Connecting the Next Generation:

A Case Study in Shabbat

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ABSTRACT

Connecting the Next Generation: A Case Study in Shabbat

A thesis presented to the Hornstein Program for Jewish Professional Leadership and Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies

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This thesis is the culmination of an eight-month investigation into Jewish young adult engagement in the Boston Jewish community. I looked at the history of American Jewish identity, and the relevant literature specific to Jewish identity and Jewish Millennials. I identified four different organizations in Boston currently providing Shabbat engagement opportunities to this demographic. I spent time attending Shabbat programs, as well as speaking with program professionals and program participants. This is a qualitative study; through my many conversations I hope to identify what makes a Friday evening Shabbat program successful in reaching and engaging the Millennial generation. In this thesis I will share the outcome of my interviews, and provide recommendations for an organization looking to build a strong young adult Shabbat engagement program. Based on my research, there are several important factors that contribute to a successful engagement program, including special attention to program space, clearly defined program objectives and outcome measurements, and a community-organizing approach to engagement and empowerment.
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Introduction

The very first time I ever felt a strong connection to my Jewish identity I was ten years old and sitting at Friday evening Shabbat services at summer camp. I felt pulled to the music, traditions, and ritual, and knew almost immediately that Shabbat at camp was very special. As I grew up and took on an active role in the behind-the-scenes magic making of camp life, I admired how inherently special Shabbat felt. It is easy to get stressed out by the logistical burdens of everyday life at camp; programs don’t always go the way you want them to, staff don’t always perform the way you wish them to, and inevitably a child will make you angry. But every Friday without fail, Shabbat comes and brings with it a sense of calm and serenity. From Friday evening to Saturday evening at camp, campers and staff are a little nicer to one another, programs run a bit smoother, and people seem to enjoy living in the moment more. I always wondered why and how this happened; and especially what were the contributing facts that made Shabbat feel so different from the rest of the week.

Throughout my Jewish journey I have always sought out spaces to celebrate Shabbat. While I consider myself a secular Jew, the feeling and experience of a Friday evening Shabbat service has always had a special place in my heart. During the first few months at the University of Colorado at Boulder I felt completely lost and totally alone. The size of the school was overwhelming to me, as was being far away from my family, and there were several times
throughout the year where I considered transferring to a school closer to home. Upon chance I ended up at a Friday evening Shabbat service at Hillel, and once again I knew almost immediately that it was a very special place and experience. The music and singing brought me back to camp, and the food and atmosphere felt comfortable and safe. I attribute my experience at Hillel as the single most defining experience of my college career through Hillel I was introduced to some of my best friends, and the Hillel staff encouraged my involvement in the Jewish Studies program at Boulder. Without my positive experience at Hillel in college, I certainly do not think I would have chosen to continue my career in the Jewish communal world.

After I graduated college I moved home to Los Angeles for a year and spent time getting involved in the young adult Jewish community. At the time a few friends of mine had just become part of the Moishe House network, and once a month they would throw a big Shabbat dinner at their place. At these dinners I immediately felt the same way I did at Hillel in college – safe, familiar, and comfortable. These dinners were a great way to catch up with old friends and meet new ones -- and through my interactions with people, I really got a sense that for some, Moishe House was a vital part of their social network. I attended every month because I knew the residents of the house, but there were certainly new transplants to Los Angeles who immediately sought out Moishe House as a way to meet other young Jews. The way these newcomers would seek out Moishe House reminded me of how Jews would seek out Chabad while travelling through remote parts of the world. The majority of the young adults who attended events at my local Moishe House were not religious, but they still felt a special pull and kinship to doing Jewish with other Jews. And Shabbat became a particularly special part of putting together that Jewish puzzle.

