



# Generation Now

Understanding and Engaging Jewish Teens Today



APRIL 2016

## Funders and Consultants



By investing in promising Jewish education grant initiatives, the Jim Joseph Foundation seeks to foster compelling, effective Jewish learning experiences for young Jews in the United States. Established in 2006, the Jim Joseph Foundation has awarded more than \$400 million in grants to engage, educate, and inspire young Jewish minds to discover the joy of living vibrant Jewish lives.



Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah believes that Judaism is a dynamic, evolving force in ongoing dialogue with the world around it, bringing a rich vocabulary of accumulating wisdom to this conversation. We call this wisdom “Living Torah.” Our work engages a growing group of thinkers, practitioners, communal leaders, funders and others in increasing awareness and appreciation of the value of Applying Jewish Wisdom to contemporary life.



The Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation (Schusterman) is a global organization that seeks to ignite the passion and unleash the power in young people to create positive change for themselves, the Jewish community and the broader world. Schusterman pursues its mission by working collaboratively with others to support and operate high-quality education, identity development, leadership training and service programs designed to help young people cultivate their growth as individuals and as leaders.

### The Marcus Foundation

The Marcus Foundation is the vision of Bernie Marcus, co-founder of The Home Depot. The Marcus Foundation focuses on five key areas including Children, Community, Free Enterprise, Medical Research, and the Community. Based in Atlanta, Georgia, Mr. Marcus is dedicated to ensuring the survival of the Jewish people and ensuring a strong sense of identity.

# A Generation Speaks, We Listen



*The Jewish Education Project believes in the power and possibility of a great Jewish education. It works with educators, clergy, principals, and volunteers to create outstanding Jewish experiences for 160,000 children, teens and families in 800 programs in Westchester, Long Island, and New York City. The Jewish Education Project helps educators develop new ideas, build strong networks, and nurture necessary skills. Together, it sparks and spreads innovations that expand the reach and increase the impact of Jewish education, so that more people experience the wisdom and joy of Judaism.*



*UJA-Federation invites New Yorkers to invest in their community for the biggest impact. As the world's largest local philanthropy, we care for Jews everywhere and New Yorkers of all backgrounds, connect people to their Jewish communities, and respond to crises—in New York, in Israel, and around the world. With nearly 100 agencies in our network touching the lives of millions of people in 70 countries around the world, we really can do the most good when we do it together.*

**Dear Colleague,** More than a year ago, when we embarked on the process that ultimately led to this report, we had no idea the depth of information we would learn about Jewish teens. And while the field of Jewish education has invested in and studied Jewish teens before, we can say with certainty that what we present to you here is new and extremely valuable information about the interests, beliefs, and motivations of Jewish teens.

Initially, we sought to develop outcomes by which we could measure the impact of Jewish teen education and engagement initiatives. Those 14 outcomes are presented in this report, the second in a series about educating and engaging Jewish teens. More than just providing outcomes, however, we believe strongly that the interpreted data uncovers further implications for the strategy of Jewish teen engagement. These implications, implicit within the recommendations, help us collectively to answer the question, “What do we need to consider if we want to engage a Jewish teen today?”

More than just a conversation starter, we view this report as an “action starter.” The 14 outcomes along with accompanying indicators and measurement tools, already are being field-tested in many communities. The bulk of this report brings to life the words we heard directly from teens—the true treasure trove of information that can guide our work moving forward. Armed with these learnings and insights, we hope to continue reversing the well-documented trend of teens opting out of Jewish life.

With sincere thanks for their support and encouragement to the Jim Joseph Foundation, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah, and The Marcus Foundation, we hope you find *Generation Now: Understanding and Engaging Jewish Teens Today* to be insightful and useful, and to contribute to a paradigm shift in the way we think and behave when it comes to Jewish teen education and engagement.

As always, we at The Jewish Education Project are grateful for the ongoing support of UJA-Federation NY, which makes possible all that we do to bring innovative new approaches to Jewish education.

Thank you for your time and interest in this important work.

**Robert Sherman**  
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View online at  
<http://JewishEdProject.org/GenerationNow>



**The Jewish Education Project** is committed to furthering not just the numbers of Jewish teens involved in Jewish life but also the quality of these experiences. In the pages that follow, we use the findings from this research process—looking at learner outcomes for Jewish teens—and from several other contemporary studies of Jewish teens today to describe key salient characteristics of these teens and to suggest implications of these findings for how we conduct our youth engagement and education work. If you share our commitment to teen Jewish life, then we believe that the following summary of findings, and subsequent implications and recommendations, will be important to consider moving forward.

# background

In 2013, the Jim Joseph Foundation commissioned the report entitled *Effective Strategies for Educating and Engaging Jewish Teens*. In that report, nine key implications for strategic development regarding Jewish teen education and engagement emerged.

- 1 **Location, Location, Location** Meeting teens where they go every day, both physically and virtually, helps maximize participation.
- 2 **People, People, People** Relationships are central to participants' positive educational experiences, whether they are with peers, alumni, staff members, or volunteers.
- 3 **Multiple Portals of Entry** An apparent component of successful program scaling is offering multiple portals for entry and flexible engagement structures once inside the system.
- 4 **Skin in the Game** Some teens thrive upon opportunities to have a stake in the work—to not be passive recipients—which can increase the likelihood and relevance of their involvement.
- 5 **Accepting Teens as They Are** More than anything, teens want to be accepted for who they are—and not just who and where they are on their *Jewish* journeys.
- 6 **Quality Amidst Growth** Core content combined with appropriate training and oversight can facilitate quality control over a large scale.
- 7 **The Business of Doing Business** Any effort that is going to be fiscally sustainable over the long term, regardless of cost per capita, needs a viable business model that articulates how it will develop the financial resources to enable it to do the work over the long term.
- 8 **Build for Scale from Day One** Any new effort must also effectively address the issue of scale, as it is important for expanding reach and potential customers.
- 9 **Know Your Goals and Consider Your Metrics** Articulation of specific, measureable, attainable, result-oriented, and time-bound (“SMART”) goals and milestones—coupled by a culture of accountability around them—leads to better programming and to stronger outcomes and impact.



These implications for strategic development provided a good baseline for our understanding of necessary factors to build programs that engage more Jewish teens in meaningful Jewish life. Following the release of *Effective Strategies*, the Jim Joseph Foundation is partnering with funders in ten communities (Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Denver, Los Angeles, New York, San Diego, and San Francisco) to significantly invest further in Jewish teen engagement. The Jewish Education Project has run the National Incubator that has been working closely with these communities, known collectively as the Jewish Teen Education and Engagement Funder Collaborative, as they design their respective teen initiatives.

# building on the past

**Generation Now seeks to advance Jewish teen education and engagement by building on previous research.**

*Generation Now: Understanding and Engaging Jewish Teens Today*—commissioned by the Jim Joseph Foundation, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah, and The Marcus Foundation—builds on the past and is the result of new research in Jewish teen education and engagement. Funders in the Teen Collaborative identified a need to define shared outcomes in order to pursue their common goals and to effectively aggregate and compare evaluation findings. While this research was intended only to lead to the development of outcomes in this space, it yielded insights that can guide and inform Jewish teen education and engagement more broadly, and can be used by those in the Collaborative as well as others. The Jewish Education Project is excited to unveil these insights about Jewish teens—from their interests, to their fears, to what brings them meaning in life—along with shared outcomes, indicators, and measurement tools that will gauge Jewish education and engagement among teens participating in Jewish experiences. Throughout this report, we have included the voices of teens, in their own words, to help us get a better glimpse inside the minds of this population.



**This research and new outcomes signify a tremendous shift in the way Jewish teen programming has traditionally been evaluated. Historically, evaluating Jewish teen programming has centered on whether Jewish teens have acquired more Jewish knowledge, had more Jewish experiences, “become more Jewish,” or whether the Jewish community is “better off” because of these teen programs. Instead, these outcomes provide benchmarks that focus on whether Jewish teen programs add significant benefits to the lives of teenagers, enabling them to flourish and develop in a holistic and integrated way. With this new focal point, we believe that Jewish teen programming will become more attractive to a larger number of Jewish teens. It will be more relevant and meaningful to those who participate in such experiences.**

Of note, in recent years the Jewish community has tended to conflate the terms “engagement” and “education.” *Generation Now* has adopted a definition of education put forward by educational historian Lawrence Cremin, who described education as “the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit or evoke knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, and sensibilities.”<sup>1</sup> In learning settings, “engagement” is often referred to as the immediate degree of attention and curiosity that students show when learning. When applied longer term, engagement is described as the ways in which learners apply themselves intellectually, behaviorally, emotionally, physically, socially, or culturally beyond the immediate learning experience. With this framework, Jewish education can be understood as either a subset of Jewish engagement (one way to be involved in the Jewish enterprise is through learning) or as an outcome of “education” (Jewish behaviors, beliefs, interactions, or additional learning from the initial educational experience).

