatives. He is the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Associate Professor of Jewish Educational Thought at Brandeis University, where he also directs the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education and chairs the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies.

Rabbi Daniel Smokler, PhD is the CEO of Assembly, an innovation laboratory with expertise in rabbinic and spiritual leadership, Jewish learning, and community-building. Dan served as the inaugural Chief Innovation Officer for Hillel International and received his rabbinical ordination by Rabbi Zalman Nechemia Goldberg zt”l, of Jerusalem’s highest rabbinic court. He holds a PhD in Education and Jewish Studies from NYU.

We also wish to thank **Stacie Cherner**, Director of Research and Learning at the Jim Joseph Foundation, who, in an informal capacity, offered valuable perspective and guidance throughout this study.

Atra Pipeline Project Rabbinic Advisory

We are grateful to our Pipeline Rabbinic Advisors—some of the most widely respected spiritual leaders—whose field experience informed the framing of the research implications for field impact and will inform strategies for strengthening coordination and shared purpose across the field.

Rabbi B. Elka Abrahamson, President, Wexner Foundation

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Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove, Senior Rabbi, Park Avenue Synagogue of New York City

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Rabbi Ben Spratt, Senior Rabbi, Congregation Rodeph Shalom of New York City

Rabbi Chaim Steinmetz, Senior Rabbi, Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun of New York City

Rabbi Evan Traylor, Assistant Rabbi, Congregation Beth Elohim of Brooklyn

Ms. Zissy Turner, Yoetzet Halacha, Congregation Agudath Sholom, Stamford CT and Faculty, SAR High School, Riverdale, NY

Philanthropic Supporters

This study was made possible through the generous support of the **H&F Baker Foundation** and extraordinary leadership of Atra board member **Dr. Heather Baker**, whose insight and conviction were the driving force behind its creation. Recognizing the urgent need to understand the rabbinic pipeline, Heather began by seeking this information herself on behalf of the foundation—conducting extensive interviews across the field, only to discover that the data simply did not exist. Determined to fill that gap, she partnered with Atra to ensure that the field would have a rigorous, evidence-based study to inform its future. Her steadfast belief that effective interventions must be grounded in data, coupled with her vision for a stronger and more sustainable rabbinate, brought this project to life. More than a philanthropic partner, Heather has been a true collaborator—asking incisive questions that sharpened our thinking, encouraging collaboration and connecting us with key leaders, and holding us to the highest standards of excellence. Her leadership has shaped not only this study, but the field-building work it continues to inspire. We also extend deep gratitude to **Bethany Lampland**, who represented the foundation with brilliance, curiosity, and unwavering commitment. Her thoughtful engagement and partnership strengthened this work in every dimension.

We also thank the **Jim Joseph Foundation** and the **Mandel Foundation** for their generous financial support, wise counsel, and partnership throughout this process. We are grateful for their ongoing commitment as longstanding allies in Atra's mission to strengthen rabbinic leadership.

Atra's Board of Advisors

With thanks to Atra's Board of Advisors for their leadership and commitment:

Alisa Doctoroff, Chair

Lisa Messinger, Immediate Past Chair

Heather Baker

Mimi Kravetz

Faith Leener

Alisa Levin

Abigail Pogrebin

David Resnick

Emily Scharfman

Daniel Septimus

Daniel Smokler

Introduction

Context for this study

Over the past decade, Jewish leaders have sounded an alarm about the state of the rabbinic pipeline in the United States: the system through which rabbis are identified, trained, placed, and retained in roles of Jewish leadership. While it is widely recognized that the number of rabbis entering the field has not kept pace with communal demand, especially in congregational settings, much of the discourse has relied on anecdotes or incomplete data. To move beyond conjecture, Atra: Center for Rabbinic Innovation commissioned this study, conducted by Rosov Consulting, to provide the first data-driven picture of the contemporary American rabbinate and rabbinic pipeline. Its goal: to clarify what is happening across the rabbinic pipeline in the US and inform coordinated strategies to strengthen the field.

What this study includes

This report offers a detailed, data-driven account of the current state of the rabbinic workforce¹ in the US and the factors shaping its future. It presents new quantitative and qualitative evidence about:

- who today's rabbis and rabbinical students are;
- who aspires to become a rabbi, and, what motivates or deters them;
- how the professional landscape of rabbinic work is changing.

Drawing on multiple data sources—surveys, institutional datasets, job postings, and interviews—the study provides the most complete portrait of US rabbinic leadership in at least a generation.

Research and analysis took place from October 2024 to October 2025, encompassing a year of data collection, analysis, and consultation across the rabbinic ecosystem. The process included institutional data aggregation, job posting analysis, a national survey of approximately 2,000 rabbis, students, and potential rabbis, and 80 interviews with leaders, educators, and practitioners.

What is beyond the scope

This report does not evaluate individual seminaries or movements, prescribe policy, judge the quality of rabbinic education, nor weight theological or ideological differences. Instead, it provides the empirical foundation upon which such conversations can proceed productively.

¹ This study includes data collected from self-described Conservative, denominational Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Reform, Renewal, non-denominational, and non-denominational Orthodox institutions. Additional methodological context is provided in the Methodology section of the report, and Appendix A includes a complete list of institutions included.

Research questions

The study was guided by several key questions:

- What is the size and composition of today's rabbinic workforce in the US?
- How have patterns of rabbinical school enrollment, ordination, and employment changed over time and what do these currently reveal?
- What motivates people to pursue rabbinic ordination, and what deters them?

How to read this report

The report proceeds in five parts:

1. **Mapping the Landscape:** the rabbinate and the institutions that train and employ rabbis.
2. **The Workforce Today:** rabbis' demographics, roles, and satisfaction.
3. **Emerging Generations:** current rabbinical students and would-be rabbis.
4. **Motivation and Deterrence:** patterns of and insights into why motivated people do or don't enter the rabbinate.
5. **Implications Toward Action:** key insights and opportunities for the field to consider.

Methodology

Complete descriptions of this study's data sources, sampling, and analytic procedures appear in the supplemental Methodology Appendix (Appendix A).

This study used a mixed methods approach drawing on multiple complementary data sources to develop a comprehensive picture of the contemporary rabbinic pipeline in the US. Data collection included background research; document analysis; a survey of rabbis, rabbinical students, and non-rabbis; and interviews with a broad range of stakeholders.

Background Research and Job Description Analysis

To contextualize this study, researchers first conducted an extensive review of recent literature and reports that have been written about scope, scale, and nature of rabbinic pipeline issues from the last five to 10 years as well as a review of literature on additional clergy and workforce trends from within and beyond the Jewish community. In addition, 39 rabbinic job postings from the past two years were analyzed across denominations and employment settings, including congregational, campus, educational, and institutional roles.

Key Informant Interviews

Thirty-one key informant interviews were conducted with rabbinical school professionals (14), rabbinical and congregational associations (7), national umbrella organizations that employ, contract, or oversee rabbis (7), and congregational hiring committees and personnel (3). These conversations provided critical insight into how institutions perceive the nature of the changes in the rabbinic pipeline including shifts in enrollment, rabbinical training, career pathways, and hiring needs. Interviews followed semi-structured protocols to ensure consistency across respondents while allowing flexibility for emergent themes. Notes and transcripts were coded using thematic analysis. A complete list of the institutions that participated as key informants is included in Appendix A.

Working Rabbi Estimates and Rabbinical School Enrollment Data

In order to generate a defensible estimate of the number of rabbis currently working in the US, data were compiled from rabbinical schools, professional associations, and national umbrella organizations that employ, contract, or oversee rabbis.

The following data were requested from all rabbinical schools about their alumni, from all rabbinical associations about their members, and from other organizations that employ rabbis:

1. Rabbi name
2. Year ordained
3. Institution where ordained
4. Gender
5. Year of birth
6. Current positions (organization name, role, type, tenure)
7. Current location (city, state)

Additional data were gathered from rabbinical schools to document trends in rabbinical school enrollment and ordination over the past 20 years as well as aggregate demographic data about the current rabbinical student body.

A complete list of the institutions that provided these data is included in Appendix A. While every effort was made to gather comprehensive data from all relevant institutions for ordination and enrollment trends, information was not available in every case or was incomplete. The findings therefore reflect the best available data at the time of analysis.

In developing our estimate of the number of rabbis currently working in the US, we established the following **criteria for inclusion** and criteria for how this study defines “**working rabbis**”:

This study’s population of interest includes only non-Haredi rabbis that are currently working in rabbinic careers. For our purposes, Haredi includes Hasidic rabbis (including Chabad) and non-Hasidic rabbis. We define “non-Haredi” as anyone who received *semicha* (rabbinic ordination) from a non-Orthodox institution plus those who received Orthodox *semicha* from Maharat, YCT, RIETS, or HTC. There are some rabbis who have been included in our estimate who received private Haredi *semicha* or *semicha* from Haredi institutions. These rabbis are included because their rabbinical association affiliation and/or employer indicates their involvement beyond the Haredi community.

For the purposes of this study, “rabbinic careers” include congregational rabbis, chaplains, rabbis working for Hillels, Federations, rabbinical associations, Jewish non-profits, rabbis who are day school or rabbinical school faculty or administrators, university professors teaching Jewish Studies or similar, community educators, and independent rabbis.

Survey

A survey was fielded between April and May 2025 to gather perspectives from current and former rabbis, current and former rabbinical students, those who considered rabbinical school but did not attend, as well as those who did not consider rabbinical school. The survey was distributed through institutional partners, funders, and selected professional networks.

Following data cleaning, there were 1,996 valid responses that were aggregated into four primary analytical groups: current and former rabbis, current and former students, those who considered rabbinical school but did not attend (so-called “Would-bes”), and those who never considered rabbinical school but who were engaged Jewishly (“Never Considereds”). Total response counts are shown in the table below.

Figure 1. Total Survey Responses by Response Group

Response Group	Unweighted Response Count
Rabbis	1,052
Current rabbis	847
Retired rabbis	166
Rabbis who left the field prior to retirement	39
Students	214
Current students	185
Former students who left prior to ordination	29
Would-bes	450
Never Considereds	280
Total	1,996

Prior to analysis, statistical weights were applied to rabbi and student responses. Weighting adjusts survey responses so that the distributions of key demographic or institutional characteristics in the sample align with those of the target population. This preserves the relationships among variables within the dataset while correcting for over- or under-representation of specific groups thus allowing for greater generalizability of the data.

Additional information about data weights is included in Appendix A.

Follow-up Interviews

Fifty (50) follow-up interviews were conducted with survey respondents who agreed to be contacted. Interviewees included current rabbis (22), current rabbinical school students (10), Would-be’s (10), students who left rabbinical school before ordination (5), and rabbis who left the field prior to retirement (3). The goal of these interviews was to provide deeper qualitative insight into the motivations, deterrents, and career trajectories revealed in the survey.

Interviews followed semi-structured protocols to ensure consistency across respondents while allowing flexibility for emergent themes. Notes and transcripts were coded using thematic analysis aligned with the survey’s motivator and deterrent constructs, allowing cross-validation between qualitative and quantitative strands.

Key Findings

The Current Rabbinate

1. The Rabbinic Workforce Is Aging

This study provides the most comprehensive estimate of active rabbis serving in congregational, chaplaincy, campus, educational, nonprofit, and independent roles. Of the approximately **4,144 rabbis** working nationwide, only **6%** are under 35, while **26%** are over 65 – an age profile older than Christian clergy. With an average ordination age of 33–35, rabbis are entering the field later and staying longer. Without a younger influx, retirements will soon outpace replacements.

2. Rabbis Find Deep Meaning in Their Work but Burnout Is Widespread

97% of rabbis find their work meaningful and rewarding, yet burnout is pervasive, especially in congregational roles. Many cite emotional exhaustion, financial stress, and institutional dysfunction as reasons for leaving mid-career. New rabbis often feel underprepared for the skills needed for the managerial, fundraising, and pastoral demands of modern rabbinic life.

3. Congregational Work Still Dominates But Non-Congregational Roles Are Growing

More than half of rabbis (56%) serve in congregations, yet many view the work as emotionally taxing and structurally unsustainable. Unrealistic expectations, lack of appropriate feedback, and limited time for spiritual renewal make it difficult to balance professional and personal life. Financial remuneration is one of the few areas where congregational rabbis are more satisfied with their career when compared to rabbis serving in other capacities. More rabbis are finding fulfillment in education, chaplaincy, social impact, and innovation. These positions offer stronger work-life balance and align with evolving definitions of Jewish leadership. Hillel, for example, reports **19 applicants per open role**, a striking contrast to many pulpits struggling to hire. However, non-congregational rabbis are more poorly compensated, and more than 6 in 10 of non-congregational rabbis are dissatisfied with their salary and benefits.

The Future Rabbinate

1. Enrollment Has Declined but May Be Reaching a New Equilibrium

Over the past 20 years, non-Orthodox rabbinical school enrollment and ordination have declined unevenly. Major denominational seminaries saw steep drops through 2020, while smaller and non-denominational schools held steady or grew modestly. Since 2020, enrollment appears to have plateaued somewhat overall suggesting a new, smaller but more stable normal.

2. Rabbinical Enrollment Shifts Toward Smaller and Non-Denominational Institutions

As of 2022-2023, enrollments at smaller-denominational/non-denominational schools surpassed that of large-denominational schools. From 2008 to 2020, enrollment at large-denominational schools declined by an average of 16 students per year, while smaller-denominational/non-denominational schools grew by about two. Since 2020, the decline among large-denominational schools has slowed to nine students per year, while smaller-denominational/non-denominational schools have accelerated - adding roughly four students annually. By 2022-23, their combined enrollment surpassed that of the large denominational schools, a trend that has continued through 2024-25.

3. Today's Rabbinical Students: Demographically Distinct & Second Careers

66% of current rabbinical students entered as second-career adults, drawn to serve as rabbis in part because of their adult Jewish learning experiences and increasingly without a history of significant youth engagement. By contrast, of rabbis ordained prior to 1994 only 14% were second career followed by 31% of those ordained between 1995 and 2004 and 43% of those ordained since 2005.

Today's rabbinical students also represent changing demographics: 58% women, 30% men, 12% non-binary; 51% LGBTQ+; about 16% Jews by choice and 4% from multi-heritage households; and 12% identify as a race other than white.

4. Motivation for the Rabbinate is Strong But Practical Deterrents Impede the Pipeline

Those who consider but do not pursue the rabbinate express similar levels of motivation to those who do become rabbis, but for these individuals the deterrents are too great. Financial strain, the time and relocation required for study, perceptions that the career is untenable, uncertainty about institutional "fit," and concerns about career intensity weigh heavily. The findings suggest that practical and structural barriers, not waning inspiration and interest, are driving the contraction in the pipeline.

Factors like attitudes toward Israel and Zionism, the perceived prestige of the rabbinate, or others' negative opinions about choosing this career ranked among the *lowest* deterrents. The challenges narrowing the pipeline are practical, not ideological or reputational.

A Declining Rabbinic Pipeline

One of the central animating questions of this study, driven by op-eds, discussions, and often much hand-wringing, is whether the pipeline of future rabbis is drying up. To date, most of this conversation has centered on declining enrollment and ordinations at non-Orthodox institutions affiliated with the larger and older denominational movements: the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College (HUC), the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) and Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC).²

Using data provided by the rabbinical schools, this study aimed to explore this question of declining enrollment across these larger denominational institutions as well as non-denominational and smaller denominational rabbinical schools, which, in the context of this study include the Academy for Jewish Religion (AJR), the Academy for Jewish Religion, California (AJRCA), Hebrew College, ALEPH, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (YCT), and Maharat.³ Figure 2 shows total rabbinical school enrollment trends across these institutions over the past 20 years (i.e., from 2004–05 through 2024–25). **Across all institutions, total enrollment has decreased by an average of nine students per year during this 20-year period.**

However, this decline has not affected all institutions equally. These data indicate that the combined total enrollment at institutions aligned with the larger and older denominational movements decreased by an average of 12 students per year across this 20-year period. During the same period, however, combined total enrollment in non-denominational and smaller-denominational rabbinical schools increased by an average of three students per year.

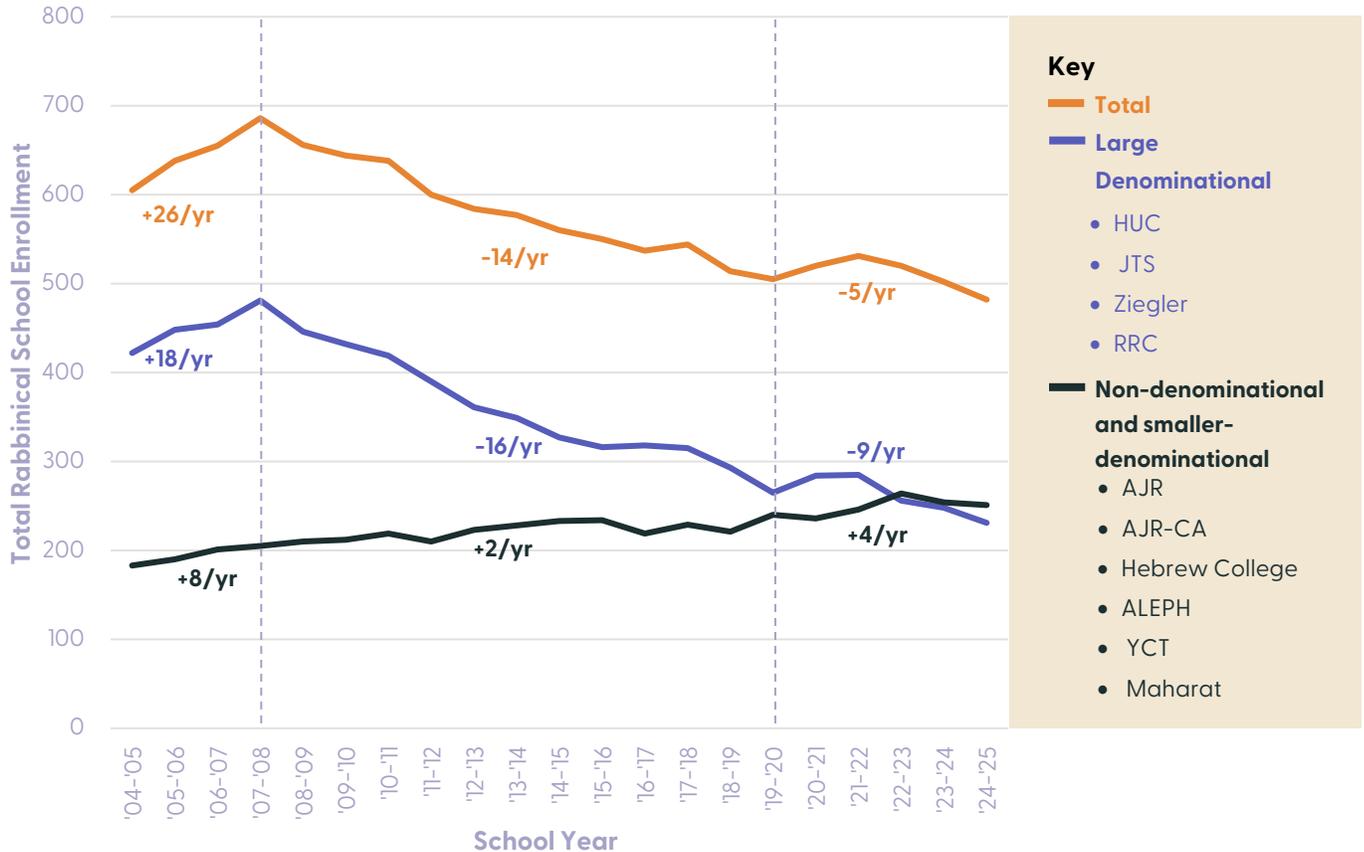
Looking at the timeline in greater detail, between 2004 and 2008, total enrollment grew across both groups: large denominational schools by 18 students per year, and smaller-denominational/non-denominational schools by eight per year. **Since 2008, their trajectories have sharply diverged; the overarching storyline of the larger denominations has been one of decline while the overarching storyline of the non-denominational/small-denominational institutions has been one of consistent growth.** From 2008 to 2020, enrollment at the large denominational schools dropped by 16 students per year, while smaller-denominational/non-denominational schools continued modest growth, gaining two students per year.

² Paula Jacobs, "Wanted: More Rabbis," Tablet Magazine (March 12, 2023); Arno Rosenfeld, "As Movements Recede in Jewish Life, Reform and Conservative Seminaries Shrink," Forward (March 25, 2022); Shira Teluskin, "A New American Judaism," The Atlantic (February 12, 2024); Yehuda Kurtzer, "The Great American Rabbi Shortage," *Identity/Crisis* (April 20, 2022)

³ Though it was requested, data on enrollment and ordinations was not provided by RIETS or HTC. Data was provided by RCA that supplements these missing data, to an extent, but data was not comprehensive enough to fully develop graphs of comparable trends.

Since 2020, decline among the large denominational schools has slowed, averaging nine fewer students per year despite a brief uptick from 2020 to 2022. Meanwhile, smaller-denominational/non-denominational schools have continued to grow, adding four students per year. In 2022–23, their total enrollment surpassed that of the large denominational schools, a pattern that has persisted through 2024–25.

Figure 2. Total Enrollment Since 2004

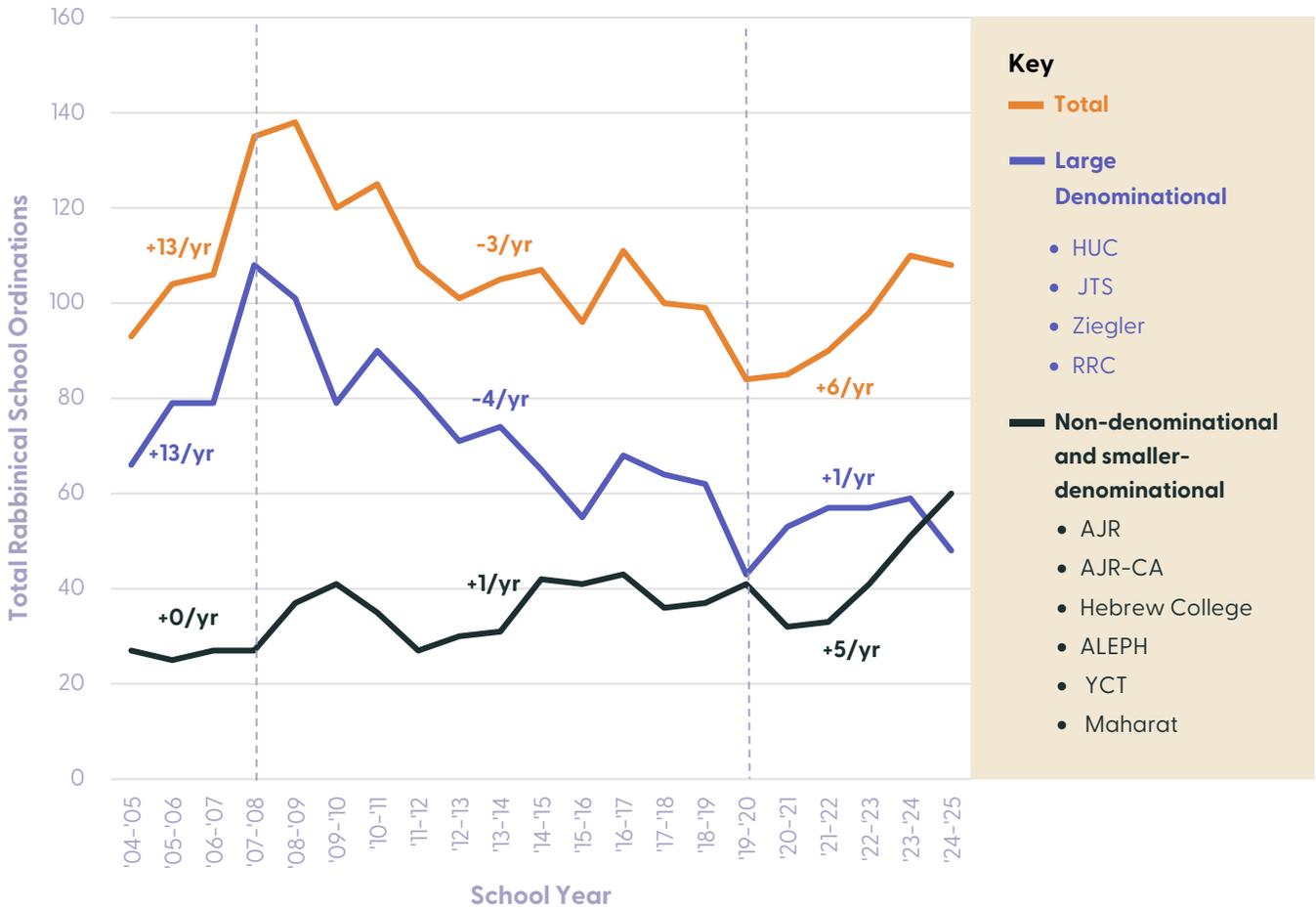


Ordination trends (Figure 3) largely mirror these enrollment patterns, though with more volatility due to smaller class sizes, variable program lengths, and unknown attrition rates.⁴ Between **2005 and 2008, total ordinations increased by 13 per year**, driven entirely by growth at the large denominational schools. From **2008 to 2020, total ordinations declined by three per year**, reflecting decline at the large denominational schools even as smaller/non-denominational institutions saw modest gains.

Since 2020, overall ordinations have risen by **six per year, with large denominational schools adding one and smaller-denominational/non-denominational schools adding five annually**. However, the most recent year (2024–25) saw a downturn in ordinations at the large denominational schools. This, paired with the decline in overall enrollment since 2022 indicates that the uptick in ordinations over the last few years is not likely to continue in the near term.

⁴ The research team requested annual attrition rates, but none of the rabbinical schools could provide them.

Figure 3. Total Ordinations Since 2004



Who are Today's U.S.-Based Rabbis?

A key objective of this research was to generate a defensible estimate of the number of rabbis currently working in the US. As discussed in the Methodology section and more comprehensively in Appendix A, to generate this estimate data were compiled from rabbinical schools, professional associations, and national umbrella organizations that employ, contract, or oversee rabbis.

For ease of reference, throughout this section, we will use the shorthand term **“working rabbis”** to describe our population of interest, which includes **only rabbis who fall within the inclusion criteria outlined in the Methodology section of this report**—namely, US-based, non-Haredi rabbis currently employed in rabbinic careers.

Using our established criteria for inclusion, we estimate the current number of working rabbis in the US is 4,144. We are aware that some data are missing from our estimates,⁵ but we are confident that our estimate likely captures over 90% of currently working rabbis. Estimating that our coverage is between 90% and 100%, we approximate that there are between 4,144 and 4,604 rabbis currently working in the US that fit within our criteria for inclusion.

Denomination

While noting the decline of clear denominational affiliation in the 21st century American Jewish landscape, the existing rabbinical schools and seminaries largely still define themselves denominationally.⁶

Per the data that we collected, as shown in Figures 4 and 5, over one-third of working rabbis (35%) were ordained at Reform institutions (HUC in almost all cases, with a small number from Leo Baeck in London or Geiger in Berlin). One-quarter were ordained at Conservative institutions (19% JTS, 5% Ziegler, with the remainder from Frankel in Berlin, Latin American Rabbinical Seminary in Buenos Aires, and Schechter in Jerusalem). Just under one-fifth (18%) were ordained at Orthodox institutions. Eight percent are from RIETS, 4% are from YCT or Maharat, and 4% are from other institutions (including HTC and various yeshivot) or received private semicha. Just over one-in-ten (11%) were ordained at non-denominational institutions (4% Hebrew College, 3% AJR, 2% AJRCA, and the remaining 2% from other institutions including Yashrut, Hartman, Hadar, and others).

⁵ As shown in Appendix A, a number of small, non-denominational programs did not provide data. Additionally, RIETS and HTC did not independently provide data; therefore, estimates of their numbers rely on data provided by RCA, which may not include all ordained rabbis currently working in “rabbinical careers.” Additionally, the extent to which we have fully captured those with non-Haredi private semicha cannot be confirmed.