A year later, when it finally came time to choose our capstone topics in the
Hornstein/NEJS graduate program at Brandeis University, I immediately knew I wanted to do something that involved Shabbat. Its presence has played such a special role in my life, and I wanted to explore if and why young adults felt particularly close to Friday evening Shabbat programming. There seemed to be no better place to do this research than Boston, which has an incredible Jewish community with robust young adult programming. Before moving to the East Coast for school I knew very little about the Boston Jewish community, and I wanted a reason to explore its young adult programming opportunities. After eight months of research I can honestly say that, with regards to young adult engagement and opportunities, the Boston Jewish community is a model to be admired by the rest of the American Jewish community. The hard work being done by committed lay leaders and professionals in this community is truly remarkable. I feel very proud to have had the opportunity to get to know this community.

While I wanted to learn more about young adult engagement in Boston, I also wanted to complete a project that could be useful to organizations outside Boston. I believe that as a Jewish community we should be investing in the highest quality programming for young adults. Instead of trying to scare young adults with words and phrases like Jewish continuity, intermarriage and assimilation, I believe we should give them a reason to be excited about engaging with their Jewish identity. Each generation of Jews shape their Jewish identity in different ways, and like all the generations before it, this generation deserves to be engaged in ways that are relevant and pertinent to its unique needs.

I recognize that sometimes Jewish communal institutions are slow to adapt to changing times, and this project is meant to aid organizations in understanding the Millennial generation. At the start of this project, with the help of my advisors, I identified four different Jewish organizations in Boston well known for their young adult engagement programming. I spent time
attending the organizations’ Friday evening Shabbat programs as a participant, and interviewing program professionals and lay-leaders. I interviewed program participants that I met either directly at an event, or through word-of-mouth of friends. I spoke to people about their own Jewish journey, what attracted them to a specific organization or program, what they were looking for in a Shabbat service, and what made them feel comfortable or uncomfortable about a particular program. The object of the interviews was to try to get at the root of what makes a Friday evening Shabbat program successful or unsuccessful. It is my hope that an organization looking either to start a young adult Shabbat program or strengthen an already existing program can look to this project as a guide.

This thesis is divided into four different parts to begin, a brief history of Jewish communal attachment in the United States with a focus on how generations have interacted and shaped formal and informal Jewish institutions. The second part is an overview of my methodology employed during this qualitative study; the third part is an in-depth examination of my findings. Based on my findings, I conclude with recommendations on how to build an effective young adult Friday evening Shabbat program.

I will admit that choosing to do a project that required me to seek out engagement opportunities and speak candidly with strangers forced me to step out of my comfort zone in a large way. I find situations where I am required to make small talk largely uncomfortable. However in my 21-months here at Hornstein I have constantly pushed myself out of my comfort zone and grown as a leader. I feel this final project really allows me to showcase what I have accomplished while at Hornstein, and I feel grateful to have been given this opportunity.
Chapter One: Understanding Jewish Millennials and Jewish Identity

On October 1, 2013 the Pew Research Center released A Portrait of Jewish Americans, the first comprehensive survey on Jewish identity and Jewish religion in the United States in over a decade. The impact of the Pew study was felt throughout the global Jewish community, with nearly every major Jewish publication and organization responding to some aspect of its findings. While it is not my intention to discuss in depth the findings of the Pew study, the comprehensive research survey serves as an excellent foundation to begin a larger discussion on Millennial Jewish identity in America.

To start, it is necessary to define the terms that will come up regularly throughout this project. The term "Millennial," as coined by social researchers Michael Hais and Morley Winogard describe young Americans born between 1982 and 2003.¹ In A Portrait of Jewish Americans, the Pew Research report classifies the Millennial Generation as those born after 1980. For the purpose of this project, I chose to focus specifically on individuals born between 1980 and 1994. This age group, roughly those now between ages 20 and 34, are the target group that many Jewish organizations hope to engage through their "20s and 30s" programming. Throughout this capstone I will be using the term "millennial," "Jewish millennial," "young adult," and "young Jewish adult" interchangeably. Furthermore, throughout this thesis when I use the term “Shabbat” I am specifically referencing to Friday evening Shabbat services. Additionally, Jewish Millennials here refers specifically to those outside the Orthodox

community.