This research involved our own researchers at The Jewish Education Project and a team of evaluators from American Institutes for Research and Rosov Consulting.

Through the comprehensive qualitative research process—including digital ethnographies and 16 in-person focus groups with 139 teens from Atlanta, Boston, Denver, and Los Angeles, along with other research—our team of researchers began to more fully understand teens and crystalized hypotheses of what “success” from Jewish teen initiatives might look like. This work was also informed by initial research with teens conducted in Westchester County, New York.



**The direct result of this multi-pronged research project is the 14 new outcomes to measure the impact of Jewish teen education and engagement. Effective programs will exhibit the following outcomes:**

- 1 Jewish teens have a strong sense of self.
- 2 Jewish teens feel a sense of pride about being Jewish.
- 3 Jewish teens have learning experiences that are both challenging and valuable.
- 4 Jewish teens engage in learning that enables them to be more active participants in various Jewish communities.
- 5 Jewish teens learn about and positively experience Jewish holidays and Shabbat.
- 6 Jewish teens establish strong friendships.
- 7 Jewish teens develop strong and healthy relationships with their families.
- 8 Jewish teens develop significant relationships with mentors, role models, and educators.
- 9 Jewish teens are able to express their values and ethics in relation to Jewish principles and wisdom.
- 10 Jewish teens develop the capacity (skills and language) that allows them to grapple with and express their spiritual journeys.
- 11 Jewish teens feel connected to various communities.
- 12 Jewish teens develop the desire and commitment to be part of the Jewish people now and in the future.
- 13 Jewish teens develop a positive relationship to the land, people, and state of Israel.
- 14 Jewish teens are inspired and empowered to make a positive difference in the various communities and world in which they live.

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Currently these outcomes—and the indicators and measurement tools developed to reflect them—are being field-tested to see how they resonate with Jewish teens and how they can be utilized by organizations to program for Jewish teens and to evaluate the impact of those programs. A full account of the methodology that led to the development of these 14 outcomes can be found in the Appendix. All of the research reports associated with the development and testing of these outcomes can be found at <http://JewishEdProject.org/GenerationNow>.

# insights

Gleaned from the comprehensive research process, this treasure trove of information offers a substantive look at Jewish teens today.

“Being Jewish makes me feel like I’m connected to something bigger than myself, which brings me a sense of happiness. It also makes me feel immediately connected with a big group of people who I consider to be my family that I can rely on.”

Older, Low-connected Denver Teen

Teens were considered “high-connected” or “low-connected” based on organizational affiliation.

**1 The Desire for Happiness** Anyone who knows a teenager today realizes almost immediately how busy they are, what pressures they face, and what stresses they endure. Beyond their schoolwork, activities that endeavor to engage teenagers today broadly fall into two categories. Some activities offer them a chance to learn and develop new skills. Other activities offer a respite from the pressures of adolescent life. As the teen who plays soccer both to become a better player and to “clear his head” indicated to us, these distinctions are by no means mutually exclusive. Moreover, when we asked teenagers and their parents what they most wanted of themselves and their children, respectively, as a result of engagement in these activities, the word “happiness,” in various forms, was part of the answer. People were not just saying that they wanted to smile—although smiling cannot be underestimated—they were explaining that they want these activities to provide them with joy and nourishment, with friendships and kinship, with relaxation and stimulation.

So while it is true that teens (and their families) want to succeed in life, it did not take long in focus groups and interviews to scratch beneath this veneer. More deeply—and more so than any definition of “success”—the pursuit of happiness is sought after by teens and their families. Thus, friendships, music, and humor, for example, were all things that teenagers prominently spoke about with fondness and yearning.

But happiness extends beyond the surface level and certainly goes far deeper than any emoji. There is a deep psychological and even a physiological underpinning of happiness about which Jewish professionals should learn. Our understanding of happiness is rooted in the field of positive psychology and the contributions of researchers including Martin Seligman, who outlines a concept of authentic happiness built on measures of Positive Emotion, Engagement, Meaning, Positive Relationships, and Accomplishment (PERMA).<sup>2</sup> This deeper understanding can be translated into aspects of Jewish communal life. So while certain times in any community are designated as serious and sometimes somber, moving forward, the overwhelming emotions to engulf Jewish life must be happiness and joy. For our teens, this will help ensure that participating in Jewish life is attractive and desirable. To be clear, this does not mean that teens cannot participate in serious, even sad Jewish experiences (e.g., learning about social crises, international conflicts, or the Holocaust). It reflects a need, rather, to have these experiences contextualized within a broader framework of positivity.

**Jewish environments perceived by the teens to be joyous—whether because of their physical space, the people within it, or an organization’s mission—share many key features: They are all environments where friendships are formed; they house activities often staffed by people who genuinely care about the teens; they provide a respite from the stresses of adolescent life; and teens referenced their appeal as “safe spaces” where teens could “just be themselves,” free of judgment and able to express themselves more openly and freely.**

# inspiration skill building values



**2 Value-Added** They will come once for pizza, they will come twice for pizza, but the third time and beyond, Jewish teens will only return to a program if they sense real value. This was a sentiment heard many times over as we spoke to Jewish teens around the country.

Teens expressed that ongoing Jewish programming should offer them recognizable value in their life. Only then, one can conclude, will the programming attract and retain Jewish teens. The nuance here is that value can, and does, mean many different things to Jewish teens today.

It is true that many teens—and often even more so their parents—are preoccupied with academic success and college preparation. Therefore, value for many teens equates to activities that strengthen their resumes and therefore improve college applications. Internships, learning tangible skills, community service, leadership activities, playing a musical instrument, or high-level achievement in sports are all experiences that teens believe help in this area.

As part of the research process, college admissions officers explained what experiences colleges perceive to have the highest value. Longer-term commitment to skill building or to activities that benefit a greater cause are more valued than one-off activities or nominal titles such as “president” or “treasurer.” They like to see teens learning new competencies, undergoing certain challenges, and being stretched beyond their normal comfort zones. This is also reflected in the teens, who themselves want to be stretched and challenged. University of Chicago professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi explains that human beings actually like challenges because they derive joy from obtaining a state of flow as they are immersed in specific activities that require both skill and challenge, writing that “the best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, experiences that exhibit these qualities often are not found in Jewish institutions, as activities are watered down in order to lower the barrier of participation.

This report is filled with several tensions, often reflecting the lives of teenagers today. When discussing happiness and value-added, for example, teens expressed a relief in being able to disconnect from their technologies when participating in various Jewish activities. But on the flip side, if the activities were seen as valuable, then teens also wanted to share them on Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and Facebook.

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**Certainly these activities of value, deemed “share-worthy,” take on many forms and have varying components. Whether a group hike to an inspiring location or a cohort-based, multi-session learning experience, teens are attracted to offerings of substance with a direct and positive influence on their lives.**

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**3 More Than Just Religion** Our research corroborates what many other studies detail about the declining rates of religious affiliation for teenagers in America today—Jewish or otherwise. Fewer Jewish teens today than before identify with Jewish religious practice, rituals, prayer, and synagogues. There are of course many Jewish teens for whom this is not the case, but they are in an increasing minority—particularly when you remove from the equation the Orthodox Jewish teen population.

For the majority of Jewish teens in America today, Judaism is more than just a religion.<sup>4</sup> These teenagers relate to being Jewish in language commonly associated with ethnicity, culture, heritage, or tribal affiliation. When Jewish teens talk about what being Jewish means to them, they reflect most often about food, their families, and their sense of belonging to a tribe of people just like themselves. This must be understood in the context of America today, in which larger cities—with high concentrations of Jews—tend to exhibit qualities of a more liberal society that highly values diversity and difference. In this context, many of these teens still proudly identify as Jews.

This movement away from viewing Judaism as *just* a religion coincides with their less-than-favorable view about some aspects of Judaism, its religious institutions, and accompanying rituals. Synagogues often are seen as being dreary, “old-school,” and irrelevant to the lives of teenagers today. Jewish rituals and prayers are viewed as meaningless, and clergy commonly deemed out of touch with current teen realities. At the same time, some teens look for opportunities to come together in decidedly spiritual experiences. Often incorporating music, movement, or nature-based programs, these experiences can be described as spiritual, just not in ways that reflect traditional Jewish experiences.