⁶ Pew Research Center. *Jewish Americans in 2020*. Pew Research Center (May 11, 2021); Paula Jacobs. “Beyond Conservative and Reform: The Rise of the Unaffiliated Synagogue,” *Tablet Magazine* (January 19, 2022)

Figure 4. Number of Working Rabbis by Denomination

Reform	1,445	35%
Conservative	1,050	25%
Non-denominational	465	11%
Modern Orthodox	353	9%
Reconstructionist	304	7%
Haredi	197	5%
Non-denominational Orthodox	175	4%
Renewal	155	4%
TOTAL	4,144	100%

Figure 5. Number of Working Rabbis By Institution Where Ordained

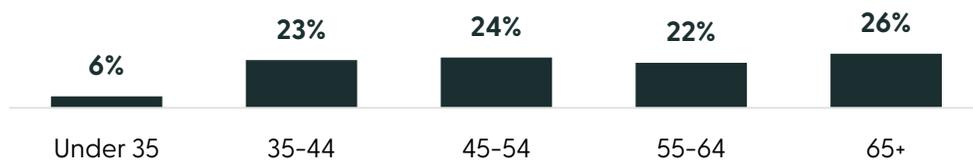
HUC	1,430	35%
JTS	793	19%
RIETS	325	8%
RRC	304	7%
Ziegler	223	5%
Hebrew College	166	4%
ALEPH	155	4%
YCT	125	3%
AJR	120	3%
AJRCA	103	2%
Maharat	48	1%
Other/Private	352	9%
TOTAL	4,144	100%

Age

The age breakdown of working rabbis is shown in Figure 6. Among working rabbis for which we have age data, just over two-thirds (69%) are between the ages of 35 and 64. Among working rabbis, only 6% are under 35. For rabbis, the average age at ordination is 33, which partially explains this very low relative proportion. The remaining 26% of working rabbis are 65 or older.

Of note, age data were provided for or were found for 87% of working rabbis. About half of the rabbis for whom there is missing age data were ordained at institutions known to primarily serve second-career rabbis. As such, the true age breakdown of working rabbis may actually skew slightly older than what is presented here.

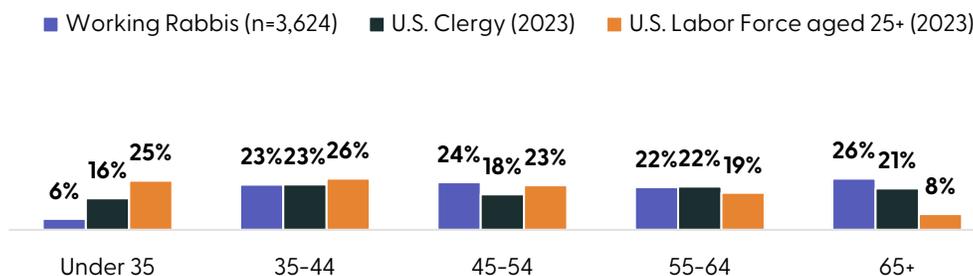
Figure 6. Current Age of Working Rabbis (n=3,624)



Comparing the age of working rabbis to other clergy and the US labor force

To better contextualize the age distribution of working rabbis, Figure 7 shows the breakdown alongside all US clergy⁷ as well as all US civilian labor (over age 25, only). According to *Clergy Age Trends Across Christian Traditions* by the Religious Workforce Project, the age of clergy across all major Christian traditions in the US has steadily increased over the past two decades. Between 1998 and 2018, the median age of lead pastors rose from 49 to 57. At the same time, the pipeline of younger clergy has declined significantly with those under age 35 accounting for only 0–8% of lead pastors across traditions. The report emphasizes that while the aging of Baby Boomers accounts for part of this trend, demographic shifts alone cannot fully explain these issues. Other contributing factors include the rise in second-career clergy and a declining number of younger people pursuing ordination.⁸

Figure 7. Current Age of Working Compared to US Clergy and the US Civilian Labor Force (Over Age 25)



⁷US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment projections: Civilian labor force by age, sex, race, and ethnicity. (2023)

⁸Lovett H. Weems Jr., *Clergy Age Trends Across Christian Traditions*, (2024)

As mentioned, just over two-thirds (69%) of working rabbis are between the ages of 35 and 64. This aligns with the Bureau of Labor Statistics' labor force data, which shows that 63% of clergy, and 68% of all 25+ US labor are between 35 and 64. **The sharpest divergence appears at the youngest end of the age spectrum: whereas 25% of the 25+ civilian labor force is between 25 and 34, only 16% of US clergy and just 6% of currently working rabbis are under 35.** Additionally, the average age at ordination has increased over time. Among all working rabbis, the average age at ordination is 33, but the average age at ordination is 35 when considering only those ordained after 2015. The relatively older age at the start of rabbis' careers accounts for some, but not all, of the discrepancy between working rabbis and the 25+ US civilian labor force. However, even when this fact is accounted for, the proportion of rabbis under 35 is still lower than expected. Also, assuming that average age at ordination is likely similar among other US clergy,⁹ we see that the proportion of working rabbis under 35 is significantly lower than all US clergy under 35, as well. This supports that young people are not entering the rabbinate at a sustainable rate, paralleling and possibly amplifying the clergy aging crisis documented across Christian traditions.

Looking at the oldest in the workforce, we see that working 65 and older comprise over one-quarter (26%) of working rabbis. Among all US clergy, 21% are 65 and older. Conversely, people 65 and older comprise only 7% of the 25+ civilian labor force. As stated in Appendix A of this report, to the extent possible, retirees were removed from the list of rabbis. As we will see in more detail, the majority of rabbis over 65 are working in non-congregational roles, so some of this persistence may be attributed to rabbis who have retired from the pulpit and are working in a part-time, independent, and/or adjunct capacity. Nonetheless, these data indicate that, in general, rabbis are working longer than the rest of the US labor force, a phenomenon that is also observed among other US clergy.

Location

Location data were provided for or were found for 96% of working rabbis. A map of the working rabbis with known locations across the nine US Census Divisions is shown in Figure 8. Overall, the proportion of working rabbis by Census Division aligns well with the proportion of the Jewish community by Census Division.¹⁰ For example, 34% of the US Jewish population resides in the Middle Atlantic Division (which includes New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania) and 32% of working rabbis serve this area.¹¹

By division, the largest observed discrepancies are in New England and the South Atlantic. In New England, 12% of working rabbis serve only 7% of the Jewish

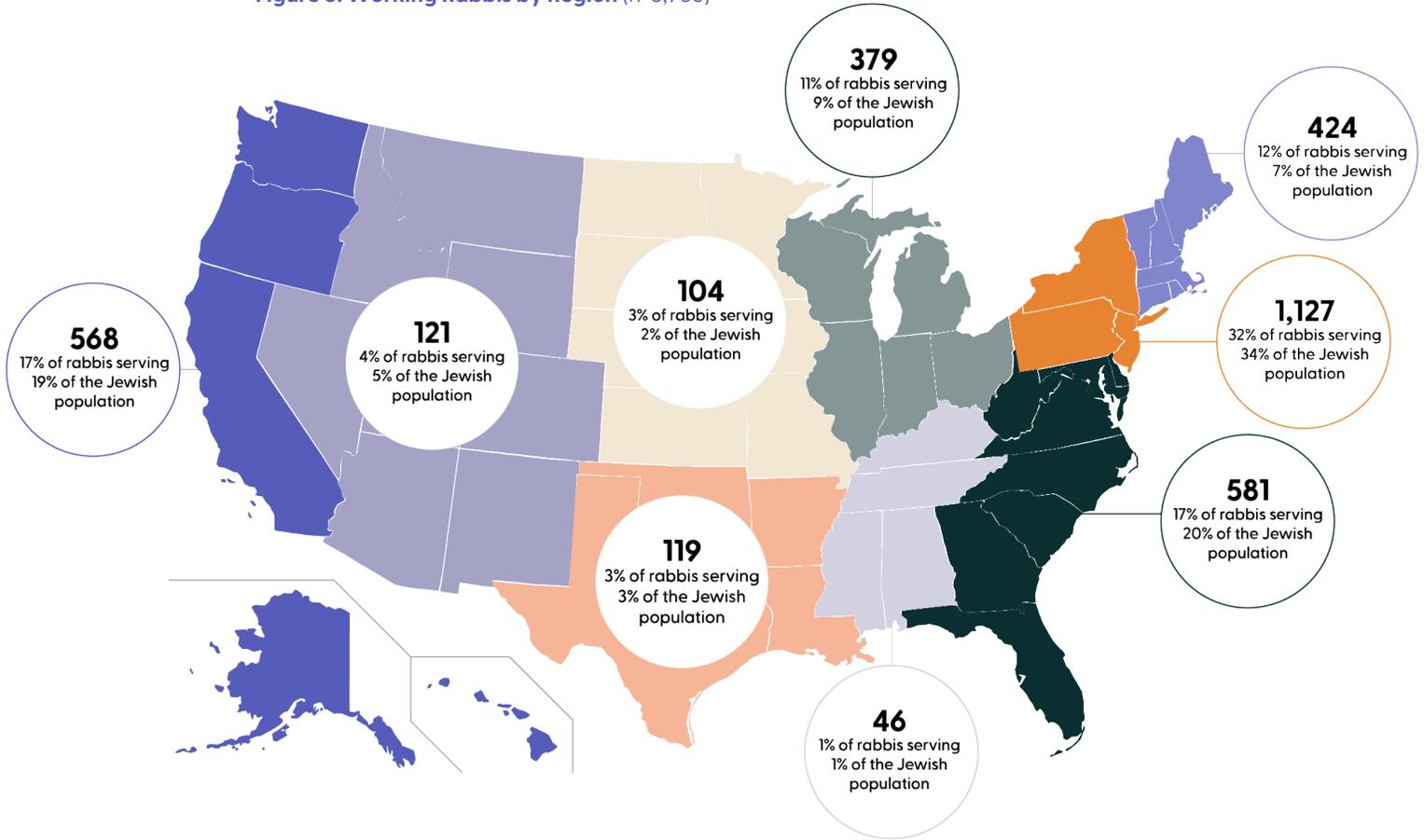
⁹ Since 1999, the average age at ordination for Catholic priests is 35 (US Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations, 2024), the median age for Orthodox priests since the 1990s has been 38 (Namee, 2019), and the average age for Presbyterian ministers was 39 between 2007 and 2016 (Presbyterian Outlook, 2018).

¹⁰ Jewish Virtual Library, "Jewish Population in the United States by State (1899-present)," (2024)

¹¹ Of note, estimates of the US Jewish population include all US Jews. This includes Haredi communities that are served primarily by rabbis who fall outside of this study's criteria for inclusion.

population. Most of this discrepancy is due to Massachusetts, where 8% of rabbis serve only 4% of the US Jewish population. In the South Atlantic, the issue is reversed and only 17% of working rabbis serve 20% of the US Jewish population. Most of this discrepancy is due to Florida, which has 10% of the US Jewish population, but only 5% of working rabbis.

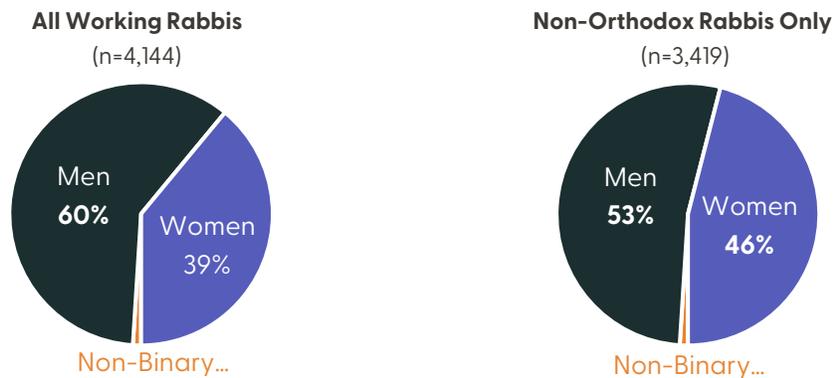
Figure 8. Working Rabbis by Region (n=3,986)



Gender

Among all working rabbis, 39% are women, and looking only at non-Orthodox rabbis, 46% are women (Figure 9).

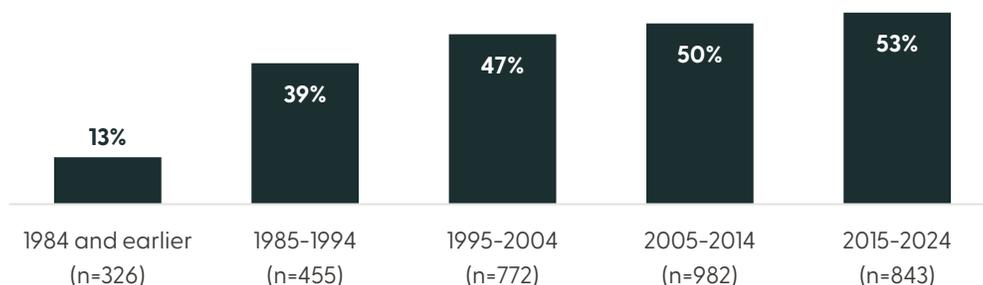
Figure 9. Gender Distribution of Working Rabbis



Looking across ordination year, the percentage of women increases over time. Among working rabbis who received *semicha* in 1984 or earlier, 13% are women, and among working rabbis who received *semicha* between 2015 and 2024, 53% are women (Figure 10). Furthermore, 2% of rabbis ordained between 2015 and 2024 are non-binary.

This increase in female clergy over time is mirrored across various Christian denominations. The United Church of Christ reports 53% of ordained clergy are female per their 2023 statistical profile of the denomination.¹² The United Methodist Church (UMC) reported that between 27% and 32% of their clergy are women, and that the percentage of female clergy in the UMC has been slowly but steadily increasing since their approval to receive full ordination in 1956.¹³

Figure 10. Percentage of Female Working Rabbis Across Ordination Year*



* Includes only non-Orthodox Rabbis

Primary rabbinic jobs

Most working rabbis (56%) are primarily congregational rabbis of some kind. This means that, though they may have other rabbinic jobs, their primary role is within a synagogue/congregational setting. Nonprofit and communal rabbis (e.g., those working for JFSs, JCCs, community education programs, etc.) follow at 14%. Chaplains, those working for rabbinical schools and associations, independent and entrepreneurial rabbis, day school rabbis, university rabbis (whether professors or campus rabbis), Hillel rabbis, and others are each between 7% and 2%.¹⁴

¹² UCC Center for Analytics, Research & Data (CARD). 2023 Statistical Profile. (2023). United Church of Christ.

¹³ General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. “Clergywomen,” United Methodist Church, (2025)

¹⁴ Both the literature and the data collection process confirm that there are many rabbis with multiple jobs. Therefore, reducing rabbis down to a “primary career” may not be accurate for many of these rabbis. Furthermore, because much of these data came from rabbinical associations, the proportion of those who hold congregational positions as a “primary career” may be overestimated and those who hold other positions (particularly independent/entrepreneurial positions) may be underestimated.

Figure 11. Rabbis' Primary Careers

Congregational	2,339	56%
Nonprofit/Communal	571	14%
Chaplain	285	7%
Rabbinical Schools and Associations	248	6%
Independent/Entrepreneurial	219	5%
Day School ¹⁵	178	4%
University	133	3%
Hillel ¹⁶	104	3%
Other	67	2%
TOTAL	4,144	100%

Key informant interviewees—particularly those within the large, non-Orthodox denominational movements—consistently reported that newly ordained rabbis today are more likely to pursue non-congregational careers immediately after ordination than in the past. While this perception cannot be quantitatively confirmed due to the lack of historical placement data, it emerged repeatedly across interviews. Because available data on working rabbis capture only a single point in time, they cannot confirm or refute whether today's new rabbis are indeed bypassing congregational roles more often than earlier cohorts did.

What the data *can* show is that among rabbis affiliated with the large, non-Orthodox movements—Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist—those ordained longer ago are somewhat more likely to now work outside congregational settings, while more recent ordinands are modestly more likely to be serving congregations. Figure 12 illustrates the share of rabbis across ordination year whose primary position is congregational: **65% of rabbis ordained since 2015 hold congregational roles compared with 52% of those ordained in 1984 or earlier.** Notably, many ordained before 1984 have retired

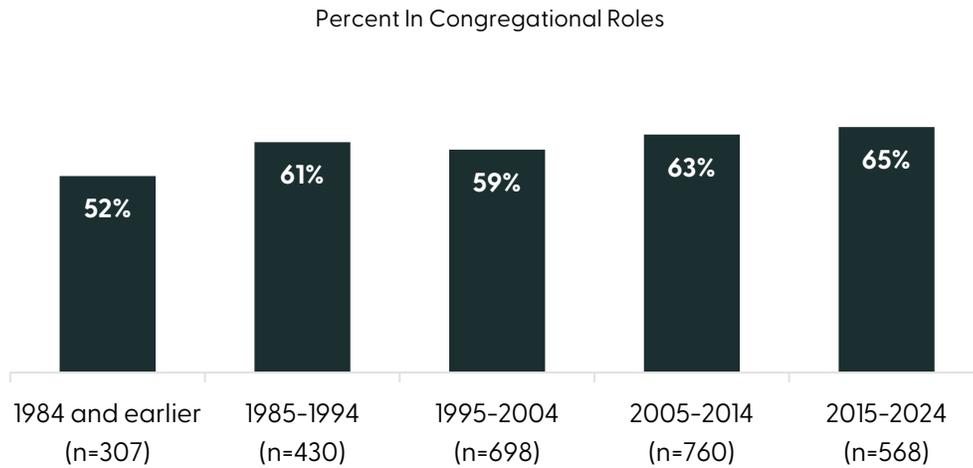
¹⁵ Additional research into day school rabbis that extrapolates on data provided by Prizmah and the AVI CHAI Foundation (Besser, 2020) indicates that there are likely around 320 non-Orthodox rabbis employed in day school settings (and likely over 1,000 in Orthodox—including ultra-Orthodox—settings). These estimates do not necessarily contradict the number reported in Figure 15 as many may be part-time positions and not counted as a rabbi's "primary role."

¹⁶ To confirm this number, data was collected from Hillel's website to estimate the total number of Hillel rabbis. Using data about what campuses have at least one rabbi. In many cases, rabbis may cover a region of campuses. We then estimated that each regional grouping with a confirmed rabbi had only one rabbi. Using these data, we were able to estimate that there are approximately 100 Hillel rabbis, which aligns with data collected for the list of working rabbis.

from full-time pulpits and now serve in part-time capacities such as chaplaincy, teaching, or consulting. However, **among rabbis ordained between 1995 and 2004—who are, on average, not of typical retirement age—59% are in congregational positions.**

This finding, paired with the assertion from key informant interviews that more newly ordained rabbis are choosing non-congregational careers today than they did in the past, suggests that a **sizable portion of rabbis have made mid-career transitions from congregational to non-congregational roles.**

Figure 12. Percentage of Rabbis Ordained through Large Non-Orthodox Movements Who Currently Serve in Congregational Roles, by Ordination Year



Rabbinical Careers, Career Satisfaction, and Rabbis' Lived Experience

The Job Market: Congregational Versus Non-Congregational Rabbinic Work

Interviews and job description analyses reveal that challenges in the rabbinic pipeline stem not only from a shortage of rabbis, but also from a mismatch between available jobs and the kinds of rabbinic work people now want to do. The contemporary rabbinic job market is bifurcated: on one side are the traditional congregational roles, which remain the most numerous and often the most visible, and on the other are non-congregational roles in education, chaplaincy, campus work, nonprofit leadership, and elsewhere that have grown steadily in both number and appeal.

Interviewees from two different rabbinical associations characterized these issues well:

It is not at all... a question of there not being enough rabbis for jobs. I think there aren't enough jobs that are appropriate jobs for rabbis to want to fill.

There are plenty of rabbis. There's a shortage of rabbis who want to serve in congregational work.

Across the job market, expectations for rabbis have expanded dramatically. After analyzing 39 job descriptions for roles with rabbinic qualifications, certain universal qualities emerged. The “ideal candidate” is typically expected to possess a strong knowledge of Jewish texts and tradition, demonstrate impressive communication skills, act with care and pastoral sensitivity, and must be capable of inspiring and engaging others. Hiring organizations are looking for individuals who simultaneously fulfill the roles of teacher, guide, counselor, and role model, whose presence is meant to enrich the spiritual and cultural lives of those around them while remaining relatable, particularly to young people. Frequently the postings include phrases like “dynamic leader,” “compassionate listener,” and “team player.” While hard skills are important and those qualifications are clearly spelled out in the listings, the emphasis on personality characteristics is far from implicit. The rabbinic candidates must be warm, approachable, collaborative, authentic, and nurturing. Regardless of the job type, the candidate must be capable of offering empathetic counseling to their congregation, community, students, or others under their care. These credentials, while often paired with certifications like mental health training, clearly depict a desire for a rabbi that is emotionally intelligent and can provide a comforting presence.

Another shared theme is the desire for authenticity. It is crucial that the candidate embody the values they are meant to cultivate in others. Regardless of whether the role is focused on spiritual leadership, teaching, or student engagement, job postings consistently emphasize personal integrity, a passion for Jewish life, and sincerity. Candidates are expected to model how one can live a positive and meaningful Jewish life in our complex society.

It is also worth noting that across all postings, the language frequently points to inclusivity as a key characteristic of their desired candidate. This inclusivity appears to be aimed at interfaith families, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those who are not halakhically Jewish but still seek to participate in community life. The postings include phrases like “embracing diversity,” “able to create a safe space,” and “creating a welcoming environment,” reflecting a need for openness and acceptance. The candidate is characterized as a bridge between tradition and modernity, which requires a personality that is open and adaptable. This focus is clearest in positions aimed at fostering community with younger demographics (e.g., college students), but it is also present in many congregations seeking to remain relevant in a rapidly evolving society.

Congregational jobs remain the most numerous and often the most financially lucrative rabbinic positions, yet these roles are also widely perceived as the most demanding and least sustainable not only among rabbinic career newcomers but perhaps especially among those who have “been there, done that” as we will demonstrate in the discussion of career satisfaction. The hours are long, and the demands are high as today’s pulpit rabbis are asked to be spiritual leaders, administrators, educators, fundraisers, community organizers, and public representatives all at once. Existing literature confirms this “everything everywhere” role, and interviewees affirm that many hiring committees are indeed searching for rabbis who can “do it all.”¹⁷

Compensation is highly uneven across movements, geographic regions, and congregation size. Large, urban congregations can offer competitive salaries and benefits, while smaller or rural communities often struggle to meet basic financial expectations, particularly given housing costs and day school tuition. Younger rabbis are often reluctant to relocate to smaller Jewish communities, further exacerbating the mismatch between open positions and willing candidates. Several hiring committees described needing to “sell” their congregation to prospective rabbis, while others, even those in large, urban synagogues, noted declining applicant pools compared to a decade ago. As one senior rabbi reflected:

When I applied to my role, there might have been a couple dozen resumes. Now, there is not this abundance of qualified candidates ready to take the reins of these storied communities.

The rabbi opined further that this may not simply reflect a lack of “qualified candidates,” but a lack of “fit.” Across movements, congregational leaders emphasized that beyond credentials, the most sought-after quality in candidates

¹⁷ Asaf Elia-Shalev, “The Great Resignation is Fueling a Rabbinic Hiring Crisis,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, (January 31, 2022); Lewish Kamrass, “Quietly Eyeing the Exit Door or Seeking Renewal,” *eJewishPhilanthropy* (October 6, 2021); Yonat Shimron, “A shortage of Conservative rabbis has Jews reexamining the pulpit role,” *RNS*, (February 14, 2022)

is “fit”—a sense of alignment between rabbi and community that is difficult find, and impossible to directly recruit for. Two congregational search committees, one in the Reform and one in the Reconstructionist movement, stressed that the idea of “fit” goes both ways as they highlighted the outsized time, effort, and resources that went into “selling” their congregation to prospective applicants. Both characterized their congregations as suburban communities with current financial stability and a history of prestigious rabbis, but both expressed concerns that they felt like they were not in the “most desirable” nor the most Jewishly dense areas.

Looking specifically at job descriptions for congregational roles, two main themes emerge: administrative/organizational skills and community-building. Ideal candidate language often references a desire for those who can perform outreach, have a strategic planning mindset, have clear vision for the future, enjoy fundraising, event planning, and even social media management. The core here is that the candidate must be a skilled interpersonal communicator who can look inward to maintain, rebuild, and hold a community together while also turning outward to the larger community with a welcoming enthusiasm. The expectations also often stretch into areas traditionally reserved for nonprofit executives. Candidates are asked to demonstrate fundraising prowess, strategic planning capacity, social media savvy, and event planning skills, all while serving as pastoral caregivers and teachers.

There are congregations that are really unrealistic in their expectations of what a rabbi will do, at what salary a rabbi will work, what conditions a rabbi will work under... So, it's much more complex than a numbers game.

Also discussed later, these expectations are often overwhelming and can contribute directly to burnout, discouraging some rabbis from remaining in congregational roles long term.

In contrast, non-congregational settings, including Hillels, schools, chaplaincies, Jewish non-profits, and others are seeing rising interest and competitive applicant pools from newly ordained rabbis as well as from rabbis making mid-career transitions.

One non-congregational employer highlighted that their positions consistently attract more candidates than they can hire:

We hire regularly, we just concluded a hiring cycle, and we had way more candidates than positions we had available.

Hillel International provided data that support these observations, over recent years, reporting an average of 19 applicants per open rabbi position in 2024 and 2025. This is an increase from an average of five applicants per open rabbi position in 2023. Hillel leaders did express concern, however, about the shrinking pool from specific seminaries that once supplied them with rabbis that, in the words of a senior Hillel professional with whom we spoke, were particularly well suited to campus and educational work.

Rabbinic Training and Career Demands

In addition to a mismatch between available jobs and the kinds of rabbinic work people now want to do, a perceived lack of alignment between pre-service rabbinic training and the myriad professional demands of the rabbinate is another recurring theme in pipeline discussions. Key informant interviewees raised concerns that new rabbis sometimes lack traditional competencies such as Hebrew proficiency, *leyning* (chanting Torah), and strong classical text skills. Meanwhile, as discussed in the previous section, the skill set required for contemporary rabbinic leadership has expanded, now encompassing pastoral care, nonprofit management, fundraising, digital communication, political navigation, and more.

Rabbinical schools acknowledge this tension but face difficulty balancing traditional learning with modern skills training.

I feel, you know, every rabbinical student... should have a master's in nonprofit management. Like that, to me... would make a generation of Jewish leaders who are much more equipped for synagogue life and also for life outside of the synagogue. If you talk to rabbis in the field today, they say they run a nonprofit. That's what being a rabbi is. –Current Student

Current rabbis and students strongly recommended more practical and experiential training. Apprenticeship-style models, earlier exposure to pastoral care, and required Clinical Pastoral Education were repeatedly cited as transformative experiences.

There really is one way to do that, and it's by doing it, you can't actually learn how to run a baby naming or a *brit milah* ceremony except by doing it. And after the first five times, you're like, okay, I know what I'm doing. –Current Rabbi

The classes that I learned the most from were the pastoral care classes and learning how to just be an open and warm presence for people. –Current Rabbi

The challenge is that seminaries must simultaneously maintain intellectual rigor and textual depth while preparing students for the practical realities of rabbinic life. This ongoing tension leaves many new rabbis feeling both overextended and underprepared.

Career Satisfaction: Congregational Versus Non-Congregational Work

In the survey, rabbis were asked nine five-point Likert scale questions about their career satisfaction in the most significant roles that they have held. Those who have held significant roles in both congregational *and* non-congregational settings were asked to reflect on their general satisfaction twice: once reflecting on the congregational roles that they have held and once reflecting on the non-congregational roles that they have held.

Regardless of setting, nearly all rabbis (97%) agreed or strongly agreed that their work has been rewarding. During interviews with current rabbis, they emphasized that being present with people, through counseling, mentoring, and at key lifecycle events, is at the heart of what makes their work most rewarding. These encounters affirmed their rabbinic calling and gave them a sense of purpose.

It's a very, very rewarding path in life... Knowing that you're there to comfort people in times of need. It's a beautiful way to serve humanity.