According to the Pew study, Jewish identity is changing in America, with one-in-five Jews (22%) now describing themselves as having “no religion.” Historically Jewish denominationalism has been on the decline since its height in American society in the 1940s and 1950s. As indicated by the Pew study, "fully 93% of Jews in the aging Greatest Generation (born between 1914-1927) identify as Jewish on the basis of religion." Eighty-six percent of Jews of the Silent Generation (born between 1928-1945) identify as Jewish on the basis of religion, 81% of Jews of the Boomer Generation (born between 1946-1964), followed by 74% of Generation X Jews (those born between 1965-1980). Finally, "among Jews in the youngest generation of U.S. adults -- the Millennials -- 68% identify as Jews by religion, while 32% describe themselves as having no religion and identify as Jewish on the basis of ancestry, ethnicity, or culture."

The social and cultural trends of Millennial Jews are not entirely out of step from the generations that have preceded them. While the Pew study may indicate increased generational detachment from Judaism across the generations, what it does not take into consideration is that each generation of Jews has found their own unique ways to mark their Judaism and Jewish affiliations. The Jews of the Greatest Generation contributed financially to the tremendous growth of Jewish prosperity in the two decades after World War II. This period in American

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
Jewish consciousness was marked by "a greater degree of economic and political security, and a broader social acceptance" into mainstream American society than Jews had ever prior experienced in the United States.\(^7\) This sort of comfort and security was reflected by the increase of membership in Jewish religious and educational institutions. Reform and Conservative congregations grew at a rapid rate during the post-war years, as did Jewish educational institutions, youth programming, and Jewish summer camps.

According to historian Jonathan D. Sarna:

"In 1949 - 1950 … forty percent of America's 4.5 million Jews affiliated with synagogues … by the late 1950s, that figure would reach 60 percent, a figure never exceeded and the only time in the twentieth century that more than half of America's Jews were synagogue members. 'Judaism has changed,' one respondent explained to researchers. 'Nowadays people enjoy religion and going to synagogue.' As late as 1962, surveys continued to describe the flourishing state of the American Jewish community's religious bodies."\(^8\)

Likewise, Baby Boomers expressed their Jewish identity in relation to societal trends happening in America during the 1960s and 1970s, including the causes that dominated the American Jewish agenda of "world peace, civil rights, interfaith relations, and opposition to the war in Vietnam."\(^9\) Motivated by Jewish values and societal trends, Jews in their 20s and 30s were actively involved in the social movements of the time.

Perhaps inspired by these anti-establishment social movements, the rise of do-it-yourself

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\(^7\) Ibid, 277.
\(^9\) Ibid, 289.
Judaism in America also began in the late 1960s and 1970s. Beginning in 1968 with "socially active, politically liberal students concerned with the 'quality of Jewish living and the desire for an integrated lifestyle'" the Havurah movement grew in response to the large, centralized, sometimes lavish Jewish Community Centers and opulent synagogues founded decades earlier.\(^\text{10}\) The Havurah movement was both religious and communal in nature, and indicated an "aim to re-create Judaism in their own generation's image."\(^\text{11}\) While many of these independent communities eventually moved into the mainstream or dispersed entirely, the movement's "counterculture ideals, counter-aesthetic values, and relaxed decorum lived on" and became the foundation for the spiritual and communal initiatives which would eventually revive with Millennial Jews nearly three decades later.\(^\text{12}\)