“I can connect with people, a community, some traditions, history, and some culture. That’s why I like celebrating certain holidays, because when I do it reminds me that, ‘Yes, I do have a culture, and yes, I do have this thing I’m able to identify with.’ And it’s nice.”

Younger, Low-connected Atlanta Teen



**4 Proud but Not Special** Being a minority group in the United States is something that many Jewish teens highly value. These teens, like so many other groups in America, appreciate the qualities that make them distinct from other groups. In fact, being Jewish in America is seen by many teens in a positive light, and they speak with pride about what sets them apart from their non-Jewish peers. Taking a day off school because of a high holiday, having a Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebration, eating special foods, and even having a family member who survived the Holocaust were all indicators that the teens expressed with positive association about being Jewish today. These notions of pride in being Jewish are reflective of similar sentiments described in the study conducted by the Pew Research Center, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*.<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes this difference was couched in a sense of uniqueness—the idea being that Jews were in some ways very different from everyone else, which imbued these teens with even more pride. But very rarely, and especially not among the less-connected teens, was this uniqueness seen as being “superior.” These teens were very adamant that any difference, and even uniqueness, was not a statement of superiority. Teens in this category clearly rejected concepts such as the Jews as a “chosen people” or being a “light unto the nations.” Rather, differences that the teens felt as a result of being Jewish often were expressed in relation to an implicit bond between fellow Jews.

The teens often also described their Jewish friendships as somehow different than friendships they had with their non-Jewish friends. It often was difficult for them to articulate why this was the case. Some teens said they liked not having to explain things (e.g., why they couldn’t go out on Friday night or eat certain foods) to their non-Jewish peers. Others said that these Jewish friendships were somehow deeper or more meaningful than the connections with their non-Jewish friends. It is important to note the possibility that the settings in which Jewish friendships were formed (e.g., Jewish summer camp)—rather than the Jewish elements of the relationships—may have resulted in such deep connectedness.

**Many Jewish settings our community creates are very strong inclusive environments, and the utilization of rituals and symbols makes people feel very much at home. At camp, youth group conventions, and other settings, teens wear the same T-shirts, sing the same songs, speak the same language, and foster the same traditions. These are very powerful factors that contribute to strong feelings and connections to many Jewish experiences.**

At the same time, teens also recognize that factors that help develop intensely inclusive environments almost by definition and design also serve to exclude others—both fellow Jews and non-Jews. In this context, teens also expressed enjoyment and pride in sharing their Jewish experiences with non-Jewish friends, particularly their Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremonies. Jewish teens for the most part are uncomfortable about feeling part of a “club” that excludes non-Jews. Many teens view the exclusion of non-Jews as discriminatory and choose not to participate in certain kinds of Jewish experiences for this reason.

“When I’m at camp I feel completely different than when I’m here. It gives me a sense of what the community is really like and how everyone really treats each other. I don’t know how to say it—but I feel more connected and more safe around people. Safe is the wrong word, but more comfortable around people.”

Older, High-connected Atlanta Teen

“Being one of the only ones makes you feel unique, and it’s kind of good to feel unique and you feel happy that you’re not just like everybody else at your school.”

Younger, High-connected Denver Teen

“There’s a lot of people who let religion dominate their life. It’s kind of all they are. And I don’t do that because, I don’t believe in it. . . I don’t want to have that label just be what people think of me.”

Younger, Low-connected Los Angeles Teen

“I have a lot of Jewish friends who I can discuss many things with, that I can’t with my friends at school. When I’m with my Jewish friends it makes me feel like I can talk with them about my religion. But with my friends in school, they just get confused whenever I talk about my religion and I have to explain it to them and I don’t have to do that with my friends from synagogue and camp.”

Younger, High-connected Atlanta Teen

“I have friends who are Jewish. I have friends who aren’t Jewish. I’ve been friends with almost all of them since kindergarten. I don’t really see how it makes a difference. I invited all of them, Jewish and not Jewish, to my bat mitzvah. So really it’s just never really made that big of a difference to me. I connect equally well with all of them.”

Younger, Low-connected Los Angeles Teen

“Even if I dislike some of my fellow Jews, I feel like I have to stand up for them if people are treating them in a mean way. Because we’re the same. We’re connected.”

Younger, High-connected Boston Teen

**5 Tribal Global Citizens** The Jewish community understands that some Jewish teens are more oriented to a universalist outlook on life, while others devote more time and focus to the Jewish community. In addition to the insights discussed in the “Proud but Not Special” section of this report, research also revealed important findings about how these different mind-sets impact how teens interact with others. Nuances related to this are worthy of consideration and further research.

Some Jewish teens (depending on where they live and what type of school they attend) have mainly (if not only) Jewish friends. These teens are far more likely to be Orthodox or practicing Conservative Jews, to attend Jewish day school or yeshiva, to keep kosher, and often to attend Jewish summer camp. Much of their identity is tribal and they view the world through a particularist Jewish lens. More often than not they mirror their parents’ practices and belief systems.

At first glance it is assumed that the majority of Jewish teens today are universalist by nature. Instead of asking whether a program/activity is “good for the Jews,” they are more likely to consider whether it “is good for all people.” For these teens, values of diversity and inclusivity will trump most tribal connections or commitments. As just one example, many Jewish teen philanthropy programs and giving circles have had to adopt policies and quotas to ensure that some contributions are made to Jewish causes. Jewish teens who are universalists have many non-Jewish friends because that is the world in which they live. They may or may not attend Jewish camp or youth group or participate in other Jewish activities.

This shift from particularism to universalism often is framed as a generational one, largely reflective of the American Jewish experience. The grandparents of these teens generally were more particularist. But as teens’ parents assimilated more into American culture, they adopted a more universalist worldview. Many assimilated completely, leaving behind their Jewish connections.

# diversity inclusivity

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**This research highlights a new concept that Jewish teens today often are both universalists and particularists. Their orientation is fluid and depends on their environment at a given time.**  
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Jewish teenagers often choose to spend time with people with whom they feel a special connection and enjoy a level of comfort. As discussed previously, their choice to spend time with other Jews results from their desire to not have to explain aspects of Judaism. This reinforces the concept that being Jewish is a very tribal notion, and that most teens in the U.S. affiliate with one or many tribes, whether based on race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, hobby, sport, or other factor. But again, they reject in great numbers the notion that Jews are a special people.

Critical to understanding Jewish teens today is the idea that these fundamental orientations are not mutually exclusive. Furthermore, Jewish teenagers often adopt a Jewish view of the world that embraces both outlooks and offers a way to navigate between them. These teens might be involved in a community service project one day and a “tikkun olam” project the next. To the outsider these activities might look ostensibly the same, but for the teens participating in both, the distinctions might be very real.

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**For educators involved in Jewish teen education and engagement, consideration ought to be given to how the particularist aspects of Jewish life might even better serve the universalist stance of many teens—a dramatic departure from the way most Jewish educators have traditionally viewed this relationship. Relating uniquely Jewish values and teachings to the broader world through service-learning programs can be an especially effective way to blend two seemingly distinctly different aspects of life.**  
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“Obviously I’m horrified at what happened [*killings in kosher supermarket in France, January 2015*], but I don’t know if I necessarily like feel worse because they were Jewish. I feel like all human life should be valued as the same. Because the loss of any life is awful, regardless of whether or not they’re Jewish.”

Older, Low-connected Atlanta Teen



“During Passover it’s cool to have one of those days where it’s a sit-down big family meal. It’s one of those big food holidays where we’re allowed to just sit and eat with our families and talk. It’s a cool feeling.”

Younger, Low-connected Denver Teen

“I think Christmas is just a holiday for big businesses to make money. But Jewish holidays I feel like they’re more spiritual. You go through something; each of them has their own type of personal endeavor. If you’re going through Passover or you’re fasting, you feel like there’s a whole bunch of other people that are also doing it. When you know other people are doing the same stuff you feel more connected with them, you’re going through similar situations as them.”

Younger, High-connected Los Angeles Teen

“Only my mom’s side is Jewish, so for me I like being Jewish because it’s something that my mom did, and I like seeing what she did and doing something that she also has always done in her life.”

Younger, Low-connected Los Angeles Teen

“Being Jewish makes me feel proud, strong, and independent. Because we Jews have been through a lot in history and we’ve still survived.”

Younger, Low-connected Boston Teen

**6 The Influence of Family** The 2013 report *Effective Strategies for Educating and Engaging Jewish Teens* explained that “relationships are central to participants’ positive educational experiences, be it with peers, alumni, staff members or volunteers.” Our research corroborates this statement, but emphasizes that the role of the peer group is far more critical than any of the other relationships. Most Jewish teenagers will participate in a Jewish program only if they attend with existing friends, or if they attend once on their own but made new friends very quickly. The peer group is one of the most influential factors in the lives of adolescents today—and even more critical as teenagers reach their latter teen years.