—Current Non-Congregational & Congregational Rabbi (Age 50s)

To compare satisfaction between congregational and non-congregational roles, paired statistical analyses were used to compare rabbis' satisfaction among those who have held *both* significant congregational and non-congregational positions (n=222).

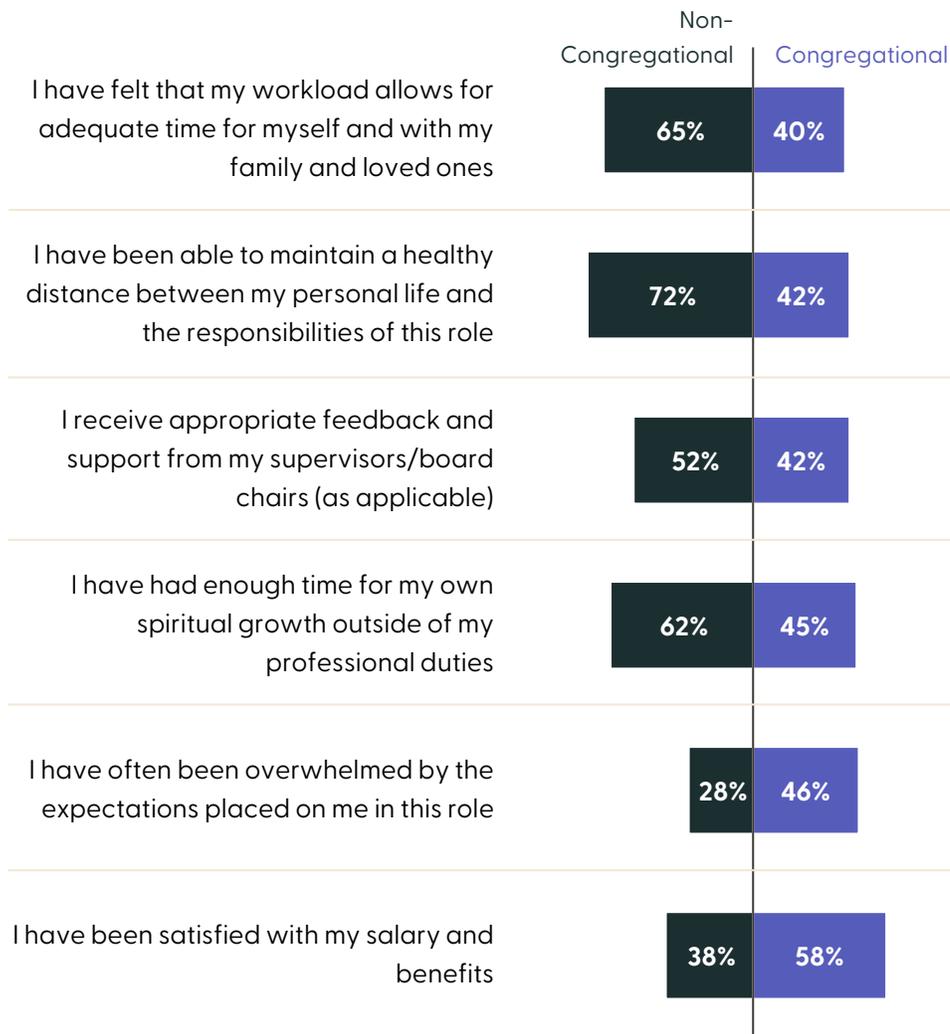
Figure 13 shows the six items that differed significantly¹⁸ between congregational and non-congregational roles. **In almost every case, career satisfaction was significantly higher for non-congregational roles. The only item that was significantly higher for congregational roles was satisfaction with salary and benefits** with 58% satisfaction among congregational roles and 38% satisfaction among non-congregational roles.

With small but significant effect, rabbis were more satisfied by supervisor/board feedback and time they have for their own spiritual growth within their non-congregational roles (52%) compared to their congregational roles (42%). Additionally, rabbis reported less overwhelm in their non-congregational roles (28%) compared to their congregational roles (48%).

Among the largest differences (as measured by effect size) was in rabbis' ability to maintain a healthy distance between personal life and the responsibilities of the role. When considering congregational roles that they have held, only 42% of respondents agreed compared to 72% when considering their non-congregational roles. Feeling that workload allows for adequate time with themselves, family, and loved ones was another item that was substantially different between congregational and non-congregational roles. When considering congregational roles that they have held, 40% of respondents agreed compared to 65% when considering non-congregational roles that they have held.

¹⁸ Significance threshold at $p < 0.05$; however, $p < 0.001$ in all cases

Figure 13. Rabbis' Career Satisfaction in Congregational Versus Non-Congregational Roles (n=222)



Interview data supports survey findings about the differences between satisfaction in congregational versus non-congregational roles. Citing higher satisfaction around salary and benefits for congregational roles, but lower satisfaction in nearly all other areas, some interviewees voiced feeling impelled to prioritize financially stable pathways over vocational interests. Owing to high costs of rabbinical education and living in many areas, some interviewees noted that, instead of pursuing the work that most closely aligned with their passions, they felt pressured into pulpits or positions with higher earning potential, sometimes taking on multiple jobs to stabilize their finances. Even for those who had initially imagined careers in chaplaincy, education, social justice, or other lower-paying communal roles, the weight of debt made those options feel financially impossible.

I think rabbinic school comes with a level of expense that requires rabbis to need to make a level of money that is only possible in the congregational world right now, if that follows. And I think many rabbis aren't actually made for the congregational world.

—Current Congregational Rabbi (Age 40s)

Additionally, interviewees repeatedly described how expectations related to congregational roles, in particular, drive unsustainable workloads and contribute to burnout. Many noted the expectations and cultural norms of rabbinic availability. Additionally, many highlighted the phenomenon of role compression, where rabbis are expected to function simultaneously as CEOs, educators, pastoral caregivers, fundraisers, and community organizers. This layering of responsibilities, combined with community expectations of near-constant availability produces intense work schedules, often at the expense of vacations, personal time, and family commitments. Some further emphasized how congregational life poses demands that extend to rabbinic families. They described invasive expectations that spouses and children participate in congregational life or adjust to the unpredictable intrusions of pastoral emergencies.

We had to set very clear boundaries very early on for what [my wife's] role might be or not be, and what the congregation could ask of her and not ask of her... I did not anticipate how much of a strain on my family it would ultimately be that I get four weekends a year off... and just the [working] six days a week, 48 weeks a year.

—Current Congregational Rabbi (Age 35 or Younger)

I think there is such an expectation for clergy to be and do everything, and that's impossible. I think the time expectations on this role, being on call 24/7, running a business... essentially being there for everyone at all times and speaking for a community, I think are impractical and have changed from what I can tell... Forty years ago maybe it was true that most of the people in a clergy leadership role were largely straight men with a partner, with a wife at home who managed everything else and was also part of the synagogue.

—Current Non-Congregational Rabbi (Age 40s)

Some interviewees also reported intentionally redirecting their careers into non-congregational roles where they perceived greater opportunities for healthier work-life balance. Many rabbis described sustaining their sense of satisfaction and avoiding burnout by creating alternative career structures that better aligned with their life stage, personal commitments, and professional passions. Rather than remaining confined to a traditional full-time pulpit model, they sought out or designed roles that blended chaplaincy, federation work, teaching, writing, and program leadership.

I am chaplain and manager of spiritual and religious life at [a senior center] ... I teach Torah, I lead services, I do a lot of pastoral care... We have a cohort of contracted clergy that rotate with me on Shabbat. I'm not here every Shabbat... I don't work six days a week, every week. —Current Non-Congregational Rabbi (Age 40s)

Why Do Some Leave the Field?

A handful of individuals who left the rabbinate, henceforth “leavers,” were interviewed about their decision to leave (n=3), and leavers who took the survey (n=33) were also asked to reflect on that decision in an open-ended survey question.

The number of survey respondents who are leavers is small, but leavers consistently had worse satisfaction across all nine career satisfaction questions.

Leavers report that their decision to leave the field largely centered around burnout, institutional politics, and/or shifting personal priorities. For some, family considerations or better career opportunities outside the rabbinate shaped their decisions. For others, conflict with boards, low pay, or evolving religious beliefs contributed to leaving.

For many, burnout and overwork were enough to push them out of the field, particularly for congregational work as it became increasingly strenuous and unsustainable. In many cases, burnout was intensified by abusive environments and constant pressure to sacrifice personal needs for the community:

I found myself doing no rabbinic work, just managing perceived crises. After years of constant demands, I transitioned into leadership coaching, which better fit my skills and energy. –Leaver

The degree of stress, adversarial treatment, and even outright emotional abuse were the key reasons I left the field. –Leaver

I felt abused by my congregations or senior rabbis... pressured to work every holiday. –Leaver

For some, disengagement was about discovering other passions or opportunities. Several respondents described finding fulfillment in fields like education, counseling, or Jewish leadership outside of the rabbinate. Some of these people also described the toll of trying to maintain dual careers, trying to balance rabbinic responsibilities alongside other professional commitments. While for some, this decision was unrelated to dissatisfaction with the career or with rabbinical school, others indicated that training and career mentorship did not support alternative pathways for those wanting to enter into or remain in the rabbinate:

I worked as a rabbi and as a therapist at the same time for many years. Something had to give. The pulpit work became more strenuous as I aged, and I could make more money as a therapist. –Leaver

An interest in a Ph.D. led to a rewarding academic career, though [the movement] ignored those of us who pursued this direction. –Leaver

Some cited low salaries and limited growth opportunities as issues that ultimately drove them away.

I was experiencing stress-induced physical symptoms... However, I couldn't afford [medical testing] on the catastrophic insurance plan the shul provided. –Leaver

Who are the Rabbis of Tomorrow? How do They Differ from the Rabbis of Today?

Qualitative observations about shifting rabbinical student profiles

Within non-Orthodox rabbinical training programs, key informants noted that overall applicant diversity is more varied than ever. Qualitatively during these key informant interviews, programs report having more students who are LGBTQ+ and more students who are Jews by Choice than in the past. Most programs report having student bodies that are majority women, and many schools report modest increases in the number of Jews of Color enrolled in their programs. Representatives from rabbinical schools also noted that their students are coming in with greater professionalism marked by more robust career histories and academic backgrounds than was seen in the past.

Several non-denominational programs have student bodies that are exclusively or predominantly comprised of second-career professionals. While this fact has not changed, key informants from these programs have observed that the candidate pool has shifted younger with more students in their 30s and 40s instead of their 60s and 70s. Even programs that do not largely cater to second-career professionals have reported seeing modest shifts toward an increasing number of second-career professionals, particularly if they offer low-residency or remote options.

On average, interviewees, particularly those from denominationally aligned institutions, observe that candidates' Hebrew proficiency, Jewish backgrounds, and Jewish knowledge, appears relatively less robust than in the past. Some interviewees hypothesize that this is a result of fewer candidates coming in from traditional pipelines such as day schools or youth movements. Conversely, programs that cater to second-career professionals, in particular, have anecdotally been observing modestly stronger Jewish backgrounds and Hebrew proficiencies which, at least one program attributes to the expansion in recent years of robust adult education programs like Hadar, Pardes, and SVARA. While, on average, Hebrew proficiencies and Jewish backgrounds have reportedly diminished at many programs, on an individual basis, some students' incoming proficiencies have been observed to be higher than anticipated. As some interviewees note, this increased candidate diversity has led to an increased diversity of Jewish experience, Jewish learning, Hebrew proficiency, and professional experience within rabbinical school cohorts.

To the extent possible, the following sections will attempt to confirm and clarify the nature of the shifting rabbinical student profiles.

Confirming shifting profiles with survey data

In order to confirm the nature of the shifting rabbinical student profiles as described in KI interviews, rabbi and student survey data was weighted. Additional details about the weighting process are included in Appendix A. But, in short, survey weights are used to adjust survey results so that the distribution more accurately reflects the real population. This helps ensure the findings accurately represent the larger population of rabbis and rabbinical students, not just the ones who responded to the survey.

In the case of our survey data, rabbi and student data were weighted to gender and rabbinical school denomination. Rabbis were also weighted to ordination year. While these adjustments do help bring survey findings into better alignment with the real world, they cannot adjust for every discrepancy.

Additionally, the number of **survey responses from RIETS and other Orthodox institutions**—aside from YCT and Maharat—**was very small**. Because these responses were both limited in number and substantially different from other denominational groups, they could not be reliably weighted to represent their broader populations. **As a result, survey respondents ordained through or currently studying at RIETS or other Orthodox institutions outside of YCT and Maharat were excluded from the survey analysis.**

To confirm shifting rabbinical student trends, rabbis were grouped by ordination year. Current students were grouped into the prospective ordination year bin “2025 and later,” and, in the following sections, shifting demographic characteristics and Jewish backgrounds were observed across these groups.

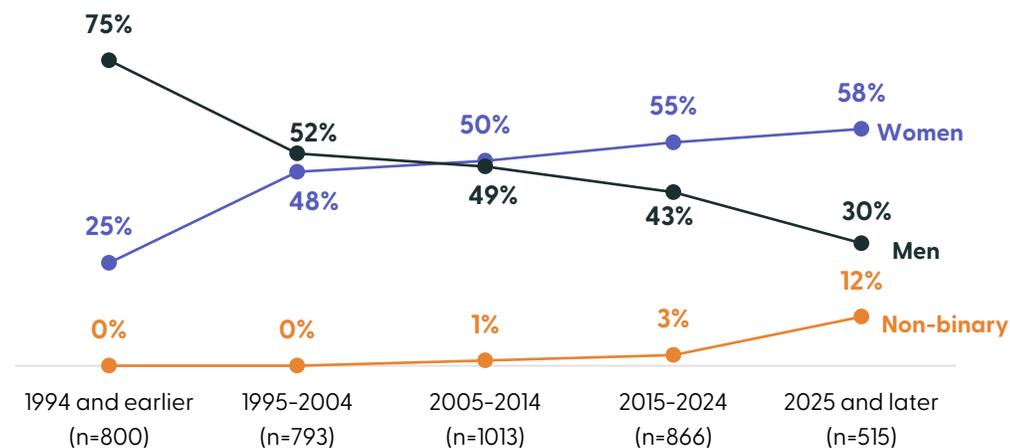
Demographic shifts

Shifting demographic trends across gender, race, and LGBTQ+ population that were observed in key informant interviews are supported by survey data.

Survey data affirmed an increase in women and non-binary rabbis over time.

Among rabbis ordained in 1994 or earlier, one-quarter (25%) are women. Between 1995 and 2014, about half were women (49%), and since 2015 over half (55%) have been women. Among current students (projected ordination 2025 and later), 58% are women and 12% identify as non-binary (Figure 14).

Figure 14. Shifting Gender Distribution by Ordination Year



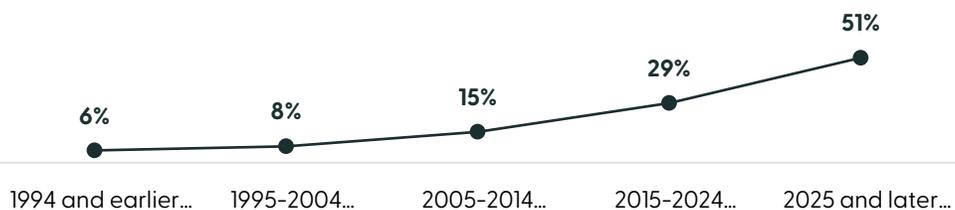
By racial identity, 3% of those ordained before 2014 identified as a race other than white; since 2015, that has increased to 8% and is 12% among current students.

Among those ordained before 2004, 7% identify as LGBTQ+ (Figure 15). This share rises steadily across cohorts: 15% among those ordained between 2005–2014, 29% among those ordained between 2015–2024, and 51% among current students projected to be ordained after 2025.

The student figure may be an overestimate since weighting cannot fully correct for discrepancies without a variable directly measuring LGBTQ+ identity. However, even if it is somewhat overstated, the consistent year-over-year increase in LGBTQ+ representation is almost certainly real. According to Gallup (2025), the percentage of US adults who identify as LGBTQ+ has more than doubled since they first began measuring LGBTQ+ identification from 3.5% in 2012 to 9.3% in 2024. Further, Pew Research Center’s Jewish Americans in 2020 report found that about 9% of U.S. Jewish adults identify as LGBTQ+ (4% gay or lesbian, 5% bisexual). The same Pew study found that among Jews under 30, roughly 25% identify as LGBTQ+. ¹⁹

Additionally, although comparative data is limited, a study of Episcopal clergy indicated that 28% of priests ordained between 2010 and 2021 identify as LGBTQ+. ²⁰ On average, current rabbinical school students are younger than rabbis and the share of these younger individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ is higher than the national average. While most rabbinical schools do not directly track LGBTQ+ identity, a number of non-Orthodox institutions did estimate that roughly one-quarter to one-half of their current students identify as LGBTQ+.

Figure 15. Shifting LGBTQ+ Population by Ordination Year



Second career

Also confirming observations made during key informant interviews, **the share of second-career rabbis and rabbinical school students increases across decade ordained.** Among those ordained prior to 1994, 14% identified as second-career rabbis. For those ordained between 1995 and 2004 it was 31%, and among those ordained since 2005 it has averaged 43%. Among current students, this is

¹⁹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-demographics/>

²⁰ Church Pension Group Research and Data Team, “Trends in Ministry: Insights into Episcopal Clergy,” (July 21, 2022).

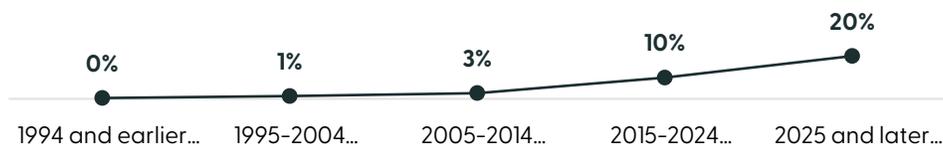
reported to be 66%, though this stark increase indicates that this may be an overestimation.

Notably, according to survey responses, 71% of those ordained at non-denominational and pluralistic institutions are second-career students compared to one-quarter of those from Reform and Conservative institutions. As ordinations from non-denominational institutions has increased through the decades, and ordinations from Reform and Conservative institutions has shrunk, that also lends some justification to the stark increase in the proportion of second-career students over time.

Jews by choice and those from interfaith upbringings

Among those ordained prior to 2014, fewer than 2% of rabbis were not raised Jewish or not raised exclusively Jewish. This increased to 10% among rabbis ordained between 2015 and 2024²¹, and is 20% among current students (Figure 16).²²

Figure 16. Proportion of Those Not Raised Exclusively Jewish by Ordination Year



Youth engagement

Survey findings reinforce key informant observations that rabbinical students today tend to have had less extensive Jewish engagement during childhood than earlier cohorts. **On average, those ordained more recently report lower rates of participation in traditional Jewish youth experiences such as Hebrew school, camp, and youth groups** (Figure 17). The proportion who attended Hebrew school declined from 93% among those ordained before 1994 to 66% among current students. Youth group participation dropped from 88% to 61%, and camp attendance fell from 77% to 55% over the same period.

Although there exists a growing share of rabbis and rabbinical students who were not raised Jewish, this factor alone does not explain the decline. Even when excluding those not raised Jewish (Figure 18), participation in Hebrew school, camp, and youth group still decreases across ordination cohorts.

The only exception is day school attendance, which has increased substantially. Among rabbis ordained before 1994, 15% attended day school (most for four or more years). Among those ordained since 2005, including current students, 31% attended day school. When excluding those who were not raised Jewish, 34% of rabbis ordained since 2005 report attending day school (including 39% of current students).

²¹ 10% not raised Jewish, 1% raised in an interfaith household

²² 16% not raised Jewish, 4% raised in an interfaith household

Figure 17. Youth Engagement by Ordination Year – All Rabbis and Students

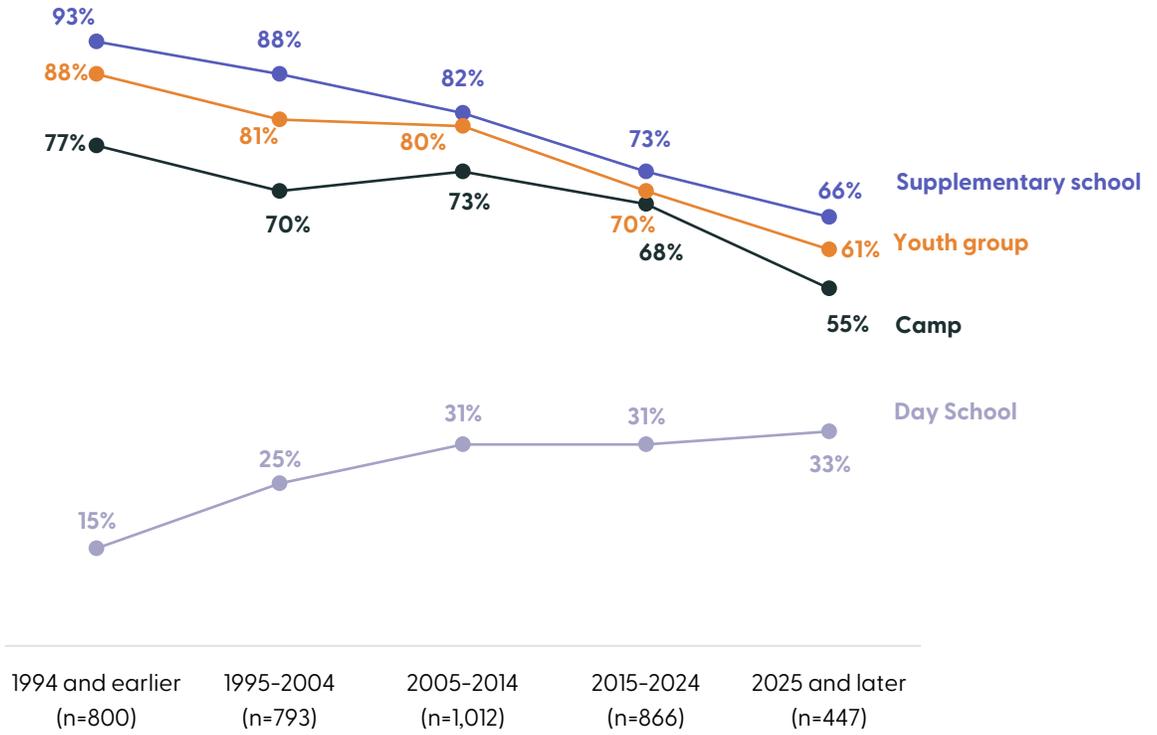
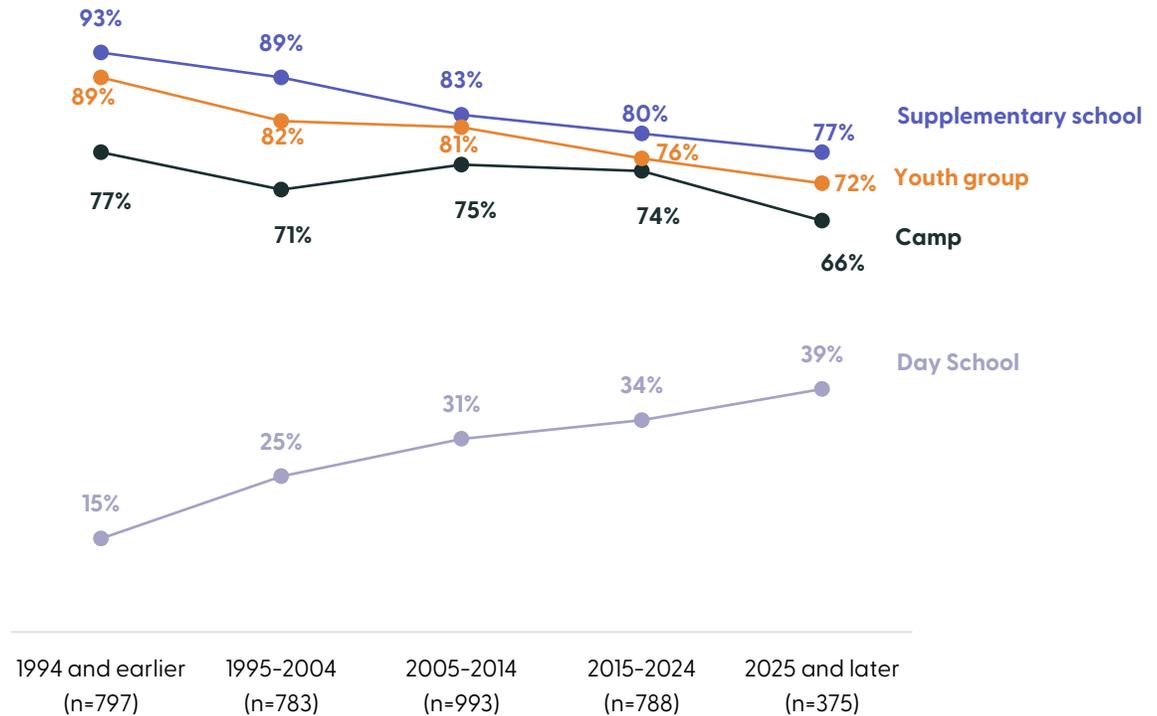


Figure 18. Youth Engagement by Ordination Year – Excludes Rabbis and Students Not Raised Jewish



Pre-rabbinical school adult engagement

In addition to questions about youth engagement, **respondents were asked about their adult Jewish engagement prior to entering rabbinical school. Survey results show that such engagement has generally increased among more recent cohorts.** The share who had ever held a lay leadership role before rabbinical school rose from 49% among those ordained before 1994 to 73% among current students. Similarly, the share who had participated in adult community Jewish education prior to rabbinical school increased from 27% among those ordained before 1994 to 66% among those ordained since 2015 (including current students).

While these shifts do signal more robust adult Jewish engagement among more recent entrants to rabbinical school, they also reflect broader changes. The growing proportion of second-career rabbis means more individuals had additional years to engage Jewishly as adults before beginning rabbinical school. These patterns also partially reflect differences by background: adult Jewish engagement prior to rabbinical school is somewhat higher among respondents not raised Jewish, though this distinction is less pronounced among current students.

Finally, these increases likely reflect the growing prevalence and accessibility of adult Jewish education programs, many of which offer online, relatively low-cost programming with a low bar for entry for those who may not be entering with a robust Jewish education.

Pre-rabbinical school university education

The average level of university education that prospective rabbis have prior to starting rabbinical school is higher among current students compared to those ordained longer ago, confirming observations made by key informants. Nearly half of current students (49%) indicated that they had a graduate degree prior to starting rabbinical school compared to 17% of those ordained prior to 1994.

Contextualizing shifting rabbinical student profiles

While much of the discourse about challenges to the rabbinic pipeline has centered on declining enrollment and ordination rates, some within the field have also opined about a potential decline in rabbinic quality. Speculation about the source of such a decline, if it exists, tends to focus on two areas: the qualifications of incoming rabbinical candidates and the quality of rabbinic education they receive.²³

Although evaluating the quality of rabbinic education is beyond the scope of this research, key informants were asked to share their perspectives on the perceived quality of candidates and the narratives surrounding its supposed decline. Only a minority of interviewees expressed concern about candidate quality, and most that did were not among the admissions professionals who were interviewed. In contrast, nearly all interviewees who do work in rabbinical school admissions refuted the notion that candidate quality has diminished, with

²³Joshua Rabin, “The Real Rabbinic Crisis,” *eJewishPhilanthropy*, (January 14, 2025); Yehuda Kurtzer, “Rabbi,” *Sources Journal*, (Spring 2024); Ari Perten. “Rabbis Need to Be Trained for the Job They Actually Do,” *Jewish Journal*, (October 29, 2025); Elliot Cosgrove, “The Pipeline Problem” [Sermon, Park Avenue Synagogue] (April 2, 2022)

many asserting that candidate quality is not only strong, but that the fit of today's candidates to school culture is excellent.

In addition, some interviewees were particularly forthright in suggesting that current conversations about a perceived decline in quality may, in fact, be a reflection of biases about who is expected, or permitted, to become a rabbi that have arisen as student bodies have become more diverse in background, identity, and life experience.