**Millennials**

The move away from formal Jewish life that began with the post-Baby Boomer generation means that, for Millennial Jews, the options to participate in Jewish activities are broad and extend beyond affiliation with established Jewish organizations. The number of formal and informal institutions offering Jewish programming is thriving. In Boston alone, Millennials can choose from over 50 different Jewish programs that cater specifically to them. Furthermore it is easier than ever to get involved; Combined Jewish Philanthropies (the Jewish Federation of the Boston community) offers a one-stop shop website that is designed to help "discover our Jewish community's young adult opportunities through The Network website, \(^\text{10}\) Ibid, 319. 
\(^\text{11}\) Ibid, 320. 
Open House events, and meet-ups with volunteer Ambassadors." Every fall The Network, CJP's young adult division, offers an Open House evening where all 50 organizations are encouraged to attend, and the event feels akin to a college activities fair. Young adults can opt to sign up for a Quick Picks e-mail sent out weekly from JewishBoston.com (another arm of Combined Jewish Philanthropies) that provides highlights of the various Jewish activities taking place in the community on a weekly basis. The types of programs offered are broad; organizations are trying to engage young adults through a variety of interests and outlets. For example, during the week of March 23-29 2015, young adults could choose to attend a Passover Glass Etching Workshop, a talk on Jewish artist Mark Rothko, a senior citizen community Passover Seder, and a conversation on the implications of the 2015 Israeli elections, each offered by a different organization.

In order best to serve the plethora of organizations that have popped up in the past two decades that cater to this demographic, it is important to understand key demographic characteristics. Millennial Jews are part of a larger development phase known as Emerging Adulthood. The phrase "Emerging Adulthood," coined by American psychologist Jeffery Arnett, refers to a specific developmental period of young adults from developed countries between the ages of 18-29. Arnett coined the phrase in 2000, which makes the research surrounding this demographic relatively new and relatively small. Arnett's Emerging Adulthood literature is a

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14 Arnett is a Research Professor in the Department of Psychology at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. His primary scholarly interest in in “emerging adulthood” and he has written proficiently on the subject. He is the author of the textbook Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: A Cultural Approach (Prentice Hall) and Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties (Oxford University Press).
solid foundation for which to understand Jewish Millennials.

In addition, much of my research on Jewish young adults comes from The Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies located at Brandeis University. The Cohen Center has been responsible for surveying the impact of Birthright on its participants since the creation of the program in 1994, and thus has collected extensive information about young Jews between the ages of 18 - 26.\(^\text{15}\) Their information, combined with several surveys on Jewish young adult behavior from other important Jewish organizations, creates a comprehensive foundation by which to understand the key characteristics of this demographic.

According to Arnett and Elizabeth Fishel, Emerging Adulthood has evolved over the past half-century because of several important demographic changes. Since the 1960s the median marriage age in the United States has gone from 20 for women and 22 for men to 27 for women and 29 for men.\(^\text{16}\) In addition to delayed ages of marriage, men and women are also having children at much later ages (late twenties as opposed to early twenties) and are also having fewer children overall. "The birthrate has declined steeply in the United States, from 3.5 children per women in 1960 to 2.0 in 2010."\(^\text{17}\) In lieu of getting married and starting families young adults are choosing to pursue college, professional goals, or traveling.

\(^{15}\) Taglit-Birthright Israel (sometimes referred to as Birthright Israel or Birthright) is a non-profit educational organization founded in 1994 by Jewish philanthropists Charles Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt in cooperation with the Israeli government, the Jewish Agency for Israel, and individual Jewish communities around the world. Bronfman and Steinhardt founded the organization in response to a feeling of increased detachment from Israel and individual Jewish identity amongst young adults living in the Diaspora. Young adults age 18-26 are eligible for a free 10-day heritage trip through Israel with their peers. Since its inception in 1994, the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies has been responsible for tracking all of the impact measurements of Birthright-Israel. For more information, visit: http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/researchareas/taglit-birthright.html


\(^{17}\) Ibid, 2.
In addition, “for those who do eventually graduate with a four-year degree, college is increasingly likely to be followed by graduate school.”\textsuperscript{18} This shift is part of larger economic trends within American society as the economy has shifted to professions that require specialized education and training. Furthermore it is not uncommon in today's society for young adults to choose to live with a significant other for several years before getting married, which is also responsible for later marriage rates. In America we have placed a high emphasis on obtaining a college degree as a means to better oneself and become a productive member of society. In many subcultures this desire has replaced the immediate need to get married and have a family, which has affected societal attitudes towards adulthood.