However, the power of the peer group does not stand in opposition to the role of the family in the lives of Jewish adolescents today. Interestingly, the vast majority of teenagers in this study spoke about the positive influence of their families in enabling them to make life choices, including choices related to being Jewish. Even when teens referenced differences with their parents’ viewpoints and practices, these differences were commonly viewed as part of a healthy relationship. This reflects literature about today’s generation of teenagers. In general, these teens are far more amicable with their parents than the children of the 1960s (the so-called Boomers), who were deemed to be rebelling against their parents.

Since the parent-teen relationship today often is positive, parents frequently are key voices in encouraging their children to participate in activities, including Jewish ones. While having a friend with whom they can attend an event is the most important factor, in many cases parents first suggest a Jewish activity, pay for any associated costs, and assist with transportation if necessary.

As well as parental influence, the research supported recent findings that have also uncovered an extremely high influence of grandparents (particularly the grandmother) in the Jewish aspects of these teens’ lives.<sup>6</sup> This is discussed in *Mosaic Magazine’s* article, *American Jewry’s Great Untapped Resource: Grandparents*. For teens who perceive Judaism as predominantly a cultural experience, grandparents often were the center of practices and experiences associated with Jewish life, such as cooking holiday meals and the transmission of heritage and other Jewish experiences. This is not uncommon for the general population of teenagers in America today and very reflective of other ethnic groups, including Hispanic and black families.



**7 The Positive Bar and Bat Mitzvah** There has been much communal concern in recent years about the dramatic drop-off in organized Jewish life for teens (and noticeably their families as well) post Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Some communal leaders have focused on the excesses of the Bar Mitzvah celebrations, citing more “Bar than Mitzvah” at many. Others have discussed the ceremony itself, asking what a real Jewish “coming of age” ceremony would look like. The argument here is that training 12-13-year-olds to read ancient scripture is hardly a skill needed to be a functioning adult in the world. Still others critique the inadequate Jewish education—often occurring for 3-4 years—that is required in order for one to have a Bar/Bat Mitzvah in a synagogue today. In some Jewish communities this has resulted in a noteworthy increase in “do-it-yourself” Bar/Bat Mitzvahs outside of synagogues. There even have been calls from the Reform Movement—the largest Jewish religious movement in North America today—for a revolution in the Bar and Bat Mitzvah.

Despite the negative discussions often surrounding the topic of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, it remains one of the rituals most widely celebrated by American Jews today.<sup>7</sup> Reasons cited for the prominence of this ritual, even in families with little overt Jewish connection, include family pride, communal celebration, and the notion that this is “just what Jews do.” These reasons can lead to potential concerns among adults in the Jewish community that teens view the Bar/Bat Mitzvah experience negatively. These leaders say that teens had Bar/Bat Mitzvahs because they were expected to, that for the most part they disliked the experience and saw little value in it, and that they felt coerced into these rituals. Simply, these views are not supported by research.

**For most teenagers, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah was viewed as a highly positive source of personal pride, accomplishment, and connection to Jewish life. Even for some of the teens who had not experienced a Bar or Bat Mitzvah at the traditional age of 13 (or 12), they were not opposed to having the experience later in life once they knew that was a viable possibility. And, for the higher-connected teens, it was a sense of newly acquired Jewish responsibility in synagogue. Sharing the event with family and friends, and being able to demonstrate skills they learned, was a highlight for many of these Jewish teenagers. Some teens especially enjoyed having non-Jewish friends attend the celebration so that they could share Jewish traditions with those who weren't familiar with them.**

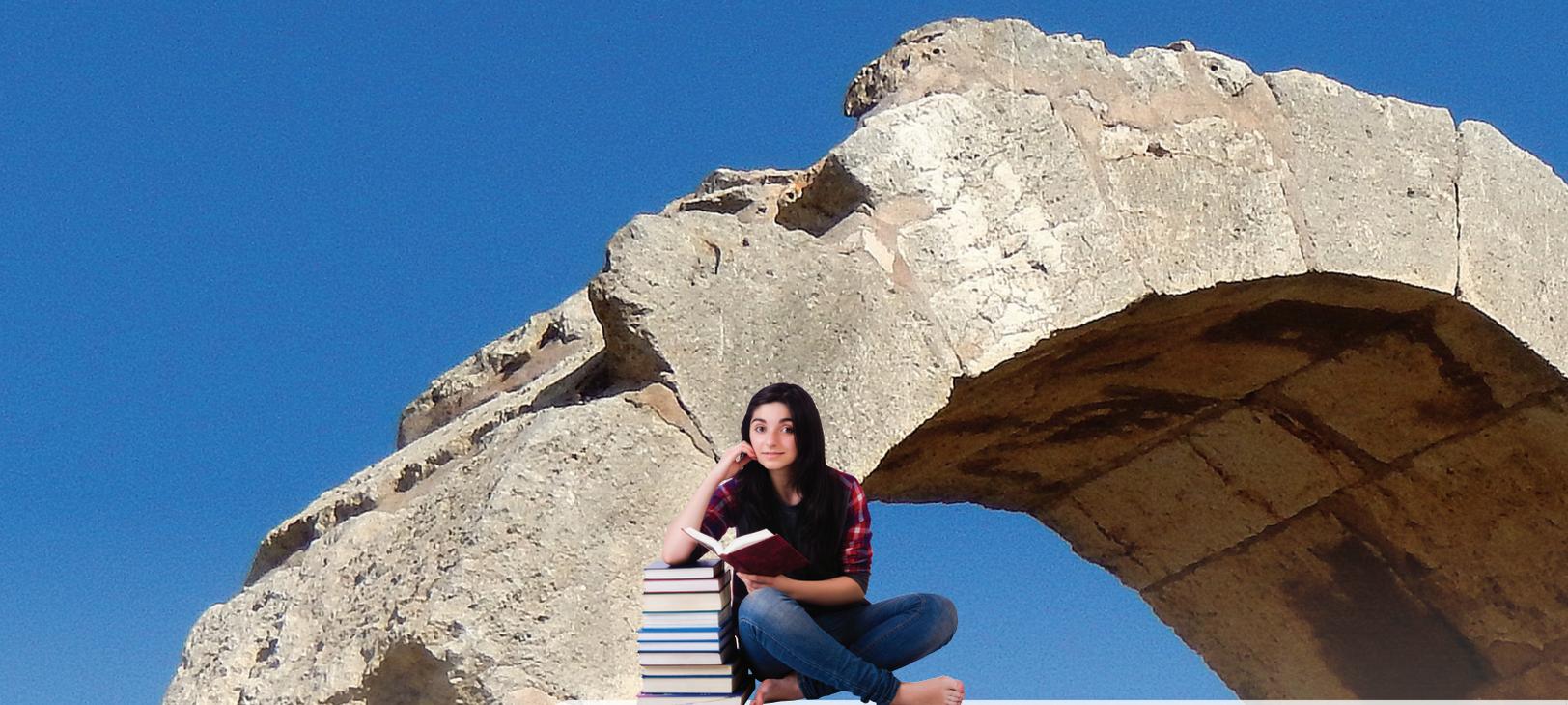
Because it is still such a widely celebrated ritual, and when done well such a meaningful and powerful experience for the teenager, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah should be transformed from what has commonly been described as a graduation from Jewish life to a major launching pad for further engagement of the family to other positive experiences.

“Because we had to prepare so much, the fact that we did it was just a major accomplishment. If we only had to say a couple prayers, it wouldn't have been that big of a deal, but we did a lot.”

Younger, High-connected Boston Teen

“It was pretty cool to invite a lot of my friends and show them something that they hadn't seen before, see the Jewish culture.”

Older, Low-connected Teen



“After my Bar Mitzvah, I wanted to know more about Jewish opinions on things. So we got to go on a trip to Washington, DC, from a Jewish stance, which was really cool, because then we learned a lot of Jewish opinions on gun control and abortion and that kind of stuff. Even if I didn’t agree with some of them, it was just cool to know that my religion has a stance on this stuff.”