On average, today's candidates do have less robust Jewish youth engagement than in the past, and there is a growing proportion of rabbinical candidates who were not raised Jewish. Both of these may contribute to the observation that students are increasingly coming into rabbinical school with less advanced Hebrew proficiency or traditional text skills. While schools do have to make decisions around how to adapt to this reality, the observed decline in entering Hebrew proficiency reflects a shift in the timing and accessibility of this learning, and not an intrinsic decline in capability or intellectual rigor. Many interviewees spoke to the observation that today's students increasingly bring a broader range of professional competencies that are highly relevant to the modern rabbinate, such as pastoral sensitivity, community-building skills, and the ability to navigate complex contemporary issues. This assertion is supported by the data, which demonstrates that, on average, today's rabbinical candidates are entering rabbinical school with stronger university education than in the past, and that an increasing share of today's rabbinical candidates are second-career rabbis who are likely entering with existing professional skills.

Today's rabbinical students reflect a far broader range of identities, skill sets, and backgrounds than in the past—more identify as LGBTQ+, and more are Jews of Color, were raised in households not exclusively Jewish, came to the rabbinate through adult study as well as career change. These patterns reflect a widening of access to rabbinic leadership and a changing image of who becomes a rabbi.

Why Do People Pursue the Rabbinate and What is Detering Them From It?

In the survey, rabbis, students, and the “Would-bes”—individuals who considered becoming rabbis but did not or have not—were asked to reflect on what most motivated or deterred them in their decision to pursue or consider pursuing the rabbinate. Using a five-point Likert scale from 1-“completely untrue” to 5-“completely true,” respondents rated the extent to which a series of 21 potential motivators and 20 potential deterrents were true for them.

The lists of motivators and deterrents explored in the survey were developed from existing literature as well as from a set of regnant hypotheses that have been put forward by those deeply invested in the state of the rabbinate in the US today.

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was used to group individual motivators and deterrents into categories (or “Factors”). By looking for underlying themes that group items together, EFA provides a way to summarize these long lists of 21 motivators and 20 deterrents into fewer themes that are more meaningful and easier to conceptualize. This, in turn, allows for clearer comparisons and a greater ability to spot trends and draw conclusions.

Latent Class Analysis (LCA), discussed later in this section, was used to look for “hidden” (latent) subgroups not based on demographics like age or gender or denomination, but based on how people answer questions about motivations, barriers, behaviors, or attitudes.²⁴

In addition, **50 follow-up interviews were conducted with survey respondents** to add depth to their responses, particularly with respect to the factors that motivated and deterred them in their decisions to pursue a career in the rabbinate.

Motivators

Among all survey respondents, the most relevant individual motivators (where roughly three-quarters of more chose one of the top two ratings of “mostly true” or “completely true”) were a desire to serve others (82%), an interest in deepening their knowledge of Jewish text and traditions (82%), feeling called by their love of Judaism (82%), a desire to support and guide people in their religious and spiritual journeys (78%), a desire to teach (77%), and a desire to build and/or sustain community (73%).²⁵

²⁴ For more on the analytical methods, please see Appendix A

²⁵ See complete motivation and deterrent tables in Appendix B.

Figure 19. Top Six Overall Motivators—Sum of “mostly true” and “completely true”



Through EFA, the 21 motivations grouped into six factors that illustrate the themes listed in Figure 20. Two of the 21 motivations did not factor into one of these six themes.²⁶

²⁶ In technical terms, an item that does not “factor” does not mean the item is unimportant, only that it stands as a distinct theme. It has correlations with other variables that are too weak or inconsistent for it to load clearly onto a single factor using the criteria defined in Appendix A. More plainly, an item that does not factor does not cleanly align with any of the themes that emerged. This usually happens when responses to a question are more varied or when a question measures something unique that does not fit neatly with other items.

Figure 20. Motivation Factors

Factor	Motivator
Service and Community	A desire to build and/or sustain community
	A desire to be a community leader
	A desire to make social change
	A desire to serve others
Mentorship and Guidance	Mentorship I received from rabbis or other Jewish leaders
	A Jewish leader suggested that I become a rabbi
	I was inspired by the work of rabbis or other Jewish leaders who I admire
Love of Judaism and the Jewish People	Encouragement from my family and/or community
	I felt called by my love for the Jewish people
	I felt called by my love of Judaism
Religious Authority	I felt called by a responsibility to preserve Jewish ritual, tradition, and/or identity
	A desire to become a religious scholar/authority
Intellectual and Personal Growth	A responsibility to provide moral, ethical, and/or halachic guidance
	An interest in deepening my knowledge of Jewish text and traditions
	The intellectual challenge of rabbinical school
Spiritual Calling	A desire to grow my Jewish identity
	I felt called to pursue the rabbinate by a higher power
	A desire to pursue my own spiritual journey
<i>Did Not Factor/Distinct themes</i>	A desire to support and guide people in their religious and spiritual journeys
	A desire to teach
	A desire to garner more support for Jewish self-determination within the land of Israel

Across each of these factors, students expressed somewhat stronger motivation compared to rabbis who, in turn expressed somewhat stronger motivations than would-bes.

In interviews, as in the survey responses, both current rabbis and rabbinical students named similar motivations for pursuing the rabbinate and, in general, the larger themes that interviewees raised when speaking about their motivations aligned well with the six motivation factors uncovered in the EFA. Findings from these interviews are discussed in the following sections.

Love of Judaism and the Jewish People

Survey findings demonstrate that love for Judaism, for the Jewish people, and for Jewish tradition is at the emotional core of what draws most individuals to the rabbinate. In the survey, a strong majority of both rabbis (83%) and students (87%) agreed that it was “mostly true” or “completely true” that they felt called by their love of Judaism. Two-thirds (66%) of rabbis and students also agreed that they felt called by their love of the Jewish people. Within this same factor, 62% of rabbis and 74% of students felt called by a responsibility to preserve Jewish ritual, tradition, and/or identity.

The strength of this theme as a motivation factor carried over to the interviews as nearly all rabbinical students and current rabbis who were interviewed emphasized that their path to the rabbinate was rooted in a deep love for Judaism, the Jewish people, and the traditions that connect them. This included discussion about their desire to provide spiritual guidance, pastoral care, lead lifecycle events, and help others make use of Jewish traditions to improve their lives.

You’ve got to really love the Jews. You can’t go into this because you want—I mean every rabbi has an ego—but you [can’t want] love and adoration and respect... You’ve really got to do it out of love. It’s really hard work, and also I couldn’t imagine doing anything else. –Current Non-Congregational & Congregational Rabbi (Age 35 or Younger)

I had this calling initially at the Jewish summer camp that I was a camper at and then became a counselor at. In a funny way, I think it was sort of the campers. Not that the campers ever said to me, you should be a rabbi... But it was the act of like caring for these children and being a non-parental guiding force in their life.

–Current Non-Congregational Rabbi (Age 35 or Younger)

Service and Community

For most rabbis and students, the call to the rabbinate is deeply grounded in a commitment to service and community. A strong majority of both rabbis (83%) and students (86%) agreed that they were motivated to pursue the rabbinate by a desire to serve others, reflecting the view of the rabbinate as a vocation rooted in care, responsibility, and relational connection. Similarly, 72% of rabbis and 79% of students agreed that they were motivated by a desire to build or sustain community.

A majority of both rabbis and students (63%) were motivated by wanting to become a community leader, specifically, which speaks to the continued importance of the rabbinic role as a trusted guide, educator, and convener. Lastly, within this theme of service and community, more students (62%) than rabbis (44%) indicated that they were specifically motivated by a desire to make social change, which may speak to a generational evolution in how service is understood as younger, aspiring rabbis view service to others as not only

pastoral care and community-building, but also engaging with broader issues of justice, inclusion, and equity.

Among the interviewees, a number of current rabbis and a couple of students cited specific inclusion-oriented goals related to serving the Jewish community. These included building Jewish experiences and communities in which Jews of all kinds can find meaning, belonging, representation, and community. Others noted that their sense of responsibility to serve the community was inspired by witnessing examples of Jewish leadership and community engagement during times of crisis and otherwise.

[I was] both inspired by the positive experiences I had when I felt welcomed and included ... I think what was the strongest motivation for me was wanting to create opportunities for people of all Jewish backgrounds to feel that they had a place in Jewish community and that they can find their entry point.

–Current Non-Congregational & Congregational Rabbi (Age 40s)

I have this theory that the point at which Jews move from individuals to a community is the point at which rabbis are needed ... and where it is, and what that rabbi is going to look like, and who they are is going to be radically different based on the community. But communities of Jews need rabbis. ... If you're going to do Torah reading, you need a Torah. And if you're going to do Judaism, it's helpful to have the consult person who can help you think it through. –Current Non-Congregational Rabbi (Age 40s)

Intellectual and Personal Growth

For many rabbis and students, the decision to pursue the rabbinate is as much an expression of intellectual curiosity and a desire to cultivate Jewish identity as it is a professional choice. For a strong majority of rabbis (81%) and students (91%), their path to the rabbinate was driven by a desire to deepen their knowledge of Jewish texts and traditions, reflecting a strong sense of reverence for learning as a central Jewish value and as a lifelong pursuit.

Other items related to this theme of intellectual and personal growth, were strong, but somewhat less potent motivators with just over half of rabbis (54%) and almost two-thirds of students (64%) feeling strongly motivated by the intellectual challenge of rabbinical school and a similar proportion of rabbis (53%) and students (57%) feeling strongly motivated by the desire to grow their Jewish identity.

Some interviewees affirmed that their Judaism was most powerfully expressed through intellectual engagement, making Jewish learning and teaching central motivations for pursuing the rabbinate. They described formative experiences, whether in youth, through college Jewish studies, Hillel, fellowships, or other settings, which deepened their connection to Judaism through study. For many, rabbinical school felt like the natural next step to advance that learning. Most of these individuals were also strongly motivated by a desire to teach, which they viewed as a natural extension of their own learning. This desire to teach was also a potent motivator in the survey as over three-quarters of both rabbis and students felt strongly motivated by this desire.

I went to Jewish day school, and I loved it, and I loved Jewish learning all the way through. In high school I decided I wanted to be a rabbi, and for college I... studied sociology and Talmud. I applied [to rabbinical school] my senior year... I did it because I like learning and teaching. –Current Student

I think there's the rabbinic pursuit as a profession and there's a rabbinic pursuit as a learning journey. For me, it was very much a learning journey... It didn't really hit me until my third year... that I was like, 'oh, I guess I'm going to be a rabbi.'

–Current Non-Congregational Rabbi (Age 35 and Younger)

Some interviewees also discussed the motivation to pursue a rabbinical career as part of a personal journey to explore and deepen their connections to Judaism. Some interviewees noted that, along the way, the initial personal motivations that led them into rabbinical school often expanded into broader community-based goals for their rabbinate once they developed a stronger professional identity.

Both my parents had been sort of alienated by religion, and so if I was going to shul at all, it was with my grandparents, and even then only once a year on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur... And yet I'd always felt this draw of something bigger than myself and something really impactful about Judaism... what I really understood from an early age is that I had to be my own self advocate to be Jewish. –Current Student

Religious Authority

Motivation to become a religious authority was less strong for survey respondents than the other motivating themes previously discussed. About one-third (31%) of rabbis and students felt strongly motivated by the desire for religious authority itself. A larger share, nearly half of rabbis (48%) and about two-thirds of students (63%), were motivated by the associated responsibility to provide moral, ethical, or halachic guidance.²⁷

A few interviewees did speak to this theme, particularly as the title of “rabbi” was seen as lending a degree of authority that would allow the holder to more easily impact Jewish individuals and communities.

The rabbinate has given me an opportunity to reach hundreds and hundreds of people, trying to get them to use Judaism as a language to ask and answer the big questions of the world. And so, the rabbinate, the title of rabbi, has given me the keys to the car to create those spaces and have those conversations with a degree of ideological or institutional legitimacy behind me.

–Current Non-Congregational Rabbi (Age 35 and Younger)

I realized that there was a great potential, much more of a potential, for me to be able to make a difference with the title 'rabbi' ... to ensure that everybody's voice was able to be heard and that all sorts of Judaism was able to be accepted and seen.

–Current Non-Congregational Rabbi (Age 40s)

²⁷ As an important reminder, rabbis and students from RIETS and other Orthodox institutions outside of YCT and Maharat are not represented in the survey. As will be discussed later in the report, these motivations related to religious authority and halachic guidance are correlated with identifying as Orthodox, regardless of institution where ordained.

Spiritual Calling

Survey findings point to a nuanced picture of spirituality as both a personal and relational calling within the rabbinate. A large majority of rabbis (79%) and students (87%) were strongly motivated by a desire to guide and support people on their religious and spiritual journeys, underscoring that for most, the rabbinate is fundamentally about guiding, supporting, and accompanying people in their search for meaning and connection. At the same time, fewer respondents described being driven by their own spiritual journey or by a direct sense of being “called” by a higher power. A majority of students (69%), but only half of rabbis (50%) were strongly motivated by a desire to pursue their own spiritual journey, and a minority of both rabbis (32%) and students (44%) were strongly motivated by this sense of “calling.” The gap between students and rabbis on these measures may reflect a shift over time: students appear more likely to see the rabbinate as a vehicle for their own spiritual growth, while seasoned rabbis may experience their spirituality primarily through the act of guiding others.

Some interviewees described the path to the rabbinate as a part of a personal spiritual journey that allowed for personal growth and exploration. Other interviewees noted feeling a sense of inevitability about their path, often framing it as a “calling” or a clear opportunity to pursue deeply meaningful spiritual work.

I was in college, and I was planning on becoming a psychologist, and then I felt a strong calling towards becoming a rabbi and a chaplain. I felt a really strong pull that this was the path for me that I was supposed to be on.

—Current Non-Congregational Rabbi (Age 35 or Younger)

I had a sense of a ‘call’ when I was 12 and preparing for my bat mitzvah... it was very interesting because I was working with a student cantor who was working at our synagogue and it was like, ‘wow, you’re like not born a rabbi or a cantor... you could become this. That’s amazing.’ But [I also say that] in the sense of a ‘spiritual call.’

—Current Non-Congregational Rabbi (Age 40s)

Mentorship and Guidance

In the survey, over half of rabbis (53%) and students (56%) cited mentorship from rabbis or other Jewish leaders as at least one of the motivating factors for their desire to enter the rabbinate, and two-thirds of both rabbis and students (68%) indicated that they were inspired by the work of other rabbis or Jewish leaders. Fewer rabbis and students (39%) indicated that they were strongly motivated by explicit encouragement by a Jewish leader that they should become a rabbi. Similarly, relatively fewer were strongly motivated by explicit encouragement from their family or community (35%).

Some interviewees discussed feeling inspired by rabbis and cantors they knew and observed to pursue similar paths. For some, simply gaining a sense of understanding of what the role would be like made it more of an actual, attainable possibility in their minds. Some encountered such role models in childhood and were able to imagine themselves in this path from an early age. Others pointed to rabbis they encountered later in both college and professional roles, in organizations like JCCs, Federations, and especially in Hillel. These figures modeled rabbinic life beyond the pulpit, giving interviewees a broader understanding of what rabbinic careers could look like.

Some interviewees described receiving direct encouragement to pursue the rabbinate from rabbis, cantors, family members, or teachers. This support not only introduced the idea of becoming a rabbi but also gave them the confidence to see themselves as potential intellectual or spiritual leaders. The validation they received from trusted figures made the path feel both attainable and meaningful.

We were part of a Reform synagogue growing up, and I had really good relationships with my clergy. It was not where I thought my professional career would go at the time, but I had really positive associations with rabbis and cantors and all of that. When I was thinking about what I wanted to do with my life... the parts of being a rabbi all fit together.

—Current, Female, Reform Congregational & Non-Congregational Rabbi (Age 40s)

I would say what my childhood rabbi and other mentors did was they made it feel like it was possible and it was doable [to become a rabbi].

—Current, Female, Reconstructionist Non-Congregational Rabbi (Age 35 or Younger)

I was very influenced by the rabbis that I had growing up. My family was very involved in a Conservative synagogue, and I had a good relationship with my rabbis there. And I had a friend who was already [in rabbinical school] and so talking with them and thinking about all that made realize that rabbi was a job that really fit a lot of my interests and would make me feel really fulfilled.

—Conservative Male Student (Age 35 or Younger)

Some participants, especially those from groups that were historically underrepresented in the rabbinate (including women and LGBTQ+ people) cited exposure to female rabbis and other diverse role models as particularly valuable in making the rabbinate seem accessible.

[A woman was the] senior Reform rabbi where I finished high school. And my parents knew her, and even the Episcopal priests that I grew up with knew her, and it was like she was such a leader in the community and it was such a model of like, you can be a mom, and you can be a social justice advocate and a pulpit rabbi, and you can do all of those things. It was such a clear and obvious model ... I feel really lucky actually that before getting into the yeshiva and then seminary world, I had so many female, almost exclusively female, rabbi role models.

—Current, Female, Conservative Congregational & Non-Congregational Rabbi (Age 35 or Younger)

Motivations by segment

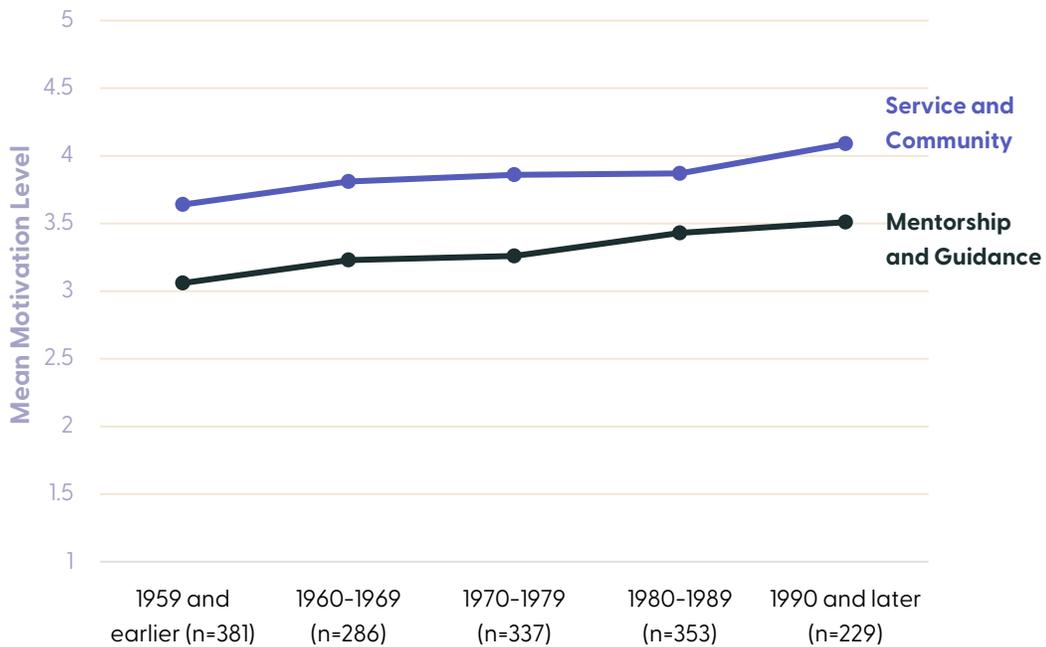
Levels of **motivation varied across respondents by age, gender, denomination, and degree of Jewish youth engagement.** To examine these differences, individual survey items that grouped together within each of the six motivation themes were combined into single factor scores. Each respondent's factor score represents the average of their responses to all items belonging to that factor (see Figure 20 and Appendix A for details). The result is a single decimal value from 1 to 5 indicating how strongly respondents identified with that overarching motivation theme.

Although these scores use the same 1–5 range as the original Likert scale questions, they no longer correspond directly to the response options (“not at all true” to “completely true”). Instead, each score serves as a summary measure, allowing for comparisons between groups on relative—not absolute—levels of motivation. In other words, the **key insights in the following sections come from differences between groups, rather than the numerical size of the scores themselves.**

By Age and Ordination Year

Two motivation factors—*service and community* and *mentorship and guidance*—are correlated with age. In both cases, across all three survey populations (rabbis, students, and “would-bes”), younger respondents are more strongly motivated by these factors than older respondents, on average (Figure 21).

Figure 21. Motivation Factors by Age (Mean Scores)

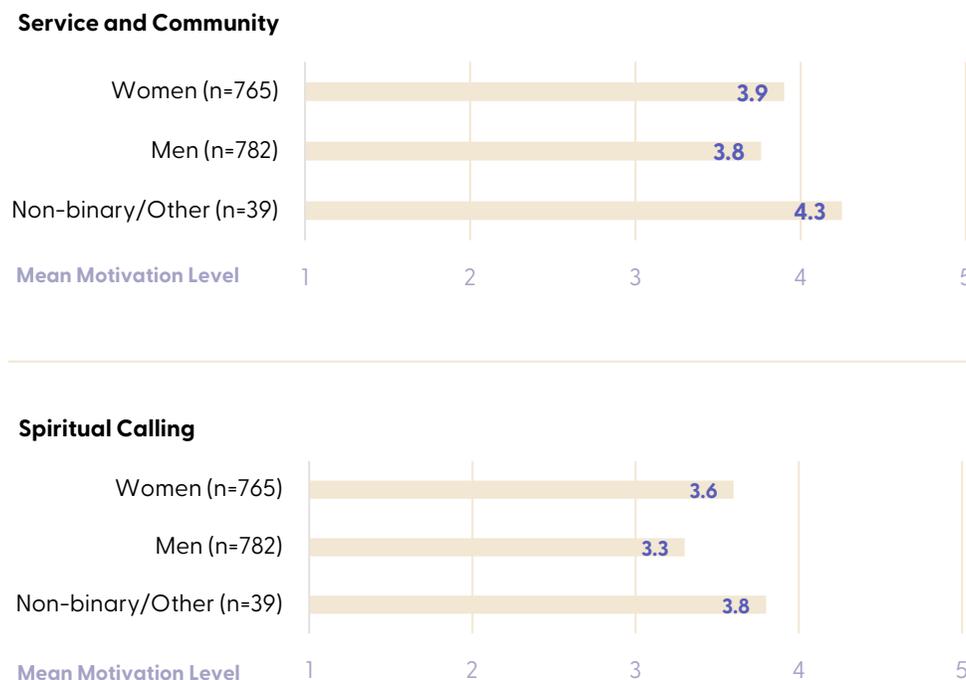


Age and ordination year are related but not identical indicators. While they generally move together, recent years have seen a higher proportion of second-career students who enter rabbinical school later in life. When analyzed by ordination year (among rabbis and students only), these same patterns largely hold. Service and Community remains a stronger motivator among those ordained more recently. Mentorship and Guidance is also modestly higher for recent ordinands, but not for current students. This may reflect the influence of second-career students and of those not raised Jewish, both of whom are more prevalent among current students. Additionally, spiritual calling is also highest among those ordained more recently.

By Gender

Two motivation factors—*service and community* and *spiritual calling*—differ significantly across gender. Despite small n's, on average, non-binary respondents were more strongly motivated by these factors than women, who were in turn more strongly motivated by these factors than men (Figure 22).

Figure 22. Motivation Factors by Gender (Mean Scores)



By Denomination

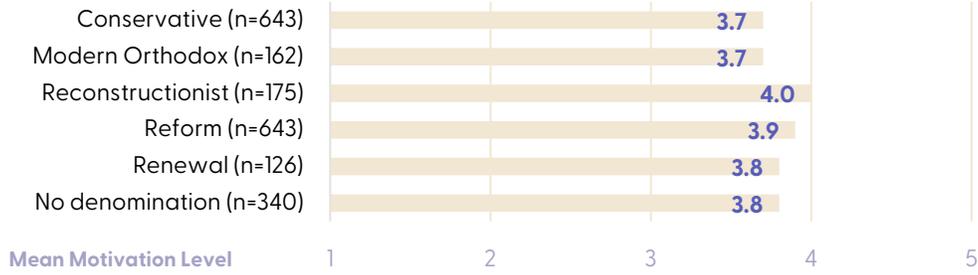
Five of the six motivation factors—*service and community*, *mentorship and guidance*, *love of Judaism and the Jewish people*, *religious authority*, and *spiritual calling*—differ significantly across self-reported denomination.

Motivations around *service and community* was strongest among those who identify as Reconstructionist or Reform and relatively weaker among those who identify as Modern Orthodox.²⁸ Conservative and Modern Orthodox respondents were more strongly motivated by *love of Judaism and the Jewish people* and by *religious authority* compared to others. Reconstructionist respondents were least motivated by *religious authority* compared to others. Compared to all other denominational groups, respondents identifying as Renewal were much more strongly motivated by *spiritual calling*. Reform respondents were modestly more likely than others to be more strongly motivated by *mentorship and guidance*.

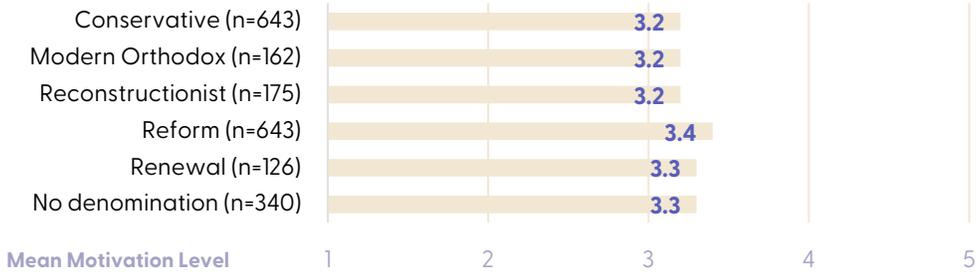
²⁸Denomination is self-reported, and respondents could select more than one option. Recall that rabbis and students who attended RIETS or any Orthodox institution other than YCT and Maharat are not included in the sample. In the survey sample, 58% of rabbis and students who identify as Modern Orthodox attend(ed) either YCT or Maharat, 21% attended a Conservative seminary, and the remaining 21% are from across other non-Orthodox institutions. In addition, 17% of would-bes in the survey sample identify as Modern Orthodox.

Figure 23. Motivation Factors by Self-Reported Denomination (Mean Scores)

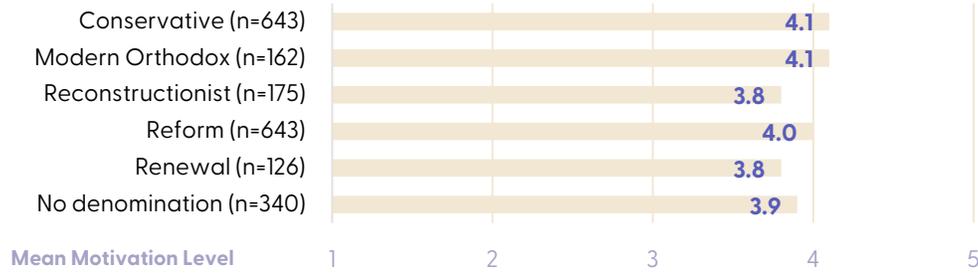
Service and Community



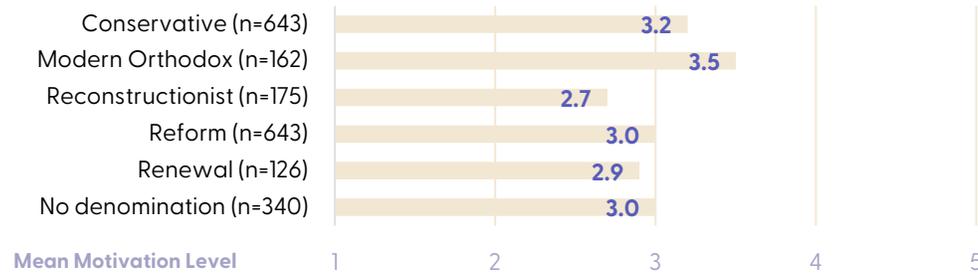
Mentorship and Guidance



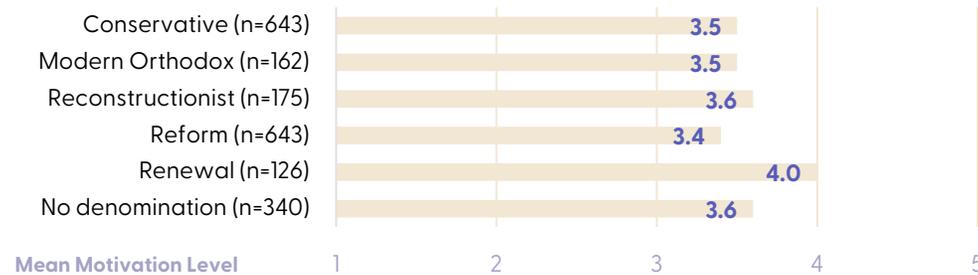
Love of Judaism and the Jewish People



Religious Authority



Spiritual Calling



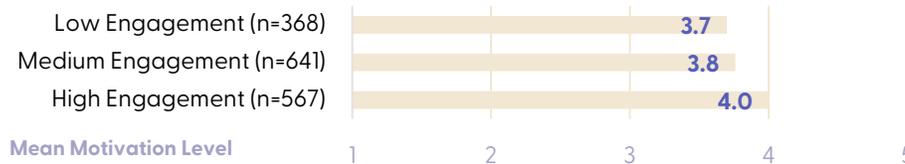
By Jewish Youth Engagement

Using responses about their participation in supplementary/Hebrew school, camp, and youth groups during adolescence, respondents were placed into High, Mid, and Low Jewish youth engagement groups, and motivation and deterrent factors were assessed across these groups.

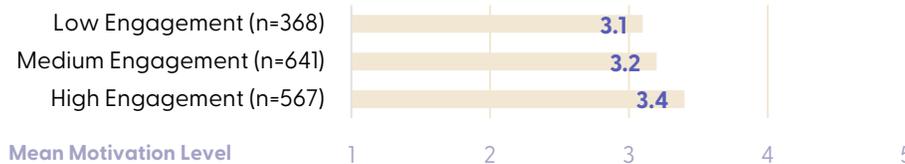
All six motivation factors differ significantly across these youth engagement groups (Figure 24). Stronger Jewish youth engagement is correlated with stronger motivations that relate to *service and community, mentorship and guidance, and love of Judaism and the Jewish people*. Conversely, weaker Jewish youth engagement is correlated with stronger motivations that relate to *intellectual and personal growth, spiritual calling, and, to a lesser extent, religious authority*.

Figure 24. Motivation Factors by Jewish Youth Engagement (Mean Scores)

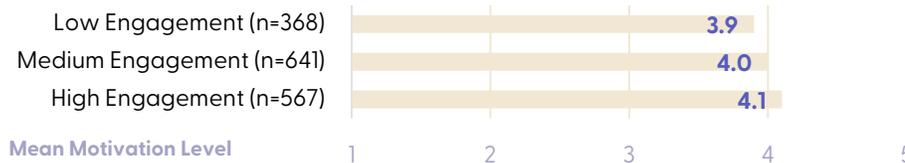
Service and Community



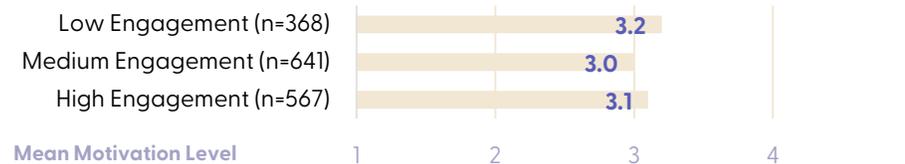
Mentorship and Guidance



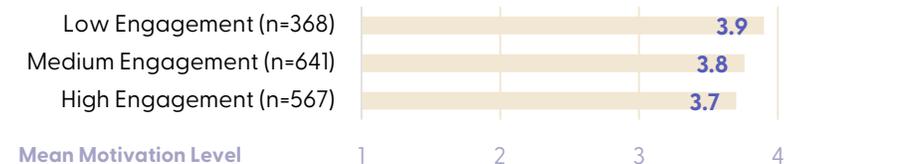
Love of Judaism and the Jewish People



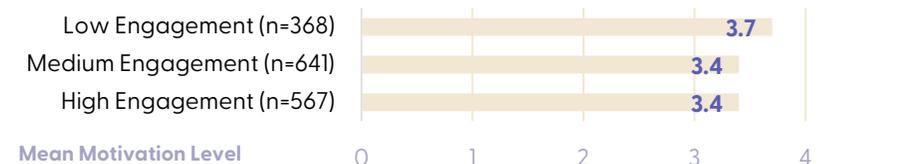
Religious Authority



Intellectual and Personal Growth



Spiritual Calling

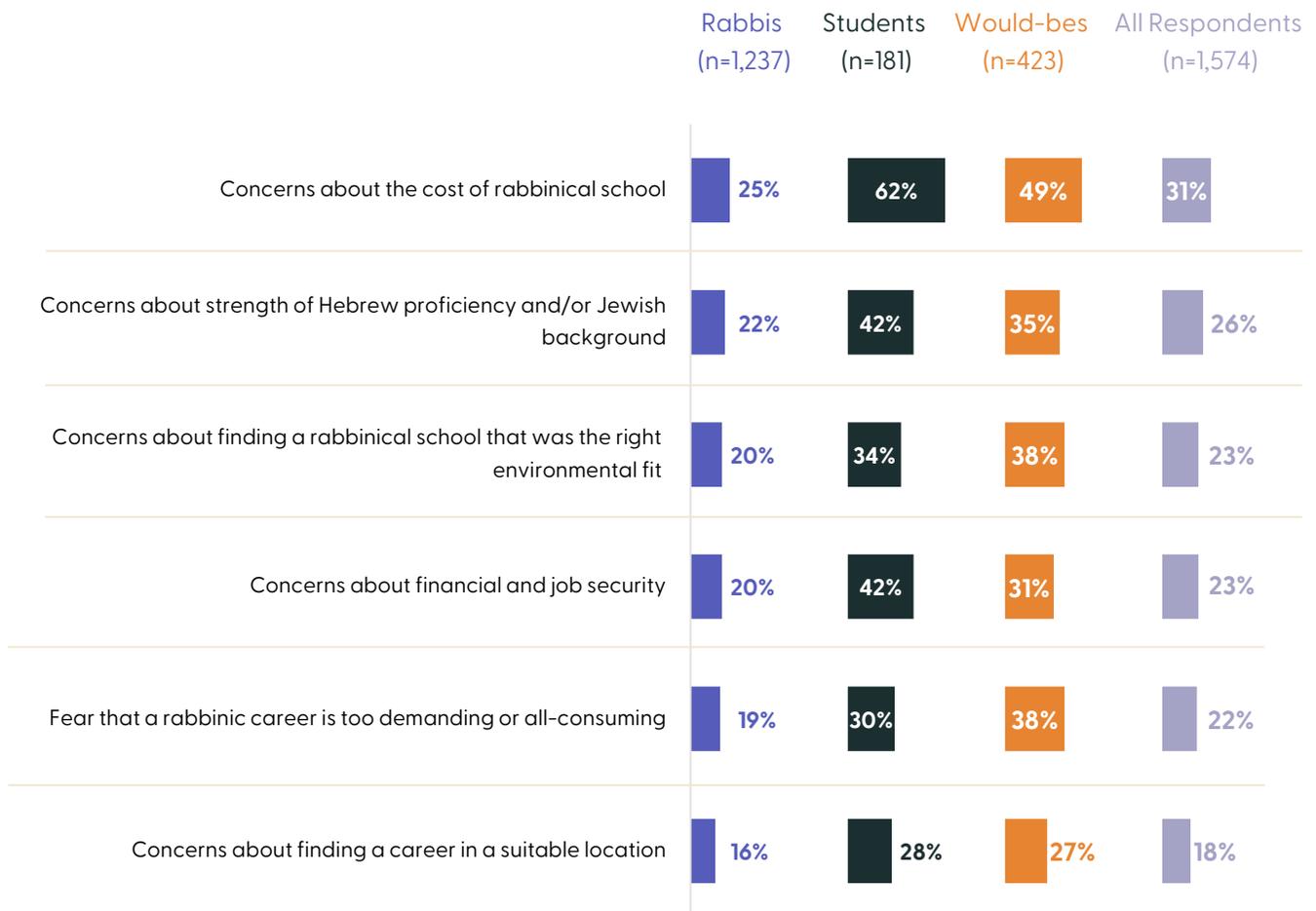


Deterrents

Among all respondents, the most relevant individual deterrents were concerns about the cost of rabbinical school (31%), concerns about the strength of one’s Hebrew proficiency and/or Jewish background (26%), concerns about finding a rabbinical school that would be the right environmental fit (23%), concerns about financial and job security (23%), fear that a rabbinic career is too demanding or all-consuming (22%), and concerns about the length of rabbinical school (18%).

Across nearly all deterrents, students and would-bes were consistently more strongly deterred than rabbis. Among the top six deterrents, rabbis were significantly less deterred than students or would-bes by between 11 and 37 points. For example, whereas more than half of students (62%) and nearly half of would-bes (49%) were strongly deterred by the cost of rabbinical school, only one-quarter (25%) of rabbis were, and whereas four-in-ten students and would-bes were strongly deterred by the length of rabbinical school, only about one-in-ten rabbis were.²⁹

Figure 25. Top Six Overall Deterrents



Through EFA, the 20 deterrents grouped into six factors that illustrate the themes listed in Figure 26. Two of the 20 deterrents did not factor into one of these six themes.

²⁹ See complete motivation and deterrent tables in Appendix B.

Figure 26. Deterrent Factors

Factor	Deterrent
Practical Career Concerns	Concerns about lack of job opportunities after rabbinical school
	Concerns about financial and job security
	Concerns about finding a career in a suitable location
	Concerns about finding a career that matched my goals
Practical Rabbinical School Concerns	Concerns about the length of rabbinical school
	Concerns about needing to relocate to attend rabbinical school
	Concerns about the cost of rabbinical school
Drawn to Another Career	Belief that I could have more impact in a different career
	Belief that I was better suited to a different career
Ideological Concerns and Rabbinical School Fit	Concerns that one or more of my beliefs and values did not align with a career as a rabbi
	Concern that my critiques regarding Jewish self-determination within the land of Israel will be discouraged
	Concerns about finding a rabbinical school that was the right environmental fit for me
	Concerns—whether true now or not—that some aspect of my identity would disqualify me from being able to attend rabbinical school
Career Intensity	Fear that a rabbinic career is too demanding or all-consuming
	Feeling that a rabbinic career may be too rigid or bureaucratic
	Concerns that a rabbinical career was incompatible with family life/raising a family
Background and Skills	Concerns that I didn't have the innate skills
	Concerns that Hebrew proficiency and/or Jewish background were not strong enough
Did Not Factor/Distinct Themes	Others' negative opinions about this career path
	Concerns about a lack of prestige

As with motivations, all interviewees—students, current rabbis, and would-be—shared similar themes when discussing potential challenges to and deterrents from pursuing a rabbinic path. These deterrents aligned strongly with the six themes that were developed from the EFA.

Practical Rabbinical School Concerns

Financial Burden of Rabbinical School

In the survey, a majority of students (62%), half of would-bes (49%), and one-quarter of rabbis (25%) were strongly deterred by concerns about the cost of rabbinical school, and this was the strongest of the deterrents, overall. In line with the survey findings, this was also the most common deterrent mentioned by interviewees. Tuition costs are high, scholarships are limited, and schools are typically located in expensive cities, compounding the financial pressure. Several noted that pursuing rabbinical school essentially required being independently wealthy, having a high-earning spouse, or being willing to take on crushing debt and side jobs. While the most strongly motivated often indicated a willingness to make the sacrifices required, they did so at a cost to their wellbeing and their studies; as will be discussed in more depth later, it is possible that those who are less intrinsically motivated, or who also have other interests, may not be so willing.

I think the price tag becomes really, really daunting. I'm very open and my classmates are very open about the cost of, not just tuition, but also cost of living is very high. And even though... I got a very generous scholarship, I was taking out the maximum amount of student loans every semester, and my spouse was working a full-time job, we still had to ask family for help at points... Next year the student council is going to start setting up a food pantry in the dorms because a non-zero number of people are facing food insecurity as a way to balance their budgets. –Current Student

Of course, if places could provide more scholarship and living stipends and stuff to make [rabbinical school] more practical. Because I know that we all were working multiple jobs and doing internships and teaching in other places, and some of that does make it hard to really sit and just be in the learning space.

–Current Congregational & Non-Congregational Rabbi (Age 50s)

A number of would-bes spoke to cost as a reason that rabbinical school was altogether out of reach, and for many, these costs were a decisive deterrent that was compounded by the time commitment:

Five years just feels very long and very expensive. And my boss has said 'I'm still in debt from rabbinical school and who knows if I'll pay it off.' So, I think finances and time are a big factor. –Would-be

I could get an MBA and a master's in Jewish professional leadership in two years at Brandeis and at a fraction of the cost. –Would-be

Other Practical Challenges

Concerns about the need to relocate for rabbinical school was a strong deterrent for about one-third of students (31%) and would-bes (37%) as well as for one-in-ten rabbis (11%). Similarly, over four-in-ten students and would-bes (42%) and one-in-ten rabbis (12%) were strongly deterred by the length of rabbinical school. Geography was also highlighted by interviewees as an obstacle. With almost all schools located on the West Coast and in the Northeast, prospective students in the Midwest and South felt shut out. For those with children or other

family obligations, the disruption of moving to another city, often for several years, felt especially daunting.

My personal life was taking me to Tulsa, and we're still here 10 years later. It just didn't seem feasible to be in New York or Cincinnati or LA or Boston or wherever the rabbinical schools were at the time. –Would-be

I think the fact that we have rabbinical schools only on the East Coast and, like, one in LA is a problem for us as a Jewish community in America. There are a lot of Jews in the Midwest that we forget about. –Non-denominational Female Student (Age 35 or Younger)

Additionally, the structure of most programs—multi-year, full-time study with limited flexibility—was especially difficult for second-career and parent candidates. Many described the rabbinate as an option better suited to younger, more mobile candidates, rather than those already rooted in professional paths or family commitments.

I wasn't at a place in my personal life or career that I could take off for five years and move... for rabbinical school and financially take care of my family. At that point I had two kids, so that wasn't going to be the right move for my family. –Would-be

Practical Career Concerns

Some, but ultimately fewer, survey respondents indicated feeling strongly deterred by practical concerns about a rabbinic career. About one-quarter of students and would-bes noted that they felt concerns about finding a career that matched their goals, about finding a career in a suitable location, and about a perceived lack of job opportunities. Consistently, rabbis were less deterred by each of these items (between 9% and 15%). Among the practical career concerns, concerns about financial and job security was consistently stronger than the others among students (42%), would-bes (31%), and rabbis (20%).

Practical career concerns in the context of being deterrents from the rabbinate (as opposed to issues experienced in the course of their career) were not raised among interviewees.

Career Intensity

Even before entering rabbinical school, many worried about whether the rabbinate was too demanding a lifestyle. About one-third of students (30%) and would-bes (38%) and one-fifth of rabbis (19%) indicated that they were strongly deterred by fear that a rabbinic career was too demanding or all-consuming. One-fifth (21%) of students and over one-quarter of would-bes (27%) were strongly deterred by concerns that a rabbinical career was incompatible with family life. Additionally, while rabbis (8%) and students (16%) were relatively less deterred, one-quarter (26%) of would-bes were strongly deterred by feeling that a rabbinic career was too rigid or bureaucratic.

While concerns about career intensity were not exceptionally strong deterrents from pursuing a rabbinical career, for many interviewees, concerns about career intensity began after they started rabbinical school. A few interviewees suggested that the culture in rabbinical school and after still tends to frame the demands of a rabbinical career as a reality that needs to be adjusted to, rather than a circumstance that may be improved.

In general, potential difficulties with navigating family life as well as the public visibility of pulpit roles were raised as major concerns.

I had my first child when I was in rabbinical school, and it was really a challenging time in a lot of ways. And I kind of was reaching out and asking for suggestions or advice or who could be good mentors to talk to. Like, how have people navigated these experiences as rabbis in the field? And there wasn't really any infrastructure for that. People were kind of just like, 'oh, I don't know, we figured it out...'

—Current Congregational & Non-Congregational Rabbi (Age 40s)

One of the big concerns is, particularly as a rabbi in a synagogue, you're up there in front of everybody. Everybody knows your business. It's very hard to have a relationship and have a private, emotional, and family life as a rabbi because everybody is seeing you for who they think you are, and you kind of can't hide those parts. —Current Student

What would concern me most is being the kind of rabbi who could never plan a vacation or never guarantee that they could prioritize their spouse or their children.

—Current Student

For some would-bes, the decision not to pursue the rabbinate became clearer as they observed the experiences of friends, family, or partners who were in rabbinical school or serving as rabbis. Seeing those peers navigate the unique responsibilities and challenges of rabbinic life highlighted the intensity of the role.

I think for some rabbis, it's such a grind. I worked enough places where they're working crazy hours, their jobs are totally out of control... They make a huge amount of money, but also, they work a crazy amount. I don't know that either of those were the thing I was interested in. —Would-be

I think I saw firsthand how demanding it was to be a congregational rabbi... I don't remember if anyone sat me down and actively discouraged me from it, but I think I didn't need that discouragement because I think I already knew. —Would-be

Background and Skills

Just under one-fifth of students and would-bes (18%) and half as many rabbis (9%) felt strongly deterred by feeling that they lacked the innate skills to be a rabbi. However, survey findings indicated that concerns about Hebrew skills and/or Jewish background was a strong deterrent for two-fifths of students (42%), one-third of would-bes (35%), and one-fifth of rabbis (22%). In alignment with the survey findings, some interviewees, particularly those who did not attend day school or have other immersive Jewish learning experiences as youth, cited hesitation about entering rabbinical school because they felt underprepared for the level of textual learning expected. Concerns about Hebrew proficiency loomed especially large. Some interviewees described feeling disadvantaged compared to peers who had grown up immersed in Jewish text study, reporting both self-doubt and real difficulties either gaining admission or passing required proficiency exams. Those who had not acquired fluency in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Jewish ritual practice anticipated that these gaps would create additional barriers to completing the program successfully. For these individuals, rabbinical school seemed designed for students with a strong

existing foundation, leaving them uncertain whether they could catch up or keep pace with their peers.

I didn't grow up with the background, so it's something I had to work at and it was definitely an anxiety about whether I have a high enough skill level to be able to learn at this level... it is an interesting balance between those who had a strong background [and those who didn't]... They don't carry that same anxiety as those who of us who have become interested later in life or weren't given the education when we were younger.

—Current Rabbi (Age 35 and Younger)

I think kind of the first order of challenge was just that I didn't have a traditional Jewish education. And so, when I was coming in [to rabbinical school] I was learning how to read Hebrew really for the first time. In my life, there were other types of spaces in the Jewish world that felt inaccessible to me either financially or socially. And I had to do a lot of personal soul searching to get over the embarrassment and to not let me limit myself in my learning. —Current Student

Ideological Concerns and Rabbinical School Fit

Some deterrents raised by students and current rabbis related to concerns about or experiences of discrimination related to personal or social identities such as gender, sexuality, disability status, or marital status. According to survey findings, one-quarter of students and would-bes (26%) were strongly deterred by concerns, whether true now or not, that some aspect of their identity would disqualify them from being able to attend rabbinical school.

Perceptions of how inclusive various rabbinical schools are for women, LGBTQ+ students, students in interfaith marriages, and students from interfaith or non-Jewish backgrounds shaped decisions about where to attend.

My supervisor is a female Reform rabbi, and I really appreciate her and appreciate working with her. I think one of the factors [of my decision not to pursue rabbinical school] is seeing, sadly, how our students talk about her and treat her, and talk about Reform Judaism, in general, discouraged me a little bit. —Would-be

It took me a long time to decide to be a rabbi, not because I was, weighing or debating, but because it really had never occurred to me. I grew up like 'Conservadox,' and in [my area], we were kind of late to the lady rabbi game and having female rabbis as role models... There were only male rabbis. And so, it never occurred to me that this was a job that was something [I could do]. —Current rabbi

For some interviewees, coming from interfaith or non-Jewish backgrounds created feelings of exclusion and added hurdles in the admissions process. They described concerns that their backgrounds might be scrutinized more heavily, requiring them to prove their Jewish authenticity or justify their place in rabbinical training in ways that peers from more traditional backgrounds did not face.

I have one non-Jewish parent, and that is a problem with a lot of people in the Jewish community, especially because it's my mother. So, there's plenty in the community who look at that and go, 'you're not really Jewish.' —Would-be

I think as somebody who came from totally outside the Jewish world, it was really hard to envision myself as somebody who could be a rabbi. And, I have a tremendous amount of imposter syndrome. And, like, am I even allowed to imagine this? Who am I to want to do this? –Current rabbi

For some interviewees, the decision not to pursue the rabbinate stemmed from a concern that denominational requirements and serving in a pulpit role would inevitably require them to compromise on their own ideological, religious, and personal commitments. Some imagined that as congregational leaders, they might be expected to moderate their views, adjust their practices, or conform to the expectations of a broad and diverse community.

If I would have become a rabbi [within a specific movement], I would have expected to be in a pretty lonely place of not being able to choose the community that I would want to be in, necessarily. And it would potentially be very lonely ideologically and religiously... even as a layperson, it's already difficult. –Would-be

In a similar vein, per the survey findings, concerns that one or more of the respondent's beliefs or values did not align with a career as a rabbi was a strong deterrent for one-sixth of students (14%) and one-fifth of would-bes (21%).

For some, finding a rabbinical school that felt like the right fit was itself a challenge. According to survey findings, over one-third of students (34%) and would-bes (38%) and one-fifth of rabbis (20%) were strongly deterred by concerns about finding a rabbinical school that fit. This sense of "fit" extended beyond denominational alignment to include social, cultural, spiritual, and educational dimensions. Interviewees described struggling to identify schools or movements that fully matched their personal or ideological identities, and some worried that enrolling would require them to present themselves in ways that did not feel authentic or to conform to communal norms that diverged from their own values.

I don't know what rabbinical school would be the right one for me to go to. I'm Modern Orthodox in my practice, I work in a school that was a Shechter school for a long time, my kid does BBYO. I mean, like, I'm a Jew. That's it. And so, the discouragement really has been around what movement would be the right movement. –Would-be

I think rabbinical schools are denominational in a world where most people do not see themselves within the boxes of denominations. They ultimately are living in a very particular box while trying to attract people who don't live in that box, by and large... So, I think that's why it's ill-fitting for a lot of people because you kind of have to just find the place that's the best fit possible. –Current rabbi

Drawn to Another Career

For many would-bes, the decision did not reflect a lack of interest in Jewish leadership, but rather the realization that their passions and skills could be expressed outside the rabbinate. They emphasized the ability to serve and engage with Jewish communities powerfully in other professional and volunteer roles without taking on the expectations and responsibilities of ordination. Per the survey findings, over one-third of would-bes (38%) were strongly deterred by a belief that they were better suited to a different career, and over one-quarter (29%) were strongly deterred by the belief that they could have a greater impact

in a different career. For both rabbis and students, the share of those who were strongly deterred by these items was considerably lower.

Some would-bes described the value of modeling deep Jewish engagement as lay leaders. By taking on roles as educators, organizers, board members, or professionals in Jewish institutions, they felt they could show others that meaningful leadership is not limited to rabbis.

I also really value being someone who is ritually and liturgically literate and being able to model that, especially for the teens in college students that I get to work with every day... find those things very, very meaningful and specifically do them not as a rabbi.

–Would-be

Others expressed concern that becoming a rabbi would mean losing the ability to simply participate in Jewish life. They worried that ordination would turn every communal moment into a leadership role, leaving little space for them to just “show up” as members of the community.

Everyone wants to ask you things, everyone sees you in a different light. And [my rabbi] says it becomes pretty much impossible to be a participant in the Jewish world. Like you are forever a leader... I really prefer to do those as a participant. –Would-be

Some interviewees explained that their interests in Jewish communal leadership leaned more toward the operational and organizational side than toward the spiritual or educational aspects of rabbinic work. They were drawn to questions of management, budgeting, fundraising, strategic planning, and logistics that sustain Jewish institutions but may be perceived as peripheral to the core responsibilities of a rabbi.

Ultimately from a career professional path, I found myself gravitating more towards the business and the operations and the fundraising of the Jewish nonprofit space and less on the programmatic and education space. Even though my undergraduate degree is in education and Jewish studies, I felt myself gravitating more towards that element, and I felt like at the time, rabbinical school didn't necessarily provide a pathway to that type of work. –Would-be

Similarly, some interviewees realized their true passions, such as Jewish education, social justice, or community organizing, could be fulfilled outside the rabbinate, making ordination unnecessary. They felt that teaching in Jewish schools, running educational programs, leading advocacy efforts, or building grassroots community initiatives could allow them to make a profound impact without the extra commitments of rabbinical school and ordination.

What I realized is that I didn't actually need to be a rabbi to do the type of Jewish professional work that I wanted to do. If I were to go into the rabbinic program, it would have just been to have the title. That wasn't a sufficient reason. –Would-be

I could be a camp director or a Hillel director without being a rabbi, and I could go get a graduate degree to be eligible for those types of positions or build my professional toolkit. I just didn't need to be a rabbi in order for me to continue to advance in my career.

–Would-be

Deterrents by segment

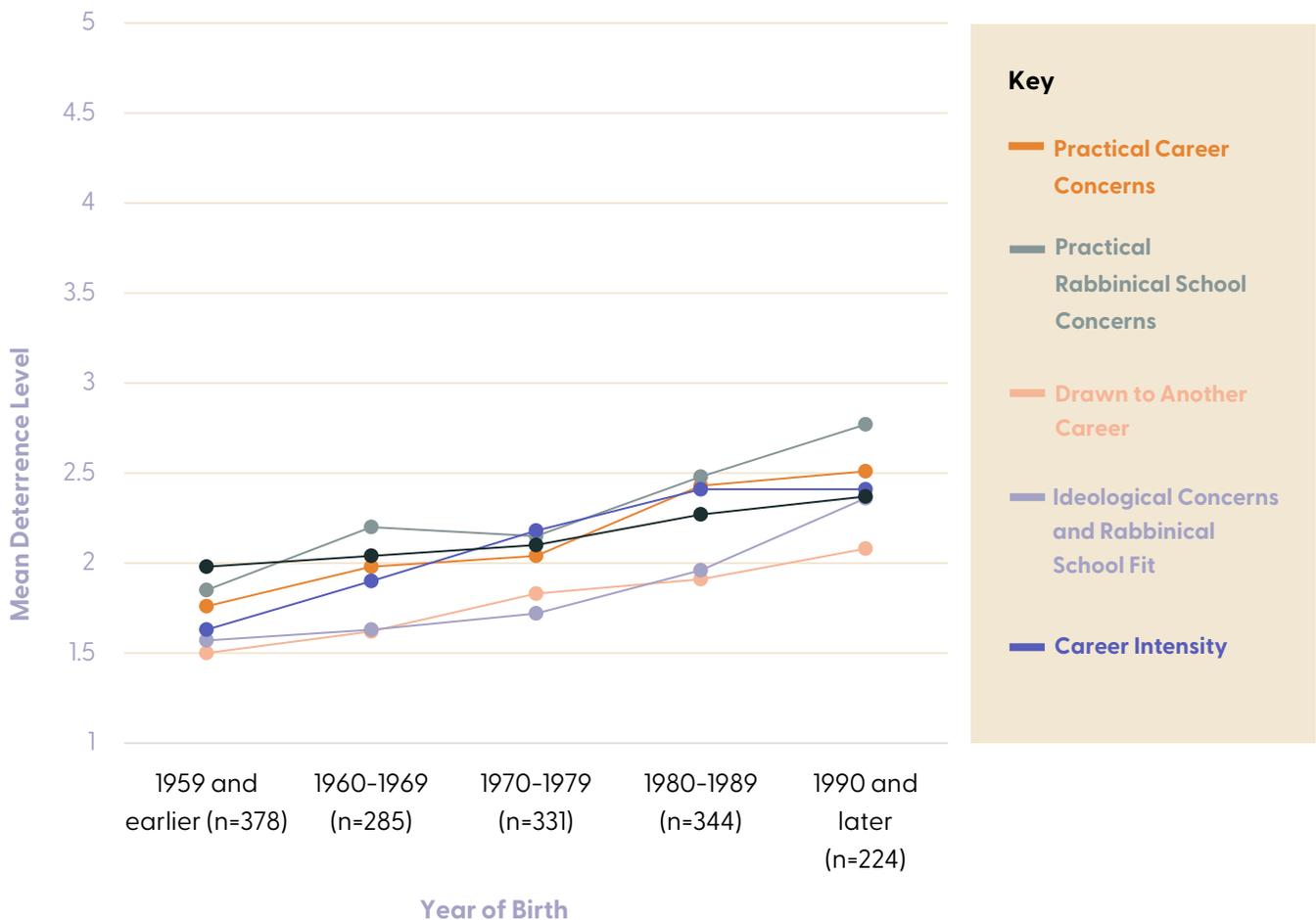
As with motivations, the relative effects of each deterrent differed across respondents of different ages, genders, denominations, and extent of Jewish youth engagement.