Older, Low-connected Denver Teen

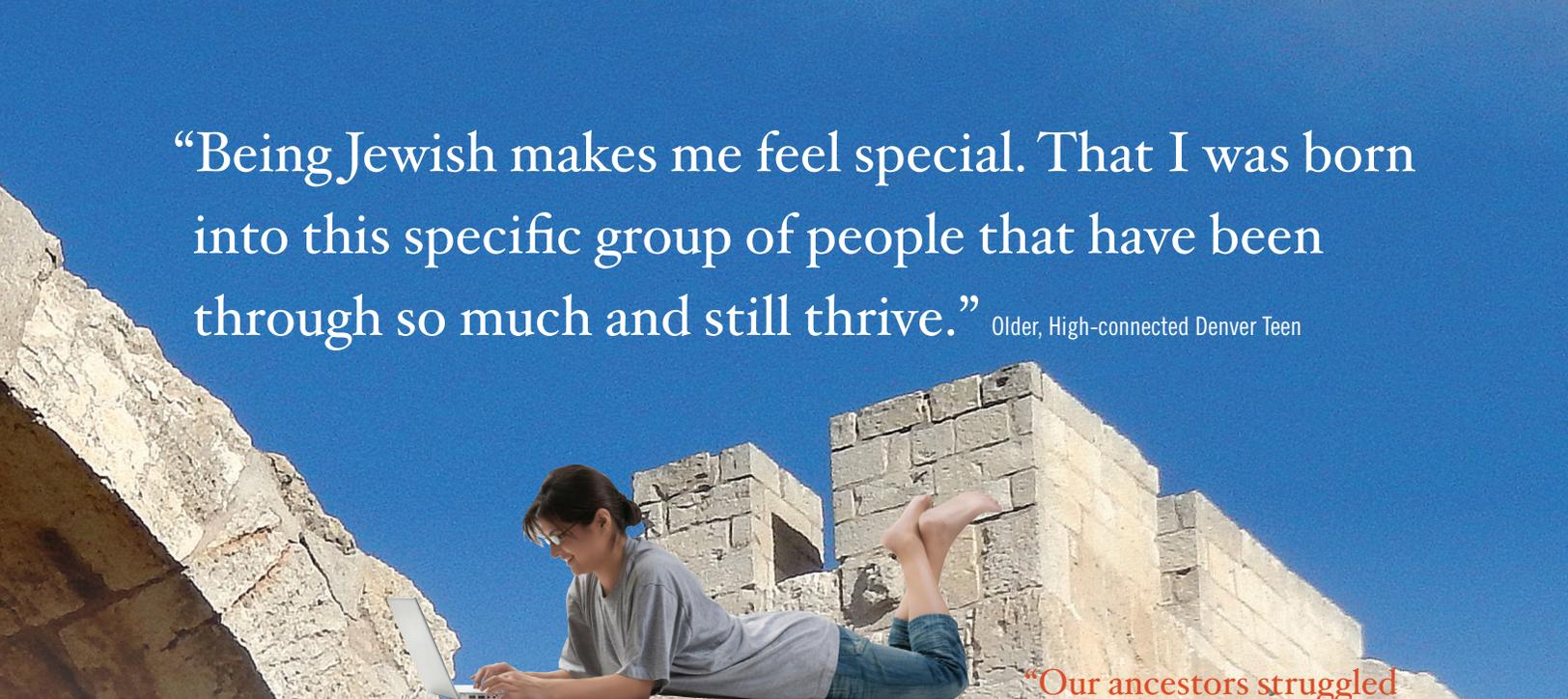
**8 From Knowledge to Wisdom** Perhaps the most challenging finding from our research, particularly for traditional institutions of Jewish education, was the frequency at which teenagers referred to the complete irrelevancy of much of their Jewish learning. When probed further, teens explained what they learned in Jewish frameworks often had no connection to their current stage of life. This sentiment is particularly important because an implicit assumption of much of Jewish learning has been that Judaism offers a framework in which people can view their entire lives, regardless of whether the Jewish learning occurred in schools, youth groups, summer camps, or elsewhere.

**For Jewish teenagers who did appreciate Jewish learning, the deeper findings offer important implications. Jewish knowledge, primarily described by the teens as traditional Jewish texts and sources, is most appreciated by teens when it can be used in the present, or when they are able to envision using it in the future. Teens were most likely to find Jewish knowledge meaningful when they could see the connections and relevance to the rest of their lives.**

For purveyors of Jewish education, the tension between “authenticity” and “relevance” is not new. Hebrew University philosopher of education Michael Rosenak, z”l, explained that authenticity is the attachment to the subject matter of Judaism (often traditional texts and sources)—or in many cases what Jewish educators believe that the students ought to know. Relevance refers to the perceived interests and needs of students in their “real” and often very secular lives. Rosenak describes in depth that the educator is constantly striving to reach the point where authenticity and relevance meet in order to impact the lives of learners and imbue them with Jewish subject matter that is both relevant and meaningful.<sup>8</sup>

“More recently, the Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah has emphasized ‘applying Jewish wisdom’ as a key goal of acquiring Jewish knowledge. Applied wisdom is the ability of learners to take their Jewish learning and use it to enhance their lives and improve the world.”<sup>9</sup>

This notion of applied wisdom is certainly challenging for Jewish educators who believe that a certain corpus of Jewish knowledge should be learned, for the primary purpose of creating a generation of literate Jews. While this is a noble, indeed admirable, goal, the concept of Torah Lishma (learning Torah for learning’s sake) is completely foreign to a generation of Jewish youth (and their parents) who demand, if not expect, instant gratification, meaning, relevance, and value in almost everything in which they choose to participate.



“Being Jewish makes me feel special. That I was born into this specific group of people that have been through so much and still thrive.” Older, High-connected Denver Teen

**9 The Past Connects to the Present** As part of the teenage quest to better understand who they are and where they fit in this world, many of the teens, including the less affiliated, expressed a curiosity about the Jewish past—their people’s story. Connected to their identification as members of the Jewish tribe (even if they were primarily universalists), these teens wanted to know more about Jewish history, particularly as it informed who they are as Jews today as it related to issues of contemporary concern.

In findings that mirrored adult responses in the 2013 Pew Study, many teens displayed a strong connection to the Holocaust.<sup>10</sup> There were a wide variety of reasons for this, including the fact that many of these teens had studied the Holocaust in their schools, both in public and private ones. In what became indicative of many of their attitudes, for some higher-connected teens, learning about the Holocaust came from a very tribal desire to understand the history and persecution of “our people.” These teens often had encountered Holocaust survivors, felt a deep connection with them, and felt an obligation as part of the Jewish people to pass on their stories and memories to future generations.

For other teens, both high and low connected, the more universal message that a Holocaust should “never again” occur in the world proved to be a primary motivation to learn more about this episode in Jewish and world history. For these teens, a commitment to social action is often a dominant feature of their lives. Combatting genocide, racism, or intolerance is a primary motivator in much of what they believe and do.

Several teens also expressed that the Holocaust was a tribal signifier that made the Jewish people a particularly strong ethnic group today. In the language of these teens, many minority groups in the U.S. experienced persecution over time. But the fact that the Jews were persecuted more than anyone else throughout world history was viewed as a source of resilience and even pride.

Despite much focus of the teens’ attention and knowledge of Jewish history being centered on the Holocaust, this did not mitigate a desire for these teens to learn more about the origins and history of the Jewish people. In much the same way as the teens described their desire for traditional Jewish knowledge to be relevant and meaningful to their everyday lives, they also spoke about a desire to engage more in learning about their collective Jewish past. **Related to their associations of pride with being Jewish, and the largely tribal nature of American society, these teens often explicitly expressed wanting to know more about their collective past in order to better understand who they are today.**

“Our ancestors struggled so much with maintaining a strong identity or even identifying themselves as Jewish at all. And I feel that in our modern society, even though there’s still some discrimination against Jewish people, in middle school, I definitely struggled with that. But, I just feel like I have to embrace it because I if don’t, then I’m just disrespecting everything that my ancestors worked for.”

Older, Low-connected Boston Teen

“What’s so good about the Jewish journey is that like when you’re learning about yourself you can also learn about the Holocaust and stuff. Like how much our ancestors went through.”

Younger, High-connected Los Angeles Teen



“I wanted to write the word ‘home’ [to describe Israel], but I have Polish and Soviet Russian lineage, which probably at some point traces back to Israel. But, I really just feel like it’s an origin point so I’m indifferent towards it. I’d like to see the wall—Wailing Wall or whatever. I think that’s a cool idea in itself. But overall, I’m not super excited about Israel.”