By Age and Ordination Year

All six deterrent factors—*practical career concerns, practical rabbinical school concerns, being drawn to another career, ideological concerns and rabbinical school fit, career intensity, and background and skills*—are correlated with age (Figure 27). In almost all cases, average deterrence increases linearly across age bins with the youngest cohort being the most deterred.

When analyzed by ordination year (among rabbis and students only), the pattern is nearly identical. However, the relationship is even more pronounced for practical rabbinical school concerns, which are highest among current students and the most recently ordained. Moreover, the magnitude of change over time is substantially steeper for this factor than for any other, indicating that practical barriers to entering and completing rabbinical school have intensified in recent years.

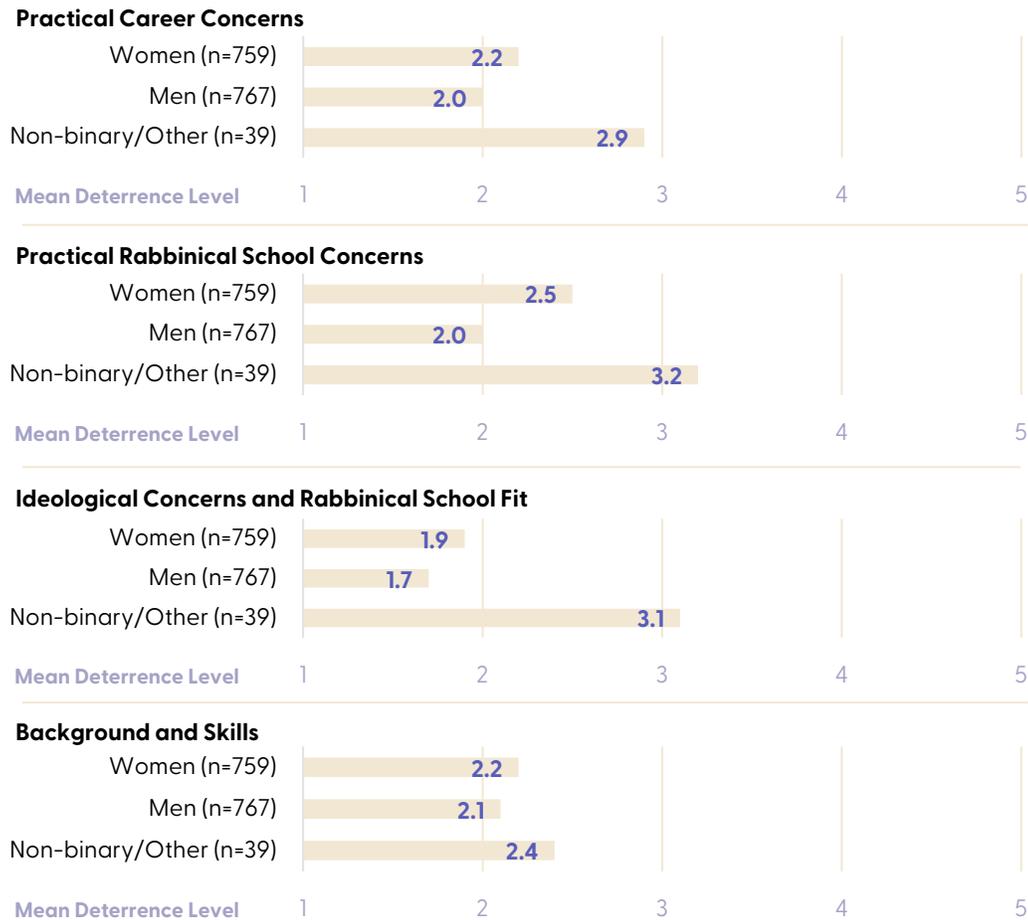
Figure 27. Deterrents by Age (Mean Scores)



By Gender

Five of the six deterrent factors—*practical career concerns*, *practical rabbinical school concerns*, *ideological concerns and rabbinical school fit*, *career intensity*, and *background and skills*—all differ significantly across gender. Despite small n’s, on average, non-binary respondents were more strongly deterred by these factors than women, who were in turn more strongly deterred by these factors than men (Figure 28).

Figure 28. Deterrents by Gender (Mean Scores)



By Denomination

Five of the six deterrent factors—*practical career concerns*, *practical rabbinical school concerns*, *ideological concerns and rabbinical school fit*, *career intensity*, and *drawn to another career*—differ significantly across self-reported denomination.

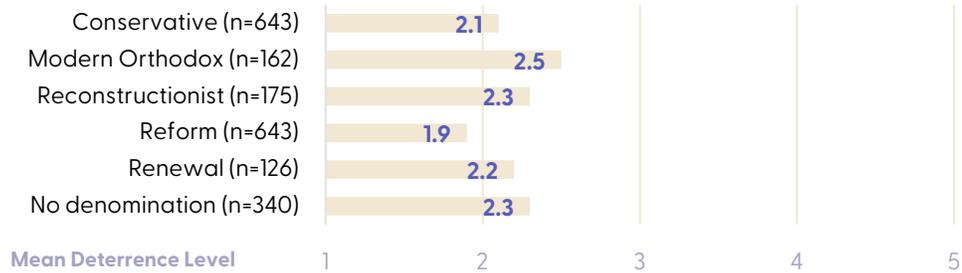
Compared to other denominational groups, respondents who identify as Modern Orthodox were the most strongly deterred by *practical career concerns*, and those who identify as Reform were the least strongly deterred.³⁰ Respondents who identify as Reconstructionist, Renewal, or no denomination were more strongly deterred by *practical rabbinical school concerns* and *ideological*

³⁰ Recall that rabbis and students who attended RIETS or any Orthodox institution other than YCT and Maharat are not included in the sample. In our sample, 58% of rabbis and students who identify as Modern Orthodox attend(ed) either YCT or Maharat, 21% attended a Conservative seminary, and the remaining 21% are from across other non-Orthodox institutions.

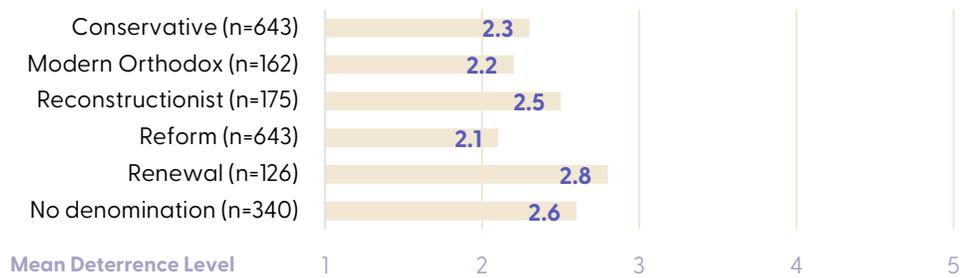
concerns and rabbinical school fit, and those who identify as Reform were the least strongly deterred. Compared to others, those who do not identify with a particular denomination were somewhat more strongly deterred by being drawn to another career and by concerns about career intensity.

Figure 29. Deterrents by Self-Reported Denomination (Mean Scores)

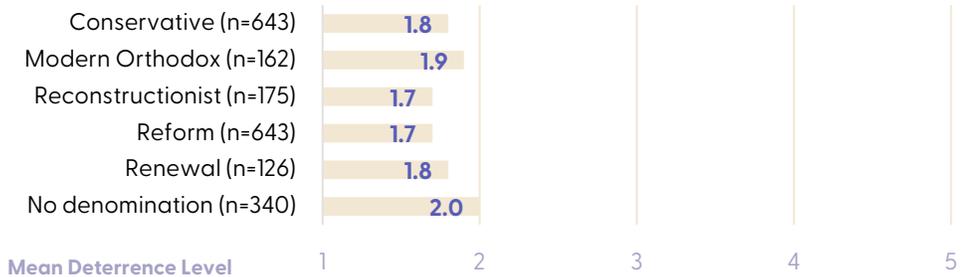
Practical Career Concerns



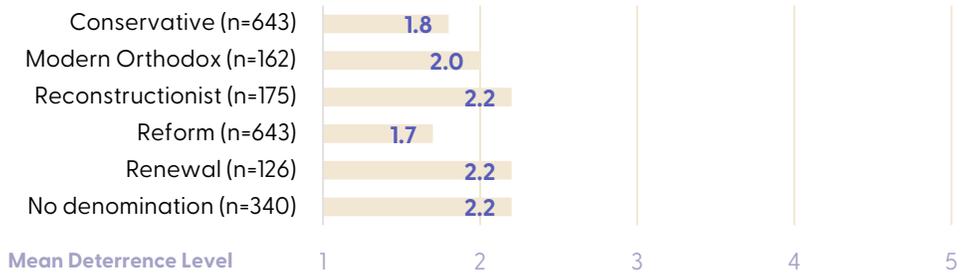
Practical Rabbinical School Concerns



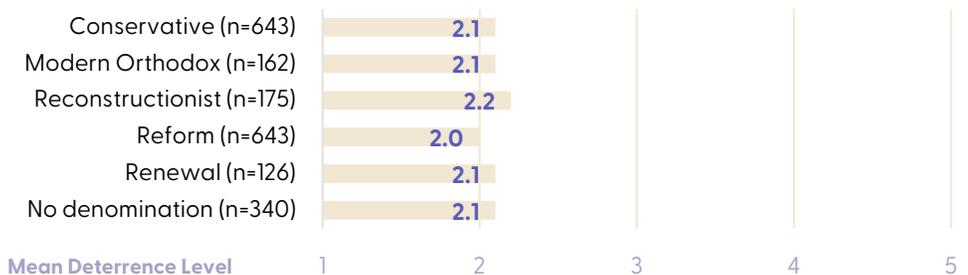
Drawn to Another Career



Ideological Concerns and Rabbinical School Fit



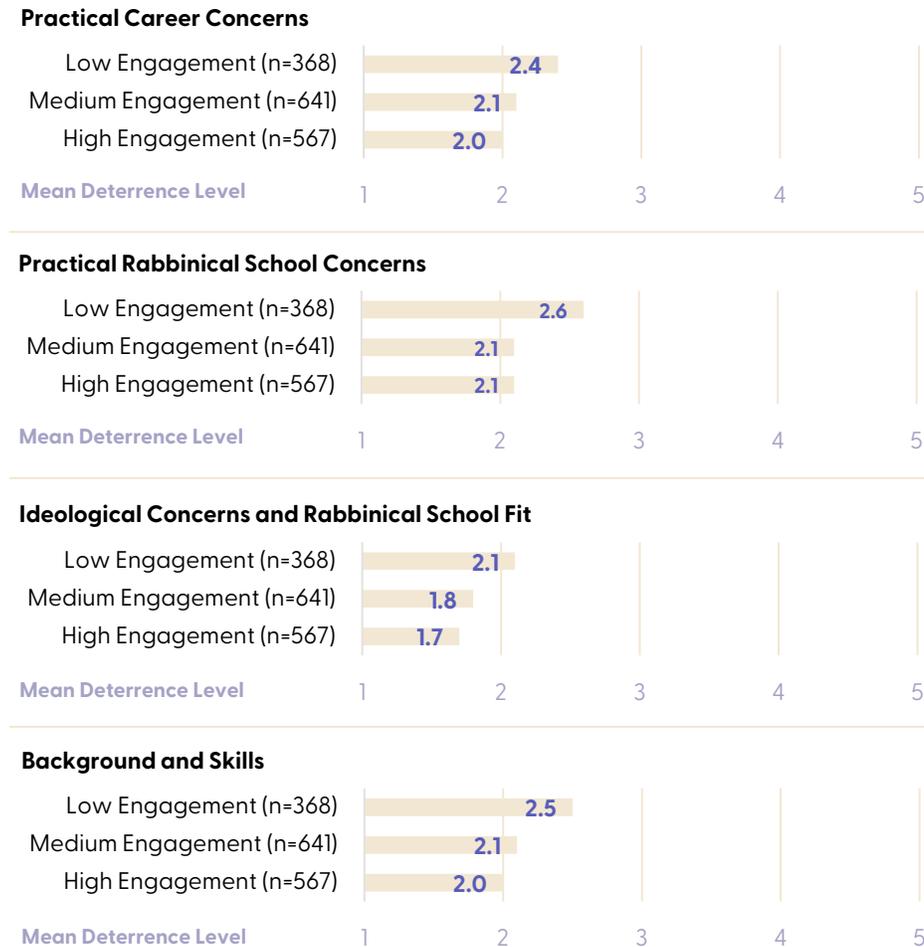
Career Intensity



By Jewish Youth Engagement

Weaker youth engagement is correlated with stronger concerns across four of the six factors—practical career concerns, practical rabbinical school concerns, ideological concerns and rabbinical school fit, and background and skills.

Figure 30. Deterrents by Youth Engagement (Mean Scores)



Those Who Never Considered Rabbinical School

While most of this study focuses on those who have pursued, considered, or entered rabbinical school, a smaller subset of respondents, those who report never having considered becoming a rabbi, offers a perspective on how the rabbinate is perceived more broadly.

Because this sample of “Never Considered” respondents (n=280) was small and not randomly selected, it cannot be treated as representative of the population at large. Some kinds of people may be overrepresented in the sample (e.g., women) while others are missing entirely, which means the results reflect only those who chose to respond. That said, we can use some information about who is included in this group of respondents to offer context for the items that surfaced about their career trajectories and why a rabbinical career was not a part of that.

Among these “never considereds” three-quarters (76%) of them do currently work as Jewish professionals. Two-thirds (66%) had “moderate” to “high” adolescent Jewish engagement, and most (71%) describe themselves as having “high” or “very high” current Jewish engagement. Most (61%) described themselves as being affiliated with a non-Orthodox denomination, 18% described themselves as Orthodox, and 21% described themselves as having no denominational affiliation. More than three-quarters (78%) of these respondents were women. These respondents were diverse in age with 28% born in 1990 or later, 40% born between 1970 and 1989, and 32% born before 1970. This group, while small and self-selected, represents a range of committed Jewish adults for whom the rabbinate simply did not register as a viable or appealing option.

When asked what deterred them from considering rabbinical school, intrinsic and conceptual barriers surfaced more strongly than practical ones. Notably, 39% of respondents expressed concern that their Hebrew proficiency or Jewish background was not strong enough, echoing deterrents identified more broadly across the study. Other items that were most frequently cited as deterrents include not feeling that they had the innate skills (38%), perceiving the career as too demanding or all-consuming (38%), and believing that their values or beliefs did not align with a rabbinic career (36%). By comparison, fewer pointed to practical barriers such as rabbinical school length (18%) or cost (14%).

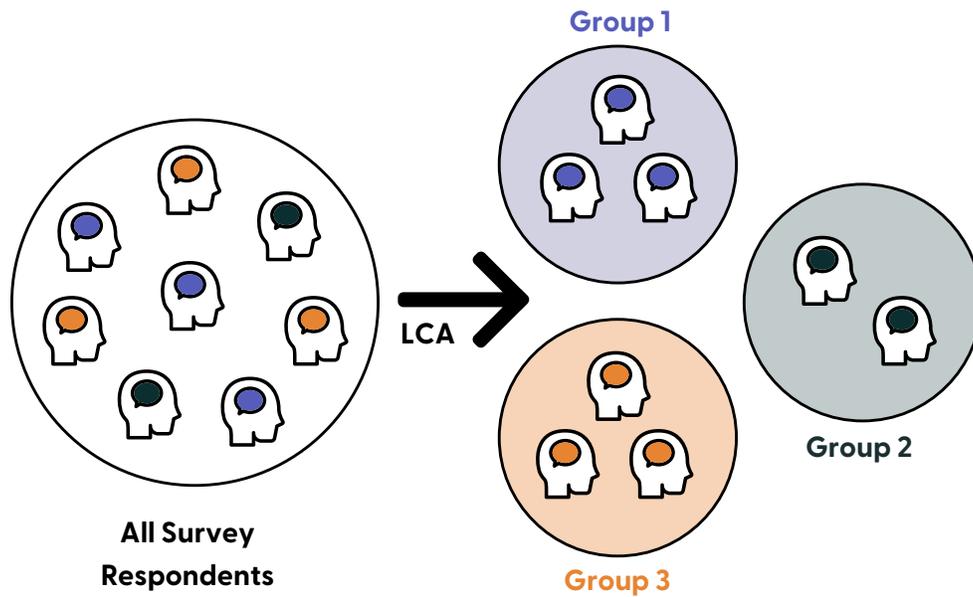
Open-ended responses support that many respondents did not have an interest in a rabbinical career and commonly expressed that they had alternative career interests—frequently, as the sample composition indicates, this included career interests in other areas of the Jewish communal field. Additional respondents, particularly older and/or Orthodox women, described cultural messages that the rabbinate was not a career that was available to them. Limiting the analysis to only non-Orthodox respondents born after 1980, over half of respondents indicated that, for one reason or another, they simply were not interested, while others noted that the job is taxing, that rabbinical school is a long, expensive commitment, and that they did not feel they had a strong enough Jewish background or Hebrew skills to pursue it. Together, these findings suggest that for most who never considered the rabbinate, the barrier was not a lack of opportunity, but rather a lack of identification or resonance with the role itself.

While the limited size and non-random nature of this group prevent broad generalization, their responses still help contextualize how the rabbinate is perceived outside of its immediate professional pipeline. These respondents illustrate the boundaries between why some view the rabbinate as a possible path and why others do not. Their responses suggest that even among highly engaged Jews, the conceptual distance from the idea of becoming a rabbi may be greater than the practical barriers of cost or length of study. This may support a broader insight that is discussed in the following section: tackling the challenges that the rabbinic pipeline presents may lie less in identifying or recruiting more potential candidates, and more in reducing the deterrents and structural barriers that dissuade those who already feel called to the rabbinate.

Latent Class Analysis

The goal of Latent Class Analysis (LCA) is to find hidden groups within a larger population based on how they respond to survey questions about attitudes, behaviors, or experiences. Unlike demographic classification, which groups individuals by demographic or identity characteristics (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, region of residence), LCA identifies clusters of respondents who display similar combinations of attitudes and motivations. Looking at patterns in the survey data, LCA is able to sort people into groups or “classes” in order to help explain those underlying patterns. Figure 31 shows a conceptual model of LCA classification.

Figure 31. LCA Conceptual Model



LCA was conducted using the same Likert-type survey questions that focused on respondents’ motivations and deterrents around their decision to pursue a career in the rabbinate. LCAs were run separately for the rabbi sample, the student sample, and the would-be sample. Additional information about the LCA methods is included in Appendix A.

The LCA represents one of the most consequential findings in this study. It moves beyond simple descriptive data to uncover distinct patterns of motivation and deterrence that define different types of rabbis, rabbinical students, and would-be rabbis and begins to explain why those patterns occur. It reveals that the rabbinic pipeline is not defined by a single type of person or a uniform set of challenges, but by a small number of identifiable groups whose motivations and barriers interact in distinctive ways. The findings that follow illuminate not only who remains drawn to the rabbinate today, but also who is being held back, and why.

Introducing the LCA Groups

The LCA identified **three distinct groups of rabbis, two groups of would-bes**, and only **one group of students**. An important takeaway from this analysis is that the individual items that most motivate and discourage people are often similar across the different groups. In other words, **the groups aren't separated by differences in what motivates or deters them, but rather by how strongly they feel those motivations and deterrents overall.**

Each of the groups identified through the analysis was given a name that reflects the distinctive combination of motivations and deterrents that characterize its members.

Among rabbis, these groups are:

- **Stalwarts** (39% of surveyed rabbis) – Rabbis who are **very highly motivated** to enter the rabbinate with **very low deterrence**. They represent the most confident and steadfast path into the profession.
- **Agreeables** (27% of surveyed rabbis) – Rabbis with **moderate motivation** and **low deterrence**, suggesting a “good enough” fit and a manageable career path rather than a deeply driven one.
- **Dark Horses** (34% of surveyed rabbis)– Rabbis who are **very highly motivated** yet face **substantial internal or external barriers**, reflecting persistence and determination despite obstacles.

Among would-bes, two groups surfaced:

- **Eager-to-bes** (62% of surveyed would-bes) – Those with **strong motivation** toward a rabbinical career despite not (or not yet) pursuing it. This group is **very strongly deterred**.
- **Thought-about-its** (38% of surveyed would-bes) – Those with **more moderate motivation** overall, who have considered the rabbinate but ultimately remain on the sidelines. This group is also **strongly deterred**, but somewhat less so than their counterpart.

For students, the analysis surfaced a single group:

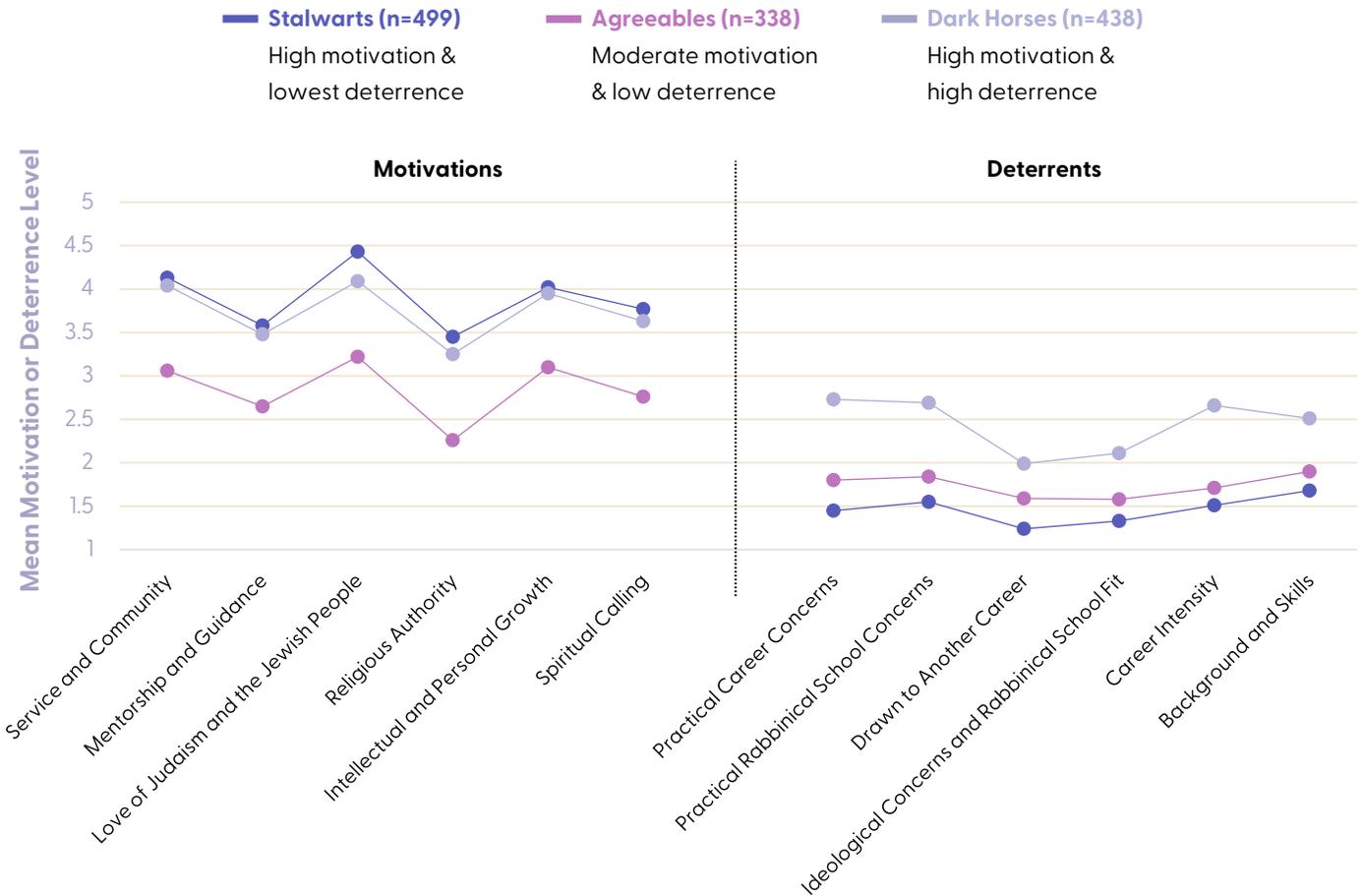
- **Students** – overall, this group is **very highly motivated** yet **strongly deterred**.

The next sections explore these groups in greater depth, comparing within and across the three categories of respondents (rabbis, students, and would-bes). Finally, the discussion concludes with how these findings illustrate broader implications for the field.

Rabbi Groups

Figure 32 shows the pattern of responses that illustrate the differences in motivation and deterrence between the three Rabbi groups: the **Stalwarts**, the **Agreeables**, and the **Dark Horses**.

Figure 32. Rabbi Groups—Stalwarts, Agreeables, and Dark Horses—Motivation and Deterrent Factors



As discussed, the **Stalwarts** are characterized by their strong motivation and very low deterrence. Relative to other rabbi groups, members of the **Agreeables** are not as strongly motivated. Though they are modestly more deterred than **Stalwarts**, they are not very strongly deterred, overall. **Dark Horses** are also characterized by very strong motivation. Although they are strongly motivated, the **Dark Horse** class is also characterized by being strongly deterred, particularly by *practical career concerns*, *practical rabbinical school concerns*, and concerns about *career intensity*.

When looking at age and ordination year, the **Stalwart** and **Agreeable** rabbis are quite similar as both have median birth years in the mid-1960s and median ordination years in the early 2000s. **Dark Horse** rabbis, by contrast, tend to be younger, with a typical birth year in the mid-1970s and ordination around 2011. While only about one-third of all rabbis fall into the Dark Horse group, they make up more than half of rabbis born after 1980 and only a small share of those born before 1960.

The gender distribution is similar across all three groups. That said, two-thirds of rabbis who identify as non-binary (n=35) are **Dark Horse** rabbis. Additionally, **Dark Horses** are more likely to be LGBTQ+ and are also more likely to not have been raised Jewish or to have been raised in an interfaith household. Nearly half of the rabbis who identify as LGBTQ+ belong to the **Dark Horse** group (n=508) as do nearly half of the rabbis who were either not raised Jewish or were raised in an interfaith household (n=126).

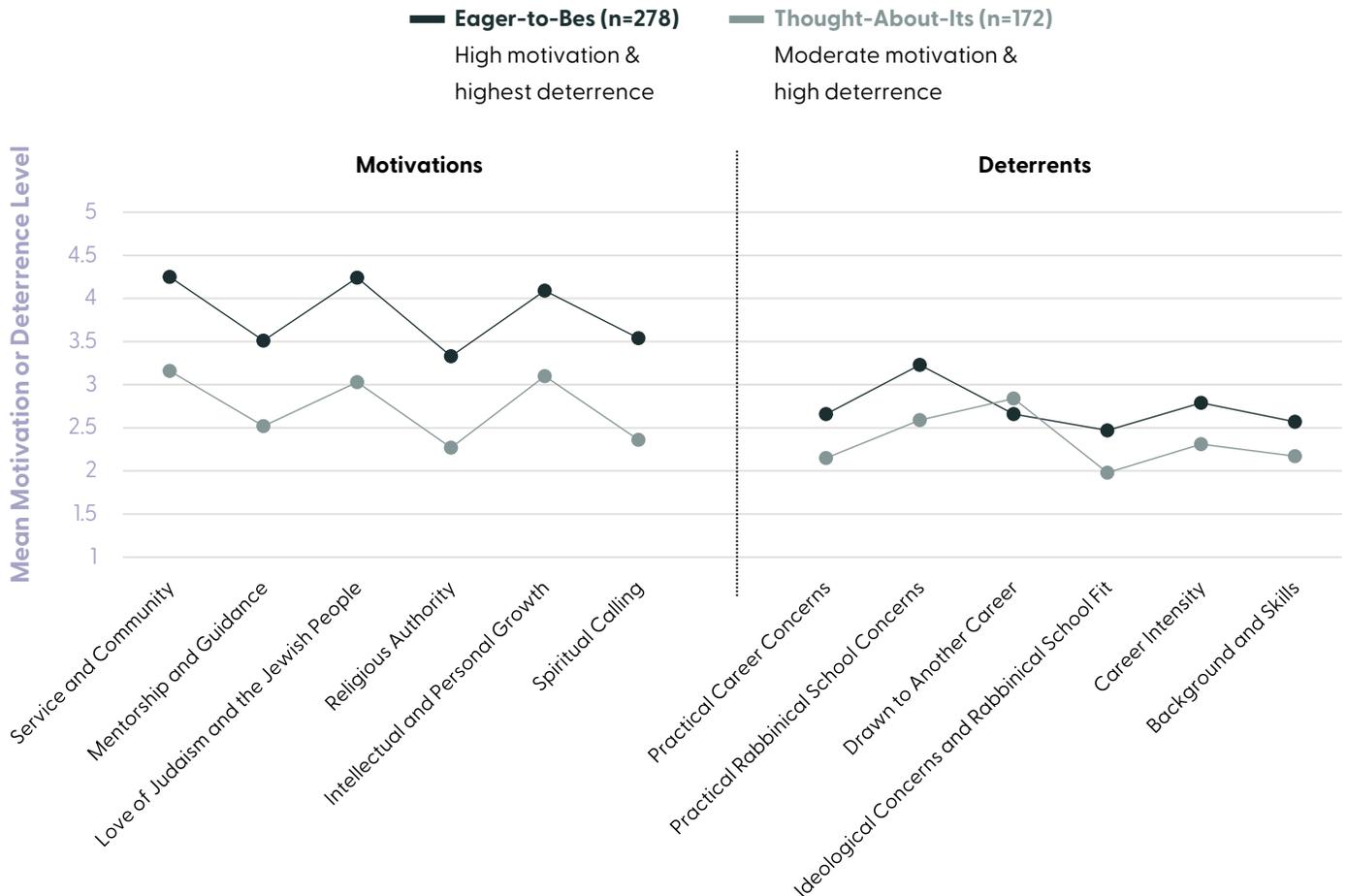
The three rabbi groups also differ in where members their members were ordained. About half of **Stalwarts** were ordained at Reform institutions, while **Dark Horses** are more likely to have studied at non-denominational, Reconstructionist, or Non-denominational Orthodox programs. Even though **Dark Horses** make up about a third of all rabbis, they account for roughly half of rabbis ordained from these institutions.

Finally, **Stalwarts** tend to have deeper early Jewish experiences. Nearly half first thought about becoming rabbis during high school or earlier, and they are somewhat more likely to have had higher levels of Jewish engagement in childhood compared to members of the other two rabbi groups.

Would-be Groups

The pattern of responses for the two would-be groups—the **Eager-to-Bes** and the **Thought-About-Its**—is shown in Figure 33.

Figure 33. Would-be Classes—Eager-to-bes and Thought-about-its—Motivation and Deterrent Factors



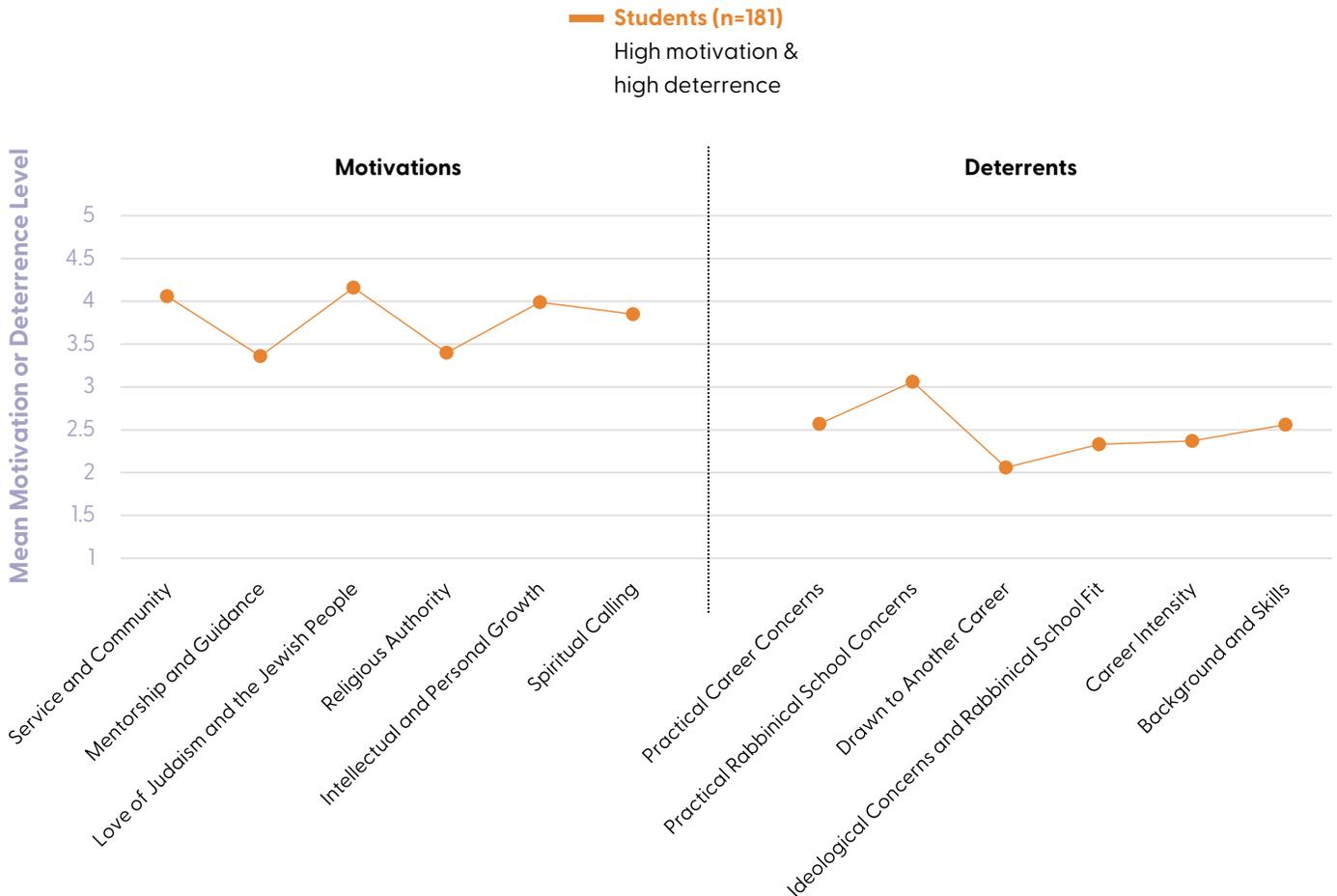
As their names suggest, **Eager-to-Bes** are more strongly motivated to pursue the rabbinate, yet interestingly, they also report higher levels of deterrence across most factors, especially when it comes to *practical rabbinical school concerns*. The **Thought-About-Its**, on the other hand, show lower motivation and slightly less deterrence overall. The one deterrent factor that is higher for the **Thought-About-Its**, compared to the **Eager-to-Bes** is being *drawn to another career*, meaning that external factors, rather than competing interests, likely drive why **Thought-About-Its** did not pursue the rabbinate.

Eager-to-Bes are somewhat younger than the **Thought-About-Its** with median birth years of 1985 and 1981, respectively. The gender breakdown is similar between both groups, though all would-bes who identify as non-binary (n=17) do belong to the **Eager-to-be** group. Additionally, members of the **Eager-to-Bes** are more likely to be LGBTQ+ and are also more likely to not have been raised Jewish or to have been raised in an interfaith family. Levels of Jewish engagement during adolescence are similar between the two groups.

Student Class

The LCA classified **Students** into a single respondent group, and their response pattern is shown in Figure 34. Both motivations and deterrents were high for the **Student** group, and comparisons to other groups is included in the following section.

Figure 34. Students—Motivation and Deterrent Factors

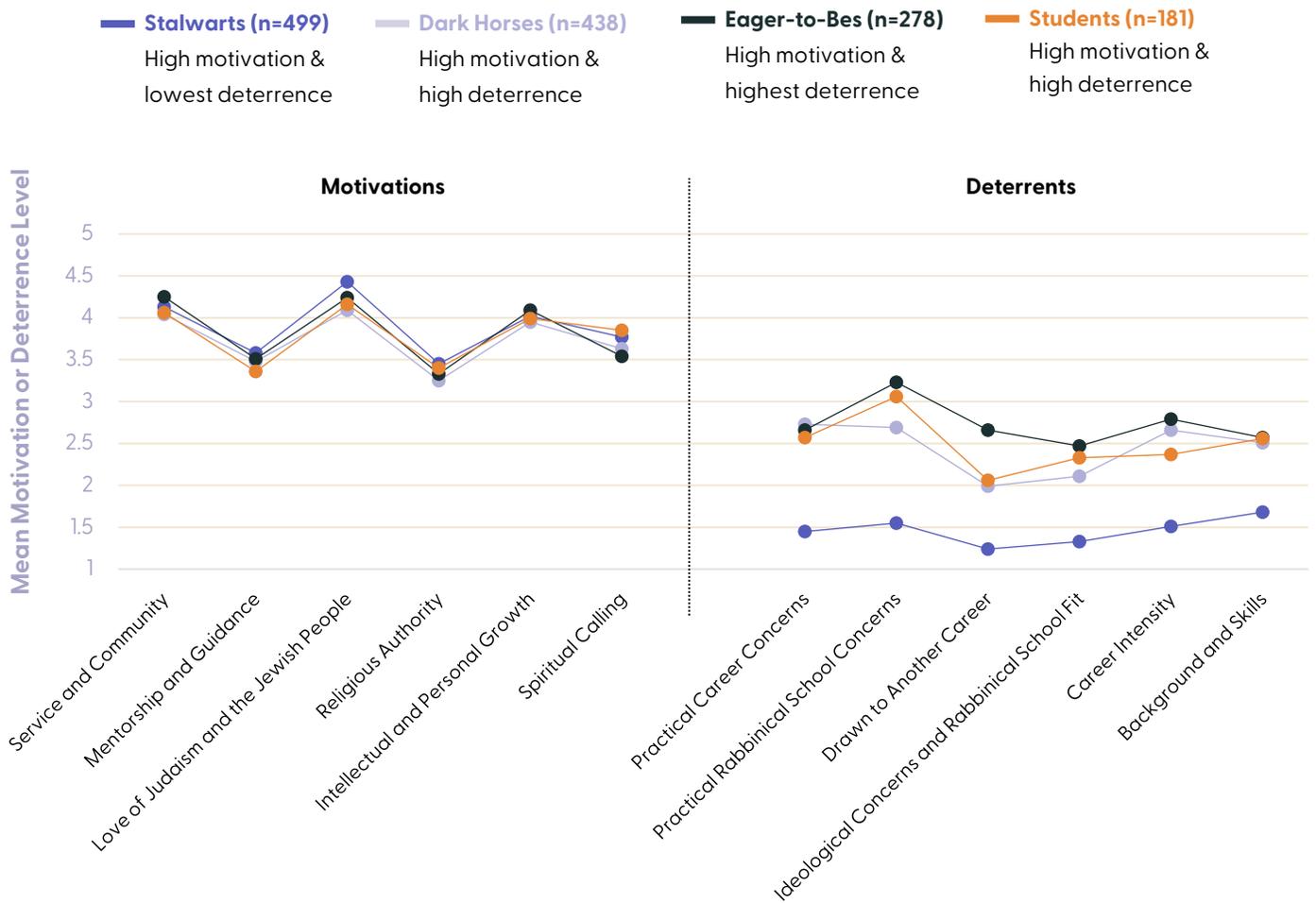


Intergroup Comparisons

There is some interesting congruence in the motivation and deterrence patterns between different groups of rabbis, would-bes, and students. As shown in Figure 35, the **Students, Stalwart rabbis, Dark Horse rabbis, and Eager-to-Bes** closely resemble one another across their strong motivations. However, the **Stalwarts'** combined pattern of motivations *and* deterrents is distinct as no other group was both strongly motivated and weakly deterred.

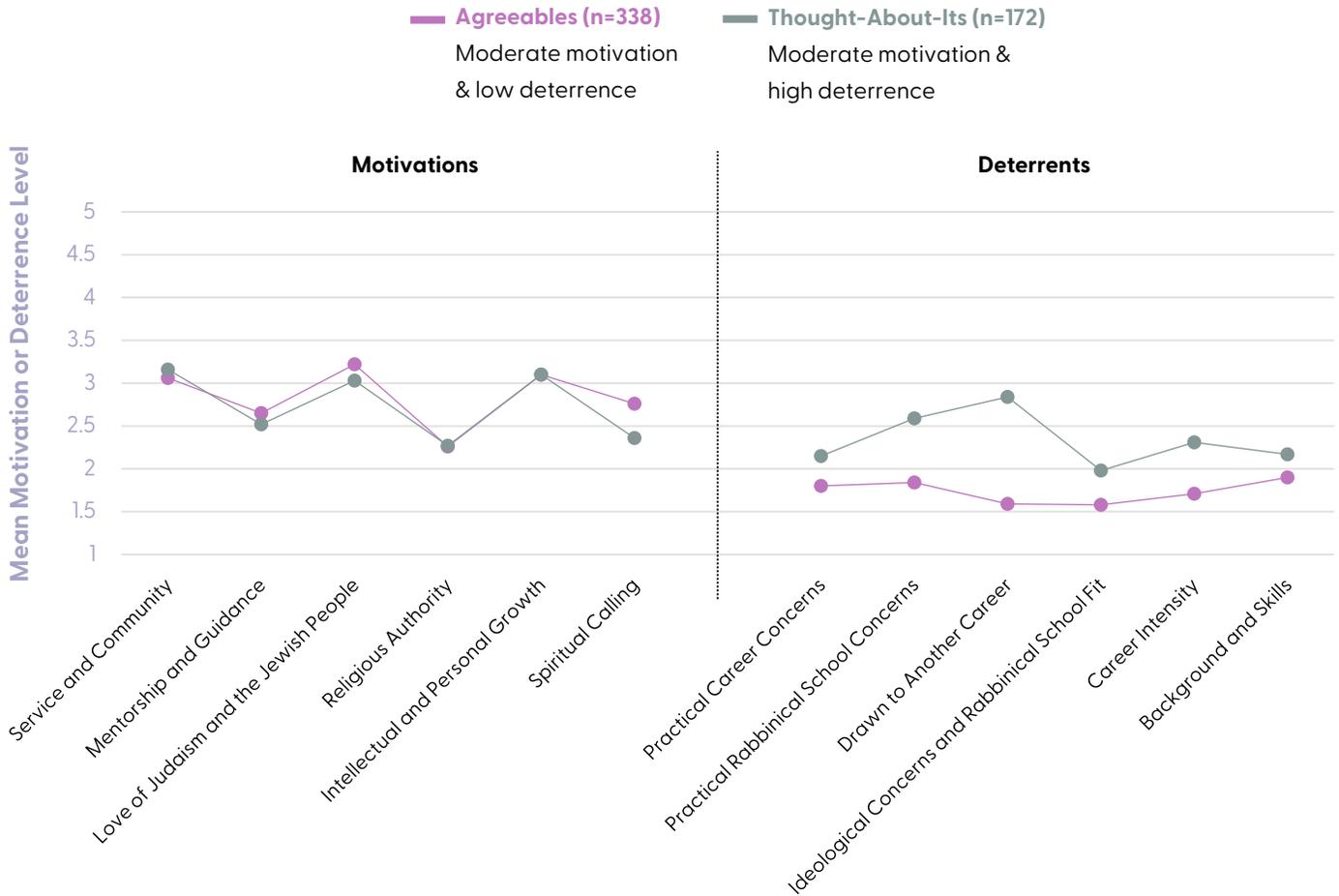
Overall, **Students, Dark Horse rabbis, and Eager-To-Bes** shared consistently strong deterrents relative to the **Stalwart rabbis**. Compared to the **Students and Eager-To-Bes, Dark Horse rabbis** were somewhat less deterred by *practical rabbinical school concerns*. Meanwhile, **Students** were somewhat less deterred by concerns around *career intensity* and, perhaps unsurprisingly, **Eager-to-Bes** were more deterred by feeling *drawn to another career* compared to those who did pursue a career in the rabbinate.

Figure 35. Comparing Students, Stalwart Rabbis, Dark Horse Rabbis, and Eager-to-Bes Would-bes across Motivation and Deterrent Factors



Additionally, Figure 36 shows the comparison between the **Agreeable** rabbis and the **Thought-About-Its**, who closely resemble one another in terms of motivations. Conversely, the **Thought-About-Its** were much more strongly deterred than the **Agreeables**. With respect to deterrents, the **Thought-About-Its** more closely resemble the **Students**, **Dark Horse** rabbis, and **Eager-To-Bes**. Though again, the **Thought-About-Its**, appear uniquely driven by their interest in alternate career options.

Figure 36. Comparing Agreeable Rabbis and Thought-About-It Would-bes across Motivation and Deterrent Factors



Implications for the Field

The findings show that motivation to pursue the rabbinate is high, not only among **Students**, but also among the **Eager-to-Bes** who never enrolled as, in fact, their level of motivation is similar to that of **Stalwart** and **Dark Horse** rabbis and is *higher* than that of the **Agreeable** rabbis.

Notably, **the existence of the Agreeable rabbis suggests that someone does not need exceptionally strong motivation to choose this career path. What seems to matter more is that the barriers stay low. In other words, The Agreeables class demonstrates that there is a theoretical path to a rabbinical career that one could pursue because the fit is “good enough” and the road to get there is “manageable enough.”**

However, deterrents are relatively high for all but the **Agreeable** and **Stalwart** rabbis. Speaking to these high deterrents, looking at both classes of would-be exposes two issues. First, while the **Thought-About-Its** appear to have the same “good enough” fit as the **Agreeables**, the road to the rabbinate is not “manageable enough,” and, as a result, that pool of potential rabbis is lost. The bigger concern, though, is the **Eager-to-Bes**—people who seem ideally suited for the rabbinate—are also blocked by obstacles that make it the path impractical or unmanageable and are, in fact, more strongly deterred as a group.

The two groups that face fewer deterrents—the **Agreeables** and **Stalwarts**—skew significantly older and somewhat more “conventional” than all other classes (e.g., less likely to be LGBTQ+, more likely to have been raised Jewish, and more Jewishly engaged in adolescence at least among the **Stalwarts**). **This pattern suggests that the lower-barrier paths into the rabbinate may no longer exist like they once did, and/or may not exist equally for all prospective rabbis.**

Finally, while the Students and Dark Horse rabbis do show that extraordinary motivation can overcome even strong deterrents, relying on that level of personal drive is not a sustainable strategy for maintaining a healthy rabbinic pipeline.

Key Insights to Sustain and Build the American Rabbinate

The insights below distill the data and findings of this study into actionable themes. They illuminate both the current realities and emerging trends shaping the American rabbinate and point toward opportunities for coordinated intervention, collaboration, and renewal across the field.

The Current Rabbinate

1. Burnout Is the Field's Quiet Emergency

Rabbis find deep purpose in their work, yet describe a career replete with exhaustion, blurred boundaries, and little institutional support. Without change, we risk losing mid-career rabbis faster than we can train new ones and deterring those who would otherwise enter the field.

2. Not Enough New Rabbis to Replace Those Retiring

Only 6% of rabbis are under 35, while 26% are over 65. Retirements may soon outpace replacements, leaving communities without the rabbinic presence they need. Further research is necessary in this area.

3. The Calling Is Strong, the Path Is Precarious

Rabbis are deeply motivated: 97% describe their work as meaningful and rewarding. But rabbinical school is long and expensive and a rabbinical career is perceived as risky to pursue. The passion remains but the path has many obstacles.

The Future Rabbinate:

1. Changing Demographics of the Rabbinate

Rabbinical students today are more diverse than ever: more women, LGBTQ+ individuals, Jews of Color, and more who are Jews by Choice or raised in interfaith households. Enrollment and survey data indicate demographic shifts that raise questions about how this changing profile will shape rabbinic leadership and its relationship to Jewish communities for the foreseeable future.

2. The Field Is Outpacing Its Institutions

Enrollment has declined at denominational seminaries and grown in independent and non-denominational ones. More rabbis are working outside pulpits: in education, chaplaincy, social impact, and innovation. Yet systems of guidance, recruitment, training, funding, and placement have been evolving more slowly

than the field, which is no longer driven by the same denominational, institutional and congregational paradigms.

3. The Barriers Are Practical and Therefore Solvable

Tuition, relocation, opportunity cost, compensation, and career uncertainty keep people out. These are not as much existential problems as they are practical problems that can be solved with planful, coordinated action.

Key Opportunities: Nine Areas of Leverage

The findings point to nine areas where coordinated focus could have the greatest impact. These are not prescriptions, but prompts for shared exploration and priority-setting.

Practical, lasting solutions will require field-wide collaboration. Together, we can develop common goals, test new approaches, and align investment to turn insight into action.

While innovation is happening, institutions frequently work in parallel instead of partnership, leaving strong ideas isolated and impact uneven. Without shared goals, data, or measures of success, progress remains scattered. The following opportunities are the strongest levers for strengthening the rabbinic pipeline through collaboration, experimentation, and sustained partnership.

Change the Financial Equation

Tuition, debt, and opportunity costs limit who can enter the rabbinate, while modest compensation and uncertain career pathways make it difficult to stay. The field could explore ways to realign the economics of rabbinic training and work with the level of education, expertise, and responsibility the profession demands.

Broaden and Coordinate Recruitment Pathways

Many who could thrive in the rabbinate do not imagine it as an option, including those who are demographically underrepresented in current students. Today's paths are often circuitous, shaped by multiple uncoordinated touchpoints across youth, adulthood, and second careers. The field could build a more coordinated web of inspiration, mentorship, outreach, and referrals that helps people of all backgrounds and life stages see the rabbinate as a rewarding and attainable calling and find appropriate experiences on their discernment path.

Expand Access to Jewish Learning and Leadership Development

As denominational youth engagement has declined, many future rabbis now arrive through adult study or as second career rabbis. The field could consider how to expand access to serious Jewish learning and leadership development at all life stages, and especially at the college and young adult phases, so that more people gain the background, relationships, and confidence to envision a rabbinic path. Institutions that train rabbis might also explore collaborating more closely with adult Jewish engagement and learning organizations as potential feeders to rabbinical schools.

Evolve Rabbinic Education to Reflect Today's Realities

Though we know there are recent shifts, the current ecosystem of rabbinic formation still often assumes that aspiring rabbis can relocate, study full-time, and invest significant financial resources - conditions that no longer fit many talented potential leaders. At the same time, no single institutional model can prepare rabbis for the range of roles and evolving realities they will encounter across Jewish life and its changes over the course of their careers.

The field could respond by developing flexible, modular, and practice-based approaches that allow emerging rabbis to better integrate learning with family, work, and community commitments, while preserving the rigor and depth of rabbinic training.

These changes may make rabbinic education more sustainable and responsive to modern needs.

Redefine Rabbinic Work and Career Viability

Rabbis find their work to be deeply rewarding but often unsustainable. The field could reexamine the structures, expectations, organizational norms, and employment culture so that the vocation remains a viable long-term career.

Expand and Strengthen Non-Congregational Pathways

Many rabbis express a desire to work in non-congregational capacities. The field could consider how to strengthen the infrastructure that supports rabbis working in education, chaplaincy, social impact, and innovation - expanding the reach and relevance of rabbinic leadership across today's multifaceted Jewish landscape.

Bridge Generational and Cultural Gaps Between Rabbis and Communities

As is usually the case, the data shows that the next generation of rabbis differs demographically from many of the communities they will serve - by age, background, and life experience. The field could focus on building mutual readiness: helping communities, boards, and search committees adapt to emerging leadership, while supporting rabbis to understand and connect with the people they serve. Greater understanding on both sides could strengthen alignment, trust, and the long-term vitality of rabbinic leadership.

Lean into Mentorship and Guidance

Although deterrents remain the most significant factors that keep people from pursuing the rabbinate, the data show that mentorship is a strong positive influence for people who do choose this path. More than half of rabbis and rabbinical students cite mentorship as a motivating factor for pursuing the rabbinate and nearly 40% say a Jewish leader's explicit encouragement to become a rabbi strongly influenced their decision. While other motivators rank as high or higher, mentorship and encouragement stand out as community-driven levers rather than motivating factors that are products of an individual's cumulative Jewish experience. The field could act on this by investing in structured guidance, encouragement and mentorship for prospective rabbis.

Strengthen Fieldwide Coordination and Shared Infrastructure

The rabbinic pipeline is shaped by many actors and institutions, often working in parallel toward similar goals. Other fields, from medicine to education to Christian ministry, have shown that shared infrastructure, aligned standards, and cross-sector coordination can reduce costs, expand access, and strengthen quality while sharpening institutional identity. The field could take similar steps to align around shared goals, replace duplicative efforts, and make collective work more effective and efficient. Field coordination, through shared benchmarks, strategy, and collaborative efforts, could transform scattered innovation into a connected, effective system for strengthening the pipeline and cultivating effective rabbis.

Ideas for Future Research

As noted, this study did not seek to examine every aspect of the American rabbinic pipeline. Other avenues for research include, but are not limited to:

1. **Further investigate the distribution and alignment of rabbinic supply and demand:** This study began to explore the gap between the supply of rabbis and vacancies in the field, particularly in congregational settings. Qualitative interviews pointed to some trends; however, the field lacks consistent, longitudinal data to measure this further. Future research might focus on building a coordinated approach to tracking synagogue closures, mergers, vacancies, and placement patterns over time. Such information could help clarify where, and in what capacities, rabbinic leadership is most needed.
2. **Understand rabbis who hold multiple roles:** This study necessarily treated each rabbi as having a single “primary” role, even though many rabbis are known to work multiple jobs. The prevalence, patterns, and implications of this phenomenon remain largely unexamined.

Future research could aim to quantify how common it is for rabbis to hold multiple concurrent roles, and in what combinations; understand who these rabbis are demographically and denominationally, and whether holding multiple roles is by necessity or by choice; assess the financial, emotional, and logistical realities of multi-role employment, how it affects workload, wellbeing, and long-term retention; and explore institutional factors that drive this trend.

3. **Identify best practices for retention and well-being:** More systematic research is needed on what concretely supports rabbis’ professional and personal sustainability. Comparative studies could identify best practices that correlate with higher retention and lower burnout. Such evidence would enable institutions to move from anecdotal understanding to evidence-based decisions on clergy wellbeing.
4. **Map the non-congregational and entrepreneurial rabbinate as a field:** The non-congregational rabbinate has expanded but remains poorly defined as a professional field. Future research should systematically map the scope and contours of this sector: its size, its principal domains, and its relationship to the traditional congregational system. Of particular importance is the growing cohort of entrepreneurial and independent rabbis, those founding new models of community, Jewish learning spaces, and spiritual collectives outside of synagogues.
5. **Evaluate the impact of rabbinical school reforms:** Many rabbinical schools have implemented changes in curriculum, tuition, and admissions in recent years. Future evaluation research should assess whether and how these reforms have affected application numbers, enrollment, student diversity, and long-term placement outcomes. Shared, longitudinal metrics across schools would allow the field to distinguish between promising innovations and those with limited impact.