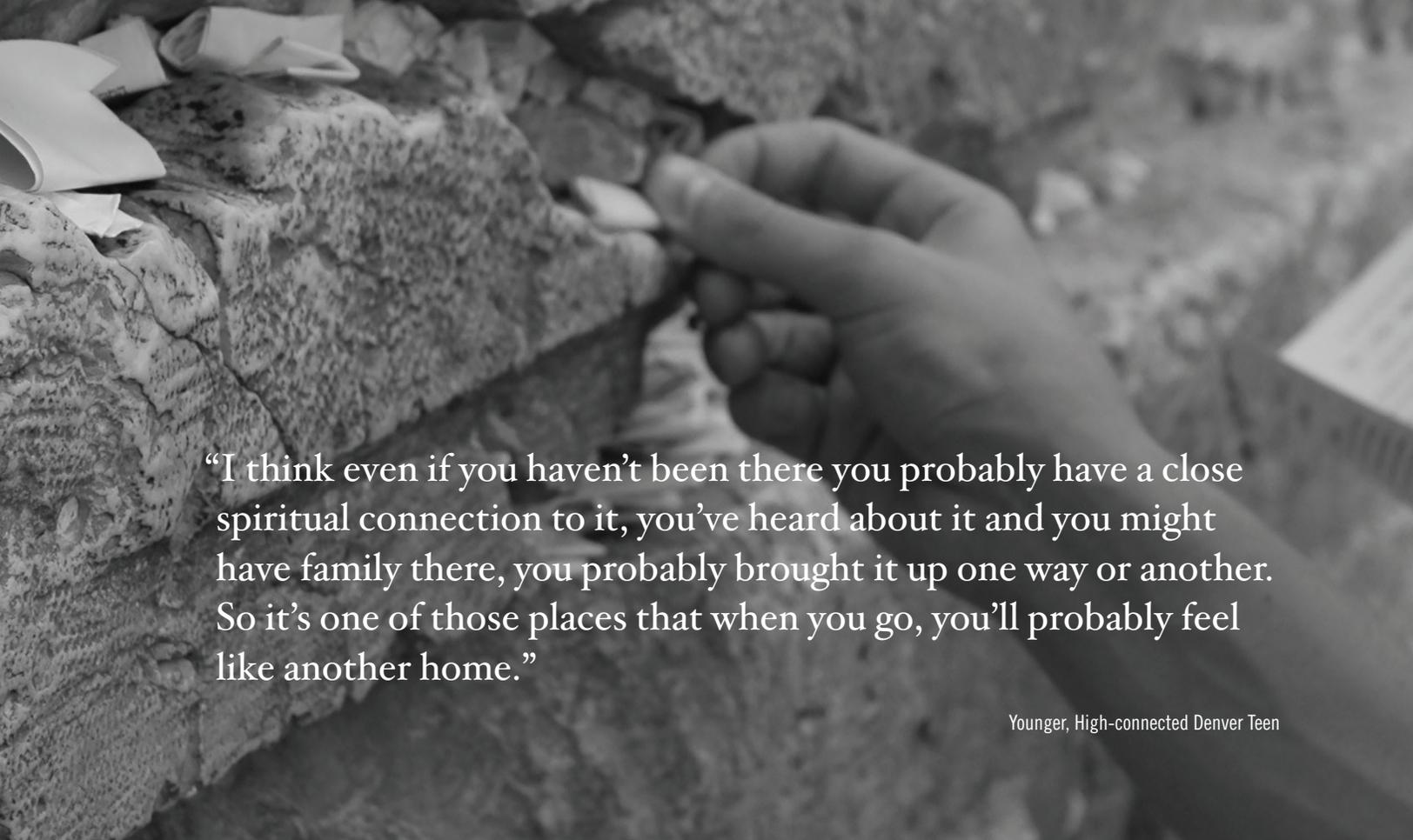
Older, Low-connected Denver Teen

**10** **The Complexity of Israel** All teens who were part of this research, regardless of how connected they were to Jewish life, had some level of exposure to Israel. They all in some way related Israel to their Jewishness. But despite this initial commonality, there was no other issue for which the differences were greater between the more- and less-connected teens.

All teens knew about “the conflict” in Israel, although clearly not all of the teens understood this term in the same way. By and large, all of the teens encountered Israel through the media (both traditional means including television and newspapers, as well as social media). And many teens, regardless of their connectedness, felt as if they were under a figurative spotlight if Israel was discussed in their public school classroom.

In this study, higher-connected teens were identified as having multiple connections to Jewish organizations. Not surprisingly, many of these teens came from more highly connected families, and often many of them also had traveled to Israel, either with their families or through peer experiences run by the organizations that connected them to Jewish life (i.e., their Jewish day schools, summer camps, or youth groups). These higher connected teens often used words such as “homeland” to describe their connection to the Jewish state. And there is a direct relationship between their levels of connection to Jewish life, the Jewish community, and their emotional connection to Israel.

Importantly, this does not mean that all higher-connected teens were monolithic in their views and support of Israel. There were many higher-connected teens who displayed staunch allegiance to Israel and sometimes found themselves defending Israel to their friends or in their classrooms. But this category of higher-connected teens with a strong emotional connection to Israel included many who displayed moral ambivalence and uncertainty about many actions taken by Israel, despite their strong connection to the country and often its people.



“I think even if you haven’t been there you probably have a close spiritual connection to it, you’ve heard about it and you might have family there, you probably brought it up one way or another. So it’s one of those places that when you go, you’ll probably feel like another home.”

Younger, High-connected Denver Teen

For lower-connected teens, most of whom had not traveled to Israel, their connections to the Jewish state were also lower. Most of their views concerning Israel were informed by media, classroom interactions, and their peers (many of whom are non-Jewish), as opposed to the higher-connected teens whose impressions about Israel were more likely informed by their families, the Jewish programs in which they participated, and their firsthand travel experience to Israel. The lower-connected teens often understood Israel in a religious or biblical context (i.e., a land of our forefathers, deserts, camels, and some Jewish symbols). Any contemporary images often encompassed a view of Israel as a country of soldiers, war, and bloodshed. While Israel still resonated with them as Jews, their language to express their connection to Israel was limited, their imagery disjointed, and their knowledge of current and historical realities was frequently inaccurate. In addition, these teens were more likely to be more universalist in their outlook of the world, expressing more concern with the military actions of Israel, and often expressing an understanding of the Palestinian perspective.

Some lower-connected teens expressed dissatisfaction in Jewish organizations that in their eyes only portray a singular, pro-Israel viewpoint. For them, any organization that failed to give a comprehensive, multi-narrative portrayal of Israel (in-line with their universal view of the world) was perceived as being dogmatic and inauthentic. Some teens also expressed a lack of desire to engage with Jewish organizations because of their perceived bias and unwillingness to allow for dissenting voices.

“When I think of spirit, I think of a presence that you can’t see, but something’s still there and can be helpful, and I feel like that’s God.”

Younger, High-connected Boston Teen

“I feel most connected when I’m on the soccer field. . .it’s a really weird place, but it’s where I like to go to think. That’s when I feel most connected.”

Older, High-connected Denver Teen

**11** **Spiritual by Another Name** Similar to their non-Jewish peers, Jewish teens also consider their place in the universe, often acknowledging a higher power and frequently searching for a connection with a force more powerful than humankind. But very few Jewish teens, other than the most highly connected ones, had any capacity to express their sense of spirituality, or connection to a higher being, in Jewish terms. Even when relating to specific Jewish ideas and concepts, many of the teens were unable to articulate these in any meaningfully Jewish ways. They lacked a language and a practice in which to express their spiritual selves.

While teens often found meaning in spirituality, they seldom used the word “spirituality” in the research conversations. They found a connection to a higher being, or contentment in their inner-self, or felt a part of something bigger than themselves, when they were engaged in meditative activities, on hikes in nature, or even playing sports. These contexts often were mediated by a spiritual guide. Again, teens did not describe the person in such terms, but clearly an adult or respected peer filled that role. Unfortunately, in their eyes, Judaism fails to offer something to which they can relate in this regard. They also do not see a language of meaning in Judaism with which they can connect.

On a lesser scale, the inability to read or recite prayers in Hebrew also may contribute to a lack of connection to Jewish spirituality. In general, they expressed ambivalence towards structured religion, the boredom of synagogue, and the rigid structure of Jewish prayer. These are further manifestations of their lack of connection to spirituality in Jewish contexts. This is consistent with much of the research about this generation, which describes them as being “spiritual but not religious.”<sup>11</sup>





**12** **Between Choice and Obligation** Traditionally, Jewish programming has been bifurcated into voluntary and involuntary activities. Barry Chazan’s seminal article describes the voluntary nature of activities like camp, youth group, and Israel trips as hallmarks of informal Jewish education.<sup>12</sup> Involuntary activities were often thought of as experiences where the participant had no choice regarding participation (often Jewish day school), or those experiences where the participant’s choice was highly influenced or even pressured by their parents (often day school and Hebrew school).