6. **Explore the early pipeline:** This report mentions the diminishing footprint of denominational youth movements and immersive Jewish experiences as possible contributors to a shrinking rabbinic pipeline. However, their direct impact is difficult to measure. Future research should examine how early Jewish educational and leadership experiences, including day school, camp, youth movements, and campus programs shape or fail to shape interest in rabbinical study.
7. **Evaluate current and future initiatives to attract talent to the rabbinic pipeline:** Efforts to recruit talented leaders to the rabbinic pipeline have been and continue to be underway. The findings in this study allow the field to test interventions informed by data. Evaluating those interventions can help us further refine our recruitment and engagement strategies.

Methodology Appendix

Appendix A

Background Research and Key Informant Interviews

Literature Review

Preliminary background research included a comprehensive review of articles and reports about the scope, scale, and nature of rabbinic pipeline issues that have been published in the last five to 10 years. To provide a broader context for this research, an additional limited review of public literature was conducted to understand if and how other faith communities in the United States have experienced clergy shortages, the extent to which other Jewish communal sectors have struggled to recruit and employ quality candidates, and the extent to which there is a concurrent decline in enrollment in professional education more broadly.

Job Description Analysis

An analysis of 39 rabbinical job postings from the last two years was conducted. Jobs included congregational roles, campus rabbis, director positions, rabbis working in long-term care and assisted living facilities, heads of schools, and more. Of the 39 job postings, 18 were for congregational positions, 14 were for educator/campus roles, and seven were for other roles. Job listings were sourced across denominations from rabbinical associations, national organizations that employ rabbis (e.g., Hillel and Mem Global), and from web searches.

Key Informant Interviews

Key informants were identified who could offer well-informed perspectives on pipeline trends in terms of quantity and quality of rabbinical school and rabbinical career applicants. Thirty-one key informant interviews were conducted with professionals working at rabbinical schools (14) and rabbinical and congregational associations (7), national umbrella organizations that employ, contract, or oversee rabbis (7), and congregational hiring committees and personnel (3). Interviews followed semi-structured protocols to ensure consistency across respondents while allowing flexibility for emergent themes. Notes and transcripts were coded using thematic analysis. Organizations that participated in these key informant interviews are shown in the table below.

Type	Participating Organization
Rabbinical Schools	Academy for Jewish Religion, California (AJRCA)
	Academy for Jewish Religion, New York (AJR)
	ALEPH
	American Jewish University (Ziegler)
	Hadar Advanced Kollel
	Hebrew College
	Hebrew Union College (HUC)
	Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS)
	Maharat
	Shalom Hartman Institute
	Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC)
	Yashrut
	Yeshiva University (RIETS)
Yeshivat Chovevei Torah	
Rabbinical and Congregational Associations	Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR)
	International Rabbinic Fellowship (IRF)
	Orthodox Union (OU)
	Rabbinical Assembly (RA)/United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ)
	Rabbinical Council of America (RCA)
	Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA)
National Umbrella Organizations	Union for Reform Judaism (URJ)
	Foundation for Jewish Camp
	Hillel International
	Honeymoon Israel
	JCC Association of North America (JCCA)
	Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA)
	Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (JLIC)
Mem Global	
Congregational Hiring Committees and Personnel	Senior Rabbi – Hiring Assistant Rabbi for a large, urban Conservative synagogue
	Hiring Committee – Hiring Senior/Solo Rabbi for a suburban Reconstructionist synagogue
	Hiring Committee – Hiring Senior/Solo Rabbi for a suburban Reform synagogue

Estimating the Number of Working Rabbis in the United States

Data Collection

An estimate of the number of rabbis currently working in the US was made using data provided by rabbinical schools, rabbinical associations, and national umbrella organizations that employ or oversee the employment of rabbis outside of congregational settings. To generate this list, data about alumni, association members, and employees was requested as applicable. Where lacunae were identified, available data were mined from publicly available sources online.

Data were requested from the following rabbinical schools and associations. Data were successfully obtained from sources in purple. In cases where text is gray and italicized, data were requested but not obtained.

Denomination	Rabbinical School	Rabbinical Association
Reform	Hebrew Union College (HUC)	Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR)
Conservative	<i>Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS)</i>	Rabbinical Assembly (RA)
	<i>American Jewish University (Ziegler)</i>	
Reconstructionist	Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC)	Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA)
Renewal	ALEPH	<i>OHALAH</i>
Non-denominational and Others	Academy for Jewish Religion, California (AJRCA)	N/A
	Academy for Jewish Religion, New York (AJR-NY)	
	Hadar Advanced Kollel	
	Hebrew College	
	<i>Hebrew Seminary</i>	
	International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism (IISHJ)	
	<i>Jewish Spiritual Leaders Institute (JSLI)</i>	
	<i>Mesifita Adath</i>	
	<i>Pluralistic Rabbinical Seminary (PRS)</i>	
Yashrut		
Non-denominational Orthodox	Maharat	International Rabbinic Fellowship (IRF)
	Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (YCT)	
Modern Orthodox	<i>Yeshiva University (RIETS)</i>	Rabbinical Council of America (RCA)

Regarding missing data, it is assumed that data that would have been provided by OHALAH is effectively covered by the data received from ALEPH. Missing data from non-denominational programs were sometimes discovered in web research, but lacunae persist for these programs, though all are known to be small. Although data received from RCA have some crossovers with RIETS and HTC, missing data from both of the latter institutions presented challenges to this research, which will be discussed further.

In addition to data from rabbinical schools and associations, data were also requested and/or mined from the following organizations that employ rabbis.

Organizations That Provided Data and/or That Public Data was Mined From

Organizations	
18Doors	Jewish Federations of North America
Foundation for Jewish Camp	Jewish Learning Collective
Hadar	Judaism Unbound
Hartman	Mem Global/BASE
Hillel	OU JLIC
Honeymoon Israel	Pardes
Institute for Jewish Spirituality	Prizmah
JCC Association of North America	SVARA

The following data were requested from all rabbinical schools about their alumni, from all rabbinical associations about their members, and from other organizations that employ rabbis:

1. Rabbi name
2. Year ordained
3. Institution where ordained
4. Gender
5. Year of birth
6. Current positions (organization name, role, type, tenure)
7. Current location (city, state)

Generating the Estimate of Working Rabbis

To use these data to estimate the total number of working rabbis in the US, these data were reformatted and merged into a single master list. Data were then cleaned to remove rabbis who are retired, deceased, living and working outside of the US, or not working in a rabbinic career. For our purposes, a “rabbinic career” includes congregational rabbis, chaplains, rabbis working for Hillels, Federations, rabbinical associations, Jewish non-profits, rabbis who are day school or rabbinical school faculty or administrators, university professors

teaching in Jewish Studies or similar area, community educators, and independent rabbis. These data were then deduplicated across the full dataset. This deduplication included checks for alternative names and nicknames while preserving different individuals with the same name. To the extent possible, item missing data were imputed using publicly available data and/or mathematically interpolated to fill gaps and reconcile inconsistencies.

This study's population of interest includes only non-Haredi rabbis that are currently working in rabbinic careers. For our purposes, Haredi includes Hasidic rabbis (including Chabad) and non-Hasidic rabbis. We define "non-Haredi" as anyone who received semicha (rabbinic ordination) from a non-Orthodox institution plus those who received Orthodox semicha from Maharat, YCT, RIETS, or HTC. There are some rabbis who have been included in our estimate who received private Haredi semicha or semicha from Haredi institutions. These rabbis are included because their rabbinical association affiliation and/or employer indicates their involvement beyond the Haredi community.

Institutions were asked to provide rabbis' current job or jobs. Where this information was not provided, it was sourced from publicly available information online. Some institutions provided more than one job per rabbi, as applicable (including, for example, part-time, adjunct, and seasonal positions). More frequently, institutions provided only one job per rabbi. Additionally, during the deduplication process, several rabbis appeared on multiple lists with different current positions. To reconcile these inconsistencies, in the final estimate, all rabbis were reduced down to a single "primary" career generally prioritized using the first listed career as provided by their rabbinical association membership where not possible. For ambiguous cases where, for example, rabbis had more than one rabbinical association membership that listed different careers, positions were confirmed, to the extent possible, by web search.

Importantly, both the literature and the data collection process confirm that there are many rabbis who hold multiple jobs.³¹ Therefore, reducing rabbis down to a "primary career" may not be accurate for many of these rabbis. Unfortunately, the inconsistency with which multiple jobs were reported across different data sources means that we cannot use these data to reliably estimate how many rabbis hold multiple jobs. Furthermore, because much of these data came from rabbinical associations, the proportion of those who hold congregational positions as a "primary career" may be overestimated, while those who hold day school position and other positions (particularly independent/entrepreneurial positions) may be underestimated.

Rabbinical School Enrollment Trends and Demographics

To analyze rabbinical school enrollment trends, data about total number of enrolled rabbinical school students and number of rabbis ordained annually was requested from the previously listed rabbinical schools each year for the past 20 years (i.e., from 2004–05 through 2024–25). Additionally, aggregate demographic

³¹ Smokler and Krieger (2024).

data about the current student body (from 2025-2026 academic year)—including gender, age, race and ethnicity—was requested to the extent that it was known.

Rabbi Survey

Survey Fielding and Data Cleaning

The survey was fielded in April and May 2025. It was distributed via individual links provided to each of the institutional partners who participated in the earlier phases of data collection as well as individual links provided to Atra staff and funders. Survey links were also distributed on a limited basis to select relevant private social media groups.

The survey sought responses from current and former rabbis, current and former rabbinical students, those who considered rabbinical school but did not attend, as well as those who did not consider rabbinical school. Using internal survey logic, respondents were grouped into one of nine possible respondent categories and were shown questions based on their categorization. Prior to data analysis, duplicate responses, fraudulent responses, and responses that were only minimally complete were deleted from the dataset. The total number of valid responses within each of the nine respondent categories is shown in the table below:

Response Group	Count	Valid Percent
1 - Rabbi currently working in a rabbinical career	847	42%
2 - Retired rabbi	166	8%
3 - Rabbi who left the field prior to retirement	39	2%
4 - Rabbi who never entered a rabbinical career	18	1%
5 - Current rabbinical school student	185	9%
6 - Former rabbinical school student who left prior to ordination	29	1%
7 - Those who considered rabbinical school but did not attend	319	16%
8 - Those who are still considering rabbinical school but have not attended	131	7%
9 - Those who never considered rabbinical school	280	14%
Total	2014	100%

Response Group	Count	Valid Percent
Current and former rabbis (1, 2, 3)	1,052	53%
Current and former students (5, 6)	214	11%
Would-bes (7, 8)	450	23%
Never considereds (9)	280	14%
Current and former rabbis (1, 2, 3)	1,052	53%
Total	1996	100%

Survey Weights

To ensure that the survey data more accurately represented the known population distributions of rabbis and rabbinical students, rake weighting was applied. Rake weighting adjusts survey responses so that the distributions of key demographic or institutional characteristics in the sample align with those of the target population. This method is particularly useful when probability sampling is not possible but reliable population benchmarks are available for several dimensions. It preserves the relationships among variables within the dataset while correcting for over- or under-representation of specific groups thus allowing for greater generalizability of the data.

While rake weighting reduces bias that arises from unequal representation of key subgroups, it cannot fully correct for non-coverage or self-selection bias, particularly if the survey respondents differ from the broader population on unmeasured characteristics. The precision of estimates remains limited by the quality and completeness of the population benchmarks used for calibration. Additionally, extreme or highly variable weights can inflate the variance of estimates, although care was taken in this study to avoid large weight adjustments.

Rake weights were developed using population benchmarks drawn from the prior data collection efforts to estimate the number of rabbis currently working in the US and the current number of rabbinical school students.

For ordained rabbis, weights were calculated to align the sample with population benchmarks on gender, institutional denomination of ordination, and ordination year. For current rabbinical students, weighting was based on data provided directly by the rabbinical schools regarding their active students and was aligned by gender and institutional denomination. To maintain proportionality across the dataset, weights for rabbis and students were then scaled relative to one another based on estimates of the total number of working rabbis (n=3,467) and the total number of enrolled rabbinical students (n=520). In contrast to current rabbis and rabbinical students, the would-be and never considered groups could not be weighted because no population benchmarks for them exist. These respondents were therefore assigned a uniform weight of 1.

For comparisons between groups (rabbis, students, and would-bes), the relative scale of rabbis to students was maintained, but the total number of responses was reduced to match the number of survey respondents (rabbis n=1,275, students n=202).

Unweighted and weighted survey responses for rabbis and students are shown below:

Response Group	Variable		Unweighted		Weighted	
			Count	Valid %	Count	Valid %
Rabbis	Gender	Woman	404	39%	1,560	45%
		Man	631	60%	1,872	54%
		Non-binary/Other	14	1%	35	1%
		Total	1,049	100%	3,467	100%
	Denomination of institution where ordained	Reform	429	42%	1,408	41%
		Conservative	284	28%	1,009	29%
		Reconstructionist	56	5%	281	8%
		Non- and small-denominational	157	15%	607	17%
		Non-denominational Orthodox	69	7%	163	5%
		Modern Orthodox	22	2%	0	0%
		Haredi	12	1%	0	0%
		Total	1,028	100%	3,467	100%
	Year ordained	2015-2024	281	27%	866	25%
		2005-2014	275	26%	1,008	29%
		1995-2004	203	20%	793	23%
1994 and earlier		279	27%	800	23%	
Total		1,038	100%	3,467	100%	
Current Students	Gender	Woman	115	63%	299	57%
		Man	45	24%	161	31%
		Non-binary/Other	24	13%	60	11%
		Total	184	100%	520	100%
	Denomination of institution attended	Reform	51	28%	108	21%
		Conservative	19	10%	88	17%
		Reconstructionist	18	10%	43	8%
		Non- and small-denominational	69	38%	220	42%
		Non-denominational Orthodox	21	12%	61	12%
		Modern Orthodox	0	0%	0	0%
		Haredi	3	2%	0	0%
		Total	181	100%	520	100%

The number of respondents from RIETS and other Orthodox institutions aside from YCT and Maharat was very small.³² Because of their small number of responses and their substantial divergence from other denominational groups, respondents ordained through or who are students at Orthodox institutions could not be reliably weighted up and were therefore assigned a weight of 0, effectively excluding them from survey analyses. Respondents with Haredi

³² Responses from YCT and Maharat are included in the survey data and are referred to as “Non-denominational Orthodox” throughout.

ordination were also excluded because they did not meet the study's inclusion criteria, as described previously.

Exploratory Factor Analysis

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) is a statistical method used to uncover the underlying structure of a relatively large set of variables and identify the underlying relationships between those variables. An EFA profile was developed on the basis of observed responses to Likert-type survey questions in the dataset that focused on respondents' motivations and deterrents around rabbinical school attendance. By looking for underlying themes that group items together, factor analysis provides a way to summarize these motivators and deterrents into fewer, more meaningful categories. This, in turn, allows for clearer comparisons and a greater ability to spot trends and draw conclusions.

All analyses were conducted in SPSS version 30.0, using data weighted according to the rake weights described in the preceding section to ensure representation across key demographic characteristics. Listwise deletion was used to handle missing data, meaning that only cases with complete responses for all items were included in the analysis. Sampling adequacy for factor analysis was evaluated using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure, and KMO values were .842 for the motivator items and .875 for the deterrent items, both of which exceed the conventional threshold of .80. These results indicate that the data were well suited to factor analysis.

The extraction method employed was Principal Axis Factoring (PAF). PAF is designed to identify the shared variance among items while excluding unique and error variance, making it well suited for uncovering the motivational dimensions underlying survey responses.

An Oblimin rotation with Kaiser normalization was applied to the extracted factors. Rotation methods are used to simplify and clarify the factor structure by maximizing high loadings and minimizing cross-loadings, thus allowing for the best fit of individual variables into mutually exclusive factor bins. Oblimin is an oblique rotation method, meaning that it allows the extracted factors to be correlated with one another, which is a realistic assumption in attitudinal research, where constructs such as “community-building” and “mentorship” may be related motivators. Kaiser normalization standardizes the factor loadings during rotation, improving interpretability and stability of the solution.

Factors were extracted based on eigenvalues greater than 1.0, following Kaiser's criterion. Both the motivator and deterrent analyses produced six interpretable factors. The motivator solution converged after 13 iterations, and the deterrent solution after 11 iterations, indicating stable solutions. To focus interpretation on meaningful relationships, factor loadings below .35 were suppressed in the output, meaning that only items with substantial correlations to a factor were retained for interpretation. All retained items demonstrated communalities above .20, confirming that each contributed meaningfully to the shared variance structure. Inter-factor correlations ranged from .084 to .500, which indicates that the factors were related but distinct and further justifies the use of an oblique rotation.

After the six motivation and six deterrent factors were extracted, composite variables were created to represent each factor. For every respondent, a mean

score was calculated across the survey items that loaded onto a given factor, using only those items with substantial loadings ($\geq .45$). This approach yields interpretable continuous variables that reflect each individual's relative agreement or identification with the underlying construct while preserving the original 5-point Likert scale range. These factor-based mean scores served as the primary variables for subsequent analyses and comparisons across respondent groups.

Latent Class Analysis

Latent Class Analysis (LCA) is another method used to describe the latent associations in the data. Whereas EFA seeks to measure the latent patterns between groups of *variables*, LCA is used to measure the latent patterns between groups of *people* who are sorted into categories or “classes” of unobserved subgroups to help explain those underlying patterns. Unlike demographic classification, which groups individuals by demographic or identity characteristics (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, region of residence), LCA identifies clusters of respondents who display similar combinations of attitudes, motivations, or experiences. In this study, LCA was employed to determine whether distinct types of respondents could be empirically distinguished from one another based on their overall response profiles to the same to Likert-type survey questions that focused on respondents' motivations and deterrents around rabbinical school attendance.

LCA is a model-based method that estimates the probability that each individual belongs to each of several potential classes. Competing models are estimated iteratively using different numbers of latent classes, and their statistical fit is compared to determine the solution that best represents the data while maintaining parsimony.³³ In this study, LCA was conducted in SPSS Statistics version 30.0 using the R poLCA module, which performs maximum-likelihood estimation via the expectation-maximization (EM) algorithm. The model was estimated 10 times with different random starting values to reduce the risk of converging on a local maximum, with a maximum of 1,000 iterations.

Rake weights were applied as described earlier to maintain representative weighting across key subgroups. The analysis used the same motivator and deterrent variables used in the exploratory factor analyses described previously. Missing values were included in estimation using the default poLCA treatment. Separate LCAs were run for each of the three respondent groups: current and former rabbis, rabbinical students, and would-be's.

Model selection was guided primarily by the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), supplemented by the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) to ensure stability and interpretability across competing solutions. The number of classes for each group was determined based on the model with the lowest BIC value, indicating the optimal balance between model fit and parsimony. Based on these criteria, the rabbi sample was best represented by three classes, the would-be sample by two classes, and the student sample by one class. All classes contained at least 10% of respondents, ensuring that each latent class represented a substantively meaningful subgroup. Class interpretation was based on the conceptual

³³ Parsimony is a statistical principle that a simpler explanation or model is preferred over a more complex one assuming they have the same explanatory or predictive power.

coherence of the pattern of factor means within each class (i.e., by what, on average, explained the pattern of motivations and deterrents of each class relative to each other class).

Follow-Up Interviews

Fifty (50) follow-up interviews were conducted with survey respondents who agreed to be recontacted for further research. The goal of these interviews was to add additional depth to respondents' survey responses, particularly with respect to the factors that motivated and deterred them in their decisions around rabbinical school and their career as well as their opinions about their education and career choices.

The 50 follow-up interviews were conducted with current rabbis (22), current rabbinical school students (10), would-be's (10), students who left rabbinical school before ordination (5), and rabbis who left the field prior to retirement (3).

Interviews followed semi-structured protocols to ensure consistency across respondents while allowing flexibility for emergent themes. Notes and transcripts were coded using thematic analysis aligned with the survey's motivator and deterrent constructs, allowing cross-validation between qualitative and quantitative strands.

In selecting interviewees, current rabbis who were ordained within the last 10 years were prioritized, as were students who were in their last two years of rabbinical school. So that no single institution was disproportionately represented among interviewees, to the extent possible, rabbi and student interviewees were selected based on the institution they attended in order to match the known institutional distribution found in the research. Additionally, current rabbi interviewees were selected to achieve an intentional mix of congregational and non-congregational rabbis. This stratified purposive approach strengthened the internal validity of qualitative themes. Qualitative findings were integrated with quantitative data (survey and enrollment analyses) and with document and job posting reviews.

Appendix B

The complete lists of motivators and deterrents across rabbis, students, and would-be's.

In the survey, rabbis, students, and would-bes who considered becoming rabbis but did not or have not, were asked to reflect on what most motivated them in their decision to pursue or consider pursuing the rabbinate as well as what most deterred them from that decision. Using a five-point Likert scale from 1 – “completely untrue” to 5 – “completely true,” respondents were asked the extent to which a list of 21 theoretical motivators and 20 theoretical deterrents were true for them.

The lists of motivators and deterrents explored in the survey were drawn partly from the literature and partly from a set of regnant hypotheses that have been put forward by those deeply invested in the state of the rabbinate in the US today.

Overall, motivation to become a rabbi is strong, even among would-be respondents who did not or have not pursued rabbinical school. Among all respondents, the most relevant individual motivators were a desire to serve others, feeling called by their love of Judaism, an interest in deepening their knowledge of Jewish text and traditions, a desire to teach, a desire to support and guide people in their religious and spiritual journeys, and a desire to build and/or sustain community.

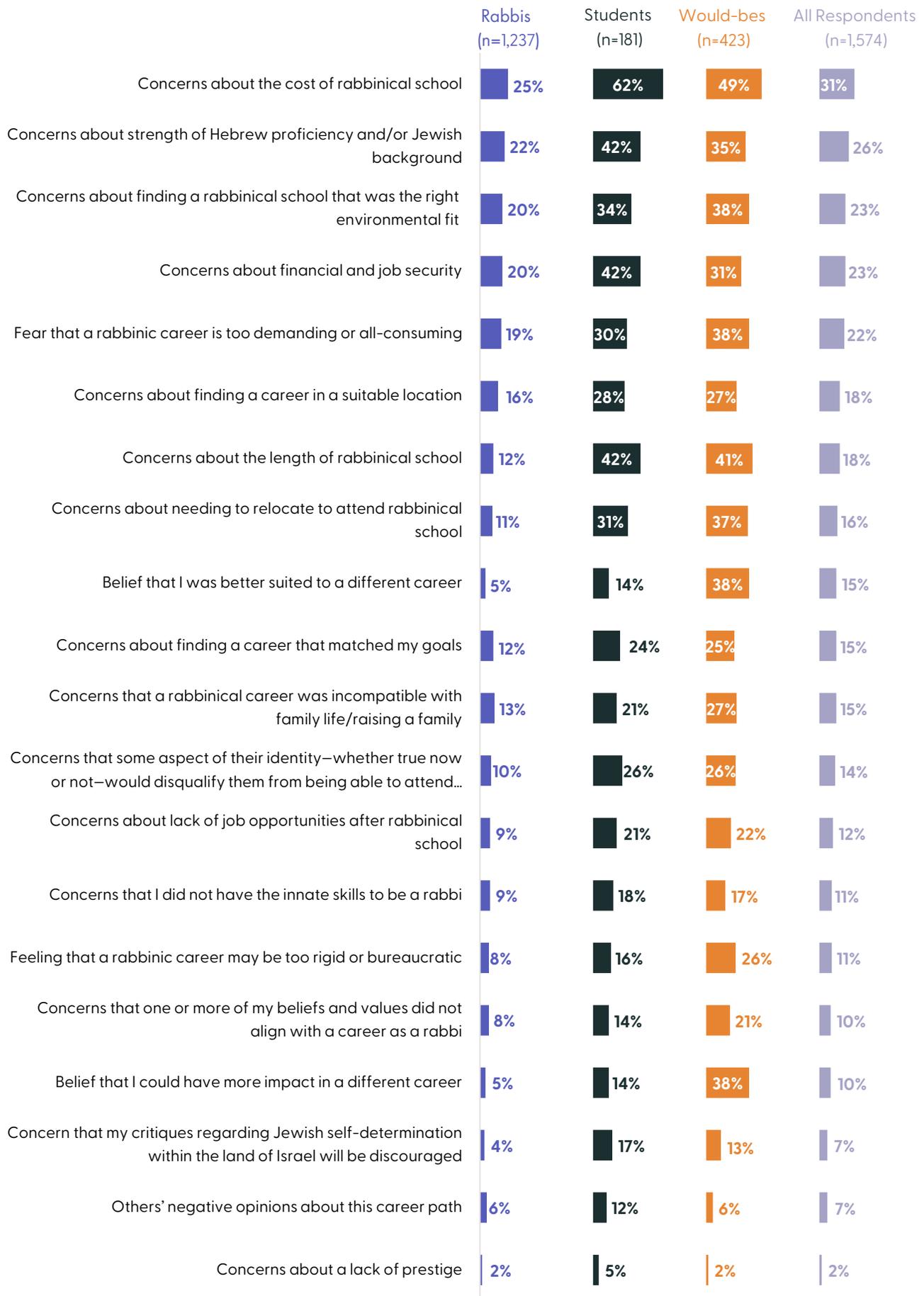
Strong motivation is met with strong practical and institutional deterrents. Among all respondents, the most relevant individual deterrents were concerns about the cost of rabbinical school, concerns about the strength of one's Hebrew proficiency and/or Jewish background, concerns about finding a rabbinical school that would be the right environmental fit, fear that a rabbinic career is too demanding or all-consuming, concerns about financial and job security, and concerns about the length of rabbinical school.

In all cases, rabbis were less deterred than students or would-bes by between 10 and 30 points. For example, whereas more than half of students and nearly half of would-bes were strongly deterred by the cost of rabbinical school, only one-quarter of rabbis were, and whereas four-in-ten students and would-bes were strongly deterred by the length of rabbinical school, only one-in-ten rabbis were.

All Motivators – Sum of “mostly true” and “completely true”

	Rabbis (n=1,237)	Students (n=181)	Would-bes (n=423)	All Respondents (n=1,574)
A desire to serve others	83%	86%	73%	82%
I felt called by my love of Judaism	83%	87%	73%	82%
An interest in deepening their knowledge of Jewish text and traditions	81%	91%	76%	82%
A desire to teach	79%	76%	65%	77%
A desire to support and guide people in their religious and spiritual journeys	79%	87%	61%	75%
A desire to build and/or sustain community	72%	79%	74%	73%
I was inspired by the work of rabbis or other Jewish leaders who I admire	68%	69%	63%	67%
I felt called by my love for the Jewish people	66%	67%	63%	66%
A desire to be a community leader	63%	64%	68%	64%
I felt called by a responsibility to preserve Jewish ritual, tradition, and/or identity	62%	74%	55%	62%
The intellectual challenge of rabbinical school	54%	64%	49%	54%
A desire to grow my Jewish identity	53%	57%	57%	54%
Mentorship I received from rabbis or other Jewish leaders	53%	56%	49%	53%
A desire to pursue my own spiritual journey	50%	69%	52%	53%
A responsibility to provide moral, ethical, and/or halachic guidance	48%	63%	41%	49%
A desire to make social change	44%	62%	47%	46%
A Jewish leader suggested that I become a rabbi	40%	36%	40%	39%
Encouragement from family and/or community	34%	40%	27%	34%
I felt called to pursue the rabbinate by a higher power	32%	44%	16%	32%
A desire to become a religious scholar/authority	31%	34%	33%	31%
A desire to garner more support for Jewish self-determination within the land of Israel	13%	21%	16%	14%

All Deterrents – Sum of “mostly true” and “completely true”



Appendix C

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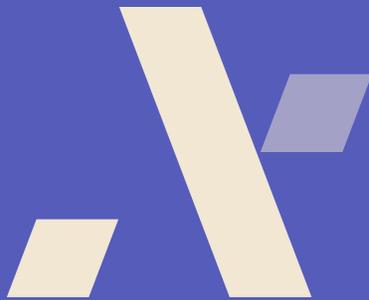
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