This distinction informs the discourse today around the sovereign-self choosing what he or she wants to participate in.<sup>13</sup> Many Jewish educators recognize that most of Jewish life is voluntarily chosen by teens. Subsequently, they seek to provide opportunities of value that attract people and warrant spending financial resources. They design experiences, in other words, that are accessible, valued, and affordable.

However, while our research does not refute these strategies, it adds a dimension to this understanding about how teens conceptualize their time. Teens easily produced lists of voluntary activities that they did in their “free time,” such as music, sports, and going to the movies or mall with friends. Yet, despite the voluntary nature of most Jewish activities, which many teens participate in, items such as youth groups, Jewish high school programs, and Jewish summer camps rarely appeared on the “free time” list. As mentioned previously, teens described attending these varied Jewish experiences as activities that they wanted to participate in because they provided friends, meaning, and value—and they were certainly not in the same category as just “hanging out with my friends.”

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**After further probing, it was learned that Jewish activities in the minds of these teens held some sort of undefined middle space between voluntary and involuntary. Many teens would not choose to participate in these activities during their “free time,” as these activities have an obligation and commitment associated with them. But teens also did not view these activities as mandatory. They recognize, too, a parental influence, as small as it might have been, that gently pushed them to attend Jewish activities.**

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Categorizing Jewish activities in this middle ground, somewhere between voluntary and involuntary activities, does not mean that the teens enjoy them less or feel forced to participate. It does, however, indicate a different mind-set around this participation—and one that the community needs to acknowledge in order to create meaningful experiences for today’s Jewish teens.





**13 It Takes a Community** In 1998, Jeffrey Kress and Maurice Elias published a paper entitled “It Takes a Kehillah [Community] to Make a Mensch,” describing the myriad influences that contribute to development of a teen’s identity.<sup>14</sup> Yet, the Jewish community still measures the number of Jewish teens engaged in Jewish life by simply counting the organizations to which they belong or the activities in which they participate.

Certainly this type of counting is useful for some purposes, but it also is problematic. Many of the most affiliated teens participate in multiple Jewish groups, resulting in duplicate and triplicate numbers when reporting on aggregate numbers of Jewish teen participation. Additionally, attending an event says very little about one’s level of engagement and any learning or growth that results from that experience.

**Beyond this somewhat technical counting issue, thinking of teens as data that engage with single institutions fails to account for the complex ecosystem of experiences in which teens live. Multiple influences contribute to the totality of teens’ existence—no single power alone, such as a youth group or summer camp shapes teens today. Family, school, society at large, and the many number of organizations to which teens belong comprise the milieu in which teens live.**

Even more alarming is the large number of teens who are not connected to any Jewish organization. Therefore, the potential power of communal collaboration should be considered to engage the Jewish youth who are doing very little or nothing Jewish at all.

Appreciating the complexity of this ecosystem starts by acknowledging that no organization can offer teens every resource they want. Moreover, not every organization and every Jewish teen are the perfect fit for each other. The plethora of Jewish organizations inherently means that teens can select to participate in one over another based on their interests and desires.



# applying research findings to our work

The findings presented undoubtedly warrant deeper conversations about their implications as leaders move forward in Jewish teen engagement efforts. To that end, we want to start that conversation here.

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The cumulative research—from the focus groups, to the interviews, to the literature review—contributed to the development of the new paradigm: Jewish teen programming should add significant benefits to the lives of teenagers, enabling them to flourish and develop as human beings. The emphasis of our efforts should no longer be about how institutions can benefit from engaging teens. Similarly, we cannot simply count the number of teens walking through our doors and deem a high number to mean success. Rather, how can we engage, support, and contribute to the whole life of a teen?

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The research findings offer insights that begin to answer these admittedly challenging questions. The following are initial thoughts and recommendations, categorized by each corresponding research section on the previous pages. We hope these thoughts and recommendations build on the insights and help to inform our community's strategies and approaches to engaging Jewish teens.

**1 Teens pursue happiness and joy** The teens' pursuit of happiness and joy should cause us to consider the totality of Jewish experiences today. This might involve the consideration of the aesthetics of an experience, including the spaces events are held in and whether they are considered by teens to be "cool," appropriate, and relevant. On what might seem a superficial level, teens enjoy spaces that are loud and colorful and allow for movement and interaction—often not features of traditional Jewish settings. At the same time, we understand that happiness can be derived from participating and succeeding in challenging experiences. Youth educators need to intentionally plan and design activities that overflow with laughter, fun, and play, but also convey a depth and richness that allow teens to struggle and succeed with the challenges of being a Jewish teen today.

**2 Teens balance joyful and value-added experiences** As much as teens want to engage in activities that bring them happiness, they also want experiences that will help them to succeed in life. Often equated with "building a resume" or "helping to get me into college," highly valued activities should not be underestimated in the Jewish teen space. Thus, balancing the purely joyful experiences with those that teens (and their parents) believe offer value equating to success presents a complex challenge. Jewish educators must provide environments that are both a respite from the stresses of teenage life and also offer enough relevance and challenge so that teens view these experiences as valuable.

**3 Teens see Judaism as more than just a religion** Institutions and leaders that wish to attract larger numbers of Jewish teens should embrace the fact that many teens identify with Jewish life beyond the parameters of traditional religious life. Promoting an authentic expression of Jewish life that also emphasizes culture and ethnicity will offer a framework that is far more resonant with larger segments of the Jewish teen population.

**4 Teens like and need open and welcoming environments** Although rituals provide people a sense of affinity and belonging, these same practices often also serve to alienate the outsider. Educators and other leaders must consider the full impact of practices and rituals that are meant to be inclusive. Teens like and need environments that are welcoming and inclusive. Traditional labels such as Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative are perceived by many teens as divisive rather than the all-encompassing terms of “Jewish” or “just Jewish.” And many Jewish teens also will not engage in Jewish experiences if they feel that those aspects of Jewish life exclude non-Jews. While this creates a challenge on its own, it is potentially very problematic in an era when more than half of non-Orthodox Jewish teens come from interfaith families and almost all have predominantly non-Jewish friends. Although this will manifest itself in different ways depending on specific institutional ideologies, the concepts of openness, diversity, and inclusivity should become hallmarks of all Jewish youth programming.

**5 Teens exhibit universalist attitudes with tribal tendencies** Jewish teens who see themselves primarily as global citizens, but also tribal at times, need certain “tools” to express their Jewishness in both environments—with fellow Jews and with their non-Jewish friends and broader community. Jewish experiences ought to provide teens with skills that enable them to share their Jewishness with non-Jewish peers and colleagues. Moving forward, consideration might also be given to opportunities that involve non-Jewish teens in some Jewish programming as a way to ultimately engage more Jewish teens who will only attend certain activities if their friends, Jewish and non-Jewish, are also welcome.

**6 Teens and their families...get along!** Organizations need to better understand the benefits of developing strong relationships with a teen’s entire family. While parents and grandparents of today’s Jewish teens may have had negative experiences in Jewish programs in their youth, many of them still want to provide positive experiences for their teens in Jewish environments and with Jewish organizations that are trusted and respected. When teen programs are deemed successful, these families often became their strongest allies, advocates, and supporters.

**7 Teens feel positively about the Bar/Bat Mitzvah** Traditionally, Jewish organizations have viewed the drop-off rate in Jewish life after the Bar and Bat Mitzvah as a crisis. Given that it is one of the highest points of engagement in Jewish life, and that most teens view the experience as positive, organizations should view the Bar/Bat Mitzvah as an opportunity, and not as an impending point of departure from Jewish life. With so many Jewish teens participating in an experience that actually brings them happiness and pride, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah must be transformed from a graduation ceremony into a launch pad for participation in Jewish life.

**8 Teens want and need Jewish knowledge to be relevant** The notion of applied Jewish wisdom pushes Jewish educators to consider deeply which Jewish texts, values, and learnings are most likely to impact the full being of an individual. This notion is highly reflective of the overall paradigm shift in Jewish learning that is the underpinning of this report—a movement away from Jewish activities designed to make participants “more Jewish” and instead focus on how Judaism can be utilized as a resource to help develop stronger and healthier human beings. Teens appreciate Jewish knowledge and find it meaningful when it is relevant to their current life or they at least can envision utilizing that knowledge in the future.



## **9** Teens feel a connection to their collective past and the Holocaust

Jewish teens, like other ethnic groups, want to know more about their collective past. It imbues within them a sense of belonging and connectedness that ultimately provides teens with a strong sense of self. Specifically, Jewish teens want to know more about the Holocaust. There is a sense of urgency about this, given that today's teens are the last generation of Jews who will have direct contact with a dwindling population of Holocaust survivors.

## **10** Teens know about Israel

No one would suggest that Israel education and engagement is simple. Yet it cannot be ignored. Israel influences nearly all Jewish teens and is simply too pervasive in the world today for it not to be addressed. But, importantly, educators and other leaders should address the full complexities of Israel, including the Arab-Israeli conflicts and other tension points in Israeli society. For teens who are trained in critical inquiry, failure to present this complexity will cause many teens to turn their backs on Israel and also often on Jewish life as a whole if they believe that they are being sold “the party line” or “lies.”

## **11** Teens are seeking greater purpose and meaning

For educators and other leaders, the good news—indeed extremely good news—is that Jewish youth are seekers on a continual journey. They look for guidance and ways to connect to each other, themselves, and to a higher sense of purpose and meaning. They respect experiences that help guide their lives. Many teens today are interested in practices such as meditation and character self-development, for example. Teen educators must be empowered to move beyond traditional Jewish practices—such as synagogue-based services and other religious practices—to engage teens, and to provide them with meaningful tools that they can apply to their own spiritual and life journeys.

## **12** Teens view Jewish activities as an obligated choice

Since Jewish activities, in the minds of teens, occupy a middle space between voluntary and involuntary activities, teens think uniquely about participation in them—what we have termed an obligated choice. This understanding lessens the pressure on educators who vie for the time of teens against highly valued secular voluntary activities. Furthermore, the secular activities that enhance a teen's life should be encouraged and not viewed as competition. At the same time, educators are reminded that their offerings must be seen as relevant, meaningful, challenging, and worthwhile for Jewish teens.

## **13** Teens expect choices in Jewish opportunities

As in other facets of life, teens expect to move fluidly between Jewish organizations and experiences. In other words, participation with one organization often does not preclude participation in another. Some organizations simply are a better fit than others for certain teens. This understanding should motivate educators and other leaders to guide teens into an activity that best meets teens' needs, as opposed to only seeking a higher number of participants in their own programming. This newly emerging paradigm, that teens exist within ecosystems, must encourage organizations to further seek opportunities to work together.

# final thoughts, final questions

We live in rapidly changing times. Most institutions that engage Jewish teens were developed in a different era when a different type of Jewish teen existed. This report highlights some of the many significant changes taking place in the Jewish teen population today. Interestingly, many have commented to us throughout this process that these changes are not restricted to the teen population. We are careful, however, not to make claims beyond our focused demographic.

For those interested in engaging Jewish teens in communal life and activity, this report outlines many new realities. We believe that organizations that adapt to these new realities ultimately will engage more teens in more meaningful and impactful ways.

One omission from this report's implications is the issue of technology—which may have been an easy “go to” when describing the rapidly changing world in which we live. Suffice to say that we believe that technology, in all of its manifestations, is inherent in all of these implications. To understand a teenager today is to understand that technology is neither what they do or how they function in the world. Technology is a part of who they are.

In sum, our findings bring to the forefront important “teen centered” questions that we should keep in mind when designing experiences for Jewish teens:

## How. . .

- will this engage me intellectually, physically, and socially?
- can I share this with my friends? (Jewish and other)
- will this help me feel more connected to the many communities in which I exist?
- can I apply this to my life?
- will this help me develop skills that will benefit my life?
- will this help me feel proud of being Jewish?
- will this help me be a better citizen of the world?
- will this help me make the world a better place?

These questions should not suggest that all Jewish experiences need to acquiesce to the often cited egocentric nature of teenagers today. For Jewish organizations to maintain their integrity and value, they must continue to offer mission-driven and aspirational programs that allow teens to be challenged and inspired. But failure to recognize the necessity of all Jewish experiences to resonate with these core questions that teenagers constantly ask is a mistake—especially if a primary motivation is for quality Jewish experiences to be had by as many Jewish teens as possible.

One way to mitigate the spiral of Jewish programming to acquiesce only to the wants and needs of teenagers is for the educators and providers of Jewish teen experiences to continually keep in mind a related battery of questions that includes:

## How. . .

- am I providing Jewish teens with a joyous space?
- can I provide Jewish wisdom to teens that they can apply to their lives?
- can I help Jewish teens find their next steps beyond the timeframe of this specific experience?
- can I be better informed about the ecosystem in which Jewish teens exist so that I can better guide them to experiences that they are best suited to?

**As a final statement,** we believe that in the course of this research we uncovered perhaps one of the most positive Jewish teen interventions possible. The act of merely talking to teens, in their language, without any sense of value judgment, proved to be highly influential in itself. Although we don't suggest that every community should invest in undertaking focus groups with experienced, outside researchers, we highly recommend, as several of our colleagues are already doing, reaching out and talking to Jewish teens as a first step for those seriously engaged in the enterprise of engaging more Jewish teens in more meaningful activities.

# appendix: methodology

The process to create these insights and outcomes included a three-pronged approach, involving various professionals in the field of Jewish education and the Jewish community.

**1. A literature review** was conducted by Dr. Meredith Woocher, covering the topics of adolescent development, Jewish teen identity, and relevant studies by Jewish and secular organizations working with teens. This synthesis created common language among stakeholders and laid the foundation for the following phases of research.

**2. Interviews with field professionals, researchers, and funders** working on initiatives related to Jewish teens were conducted throughout this research project in order to continually verify findings, raise additional questions, and contribute to the iterative research process.

**3. Qualitative research was conducted with teens and their parents to understand**, on their own terms and in their own language, how they perceive themselves as Jews and the ways in which they connect (and do not connect) to Judaism and Jewish life.

- Research was conducted among 139 teens, varying in ages from 12 ½-17 years old, in four U.S. cities (Atlanta, Boston, Denver, and Los Angeles).
- Respondents were selected through a combination of community partner outreach lists, as well as through a professional market research recruiter (Fieldwork).
- **Our qualitative research exploration consisted of three parts:**
  - > **Digital Ethnographies:** In order to get a deep understanding of what it's like to be a teen today, our research moderator corresponded with teens digitally, asking them to answer specific questions (through emails, photos, etc.) and send us detailed descriptions of their daily routines in real time. These digital ethnographies were conducted throughout one week prior to meeting teens in person, and helped us understand, on an individual level, how teens live out the “Jewish” and “non-Jewish” dimensions of their lives.
  - > **In-Person Focus Groups:** In order to hear from teens how they feel, think, and behave regarding their Jewish identity, we brought them together in person, in groups of 8-10, at focus group facilities in Atlanta, Boston, Denver, and Los Angeles. We conducted four groups in each city, dividing them between ages (12½-14, and 15-17), as well as between “higher connected” and “lower connected” to their Jewish identity. (See sidebar at left for definition.) Each focus group lasted two hours, was moderated by a professional researcher, and covered various topics related to teens’ lives, overall identity, and Jewish identity.
  - > **Interviews with Parents of Teens:** In order to understand the role that parents play in crafting the Jewish identities of their teens, as well as the family dynamics that come into play, we conducted sixteen in-depth interviews (via phone) with parents of the teens who participated in our research.

## Overall Participant Demographics:

- 139 teen ethnography and focus group participants, ages 12½-17
- Atlanta, Boston, Denver, and Los Angeles—four focus groups (and accompanying digital ethnographies) were conducted per city
- 16 interviews with Jewish parents including a mix of mothers and fathers, four from each city.

## All teen participants fit the following criteria:

- Identified as Jewish
- Fell between the ages of 12½-17
- Represented the host community's ethnic and socioeconomic diversity
- Were divided by higher- and lower-connected teens (determined by organizational affiliation)

City	Ages 12½ – 14		Ages 15 – 17		TOTALS
	Higher Connected	Lower Connected	Higher Connected	Lower Connected	
Los Angeles	1 Group N=9 Teens	1 Group N=10 Teens	1 Group N=10 Teens	1 Group N=9 Teens	4 Groups N=38 Teens
Denver	1 Group N=10 Teens	1 Group N=7 Teens	1 Group N=10 Teens	1 Group N=10 Teens	4 Groups N=37 Teens
Boston	1 Group N=9 Teens	1 Group N=9 Teens	1 Group N=9 Teens	1 Group N=5 Teens	4 Groups N=32 Teens
Atlanta	1 Group N=9 Teens	1 Group N=8 Teens	1 Group N=9 Teens	1 Group N=6 Teens	4 Groups N=32 Teens
TOTALS	8 Groups N=71 Teens		8 Groups N=68 Teens		16 Groups N=139 Teens

# endnotes

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