According to the Pew Research study, Jews graduate from college and earn post-graduate degrees at a higher rate than most other U.S. adults. Fifty-eight percent of Jews polled by Pew are college graduates, and 28\% have earned a post-graduate degree.\textsuperscript{19} This is in comparison to 29\% of U.S. adults who have graduated from college, and 10\% of those who have a post-graduate degree.\textsuperscript{20} While greater educational attainment is certainly an overall positive for the Jewish community, it means that young adults are more likely staying single and suspending these traditional life cycle roles later than they have in previous decades.\textsuperscript{21} As noted by Jewish social scientists Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman:

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} It is important to understand that the population being discussed here is strictly non-Orthodox, which is also the majority of Jewish young adults in the United States.
\end{flushleft}
"the growth over the years in singlehood and 'non-parenthood' among Jews has driven down the aggregate levels of religious and ethnic engagement. Fewer young adult Jews with children mean that few young adult Jews have immediate reasons to join synagogues, JCCs and other institutions that provide child-oriented services."²²

Cohen and Kelman argue that this period is no longer simply a "temporary phase of five to seven years in between college and marriage" but now lasts significantly longer -- 10 to 15 years longer than in previous decades. ²³

A consequence of this extended period of singlehood is that organizations that have historically built programs on engaging families with young children (like JCCs and synagogues) are now facing an identity crisis. Moreover, spaces dedicated to engaging young Jewish adults in this new singlehood or non-parenthood time have been slow to evolve. Because of this, many young Jewish adults are now going almost a full decade without much engagement with formal Jewish institutional life, and thus may be less likely to re-engage with these spaces if they do marry and have children. As communal professionals, we must have a better understanding of the behavior and needs of this specific population in order to gain their allegiance and best provide for them during the critical time of their singlehood. As institutions have become aware of this issue, a recent emergence of studies, books and reports have materialized from a variety of sources (including independent social science research and internal organizational studies) all trying to "figure out" this new demographic.

 Millennials and Jewish Organizational Behavior

²³ Ibid.
According to research conducted by the Avi Chai Foundation, non-Orthodox young adults are less likely to feel attached to formal Jewish institutions, which include belonging to a synagogue, attending a JCC, or donating to a federation campaign. Young adults are more likely to engage with an organization that appeals directly to their own interests, rather than one that simply "relies upon appeals to a general Jewish solidarity or nostalgia." Because this specific population tends to be highly mobile, they are also less likely to support brick-and-mortar institutions, unlike individuals (i.e. families) who are more rooted in one specific location. "Younger Jewish adults, especially the single, experience rather high rates of change and mobility along several dimension, thereby impeding Jewish (and other) institutional affiliation." In addition, young Jewish adults who come from intermarried families have their own unique identities, and thus may require programming unique to their wants and needs.

According to a recent study done by the Jewish Outreach Institute, young Jewish adults that are the product of intermarriage “often feel excluded from the Jewish community; this feeling is more pronounced among those whose mother is not Jewish.” The study found that this specific population is just as interested in Jewish activities and engagement as children who come from two Jewish parents. However “when the programs are offered by Jewish institutions, they participate in such activities less frequently than do comparable Jewish with two Jewish

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24 Ibid.
As a consequence of this population's high rate of mobility, young Jewish adults rely heavily on their social networks. In a study done by Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, Uncoupled: How our Singles are Reshaping Jewish Engagement, the authors share that "Jewish friends play an important role in the identities of the single population, particularly in the absence of spouses and children of their own. Moreover, given that single Jews affiliate with Jewish institutions less often than their in-married counterparts, the role of informal social networks cannot be underestimated." However while Cohen and Kelman find that "most single, Jewish young adults report that at least half their friends are Jewish" as a whole, young Jewish adults have a greater diversity within their social networks than generations past. As a result of greater Jewish acceptance into mainstream society, this generation of Jewish young adults have social networks that include Jews and non-Jews alike. Because of such diverse social networks, young Jews find it difficult to engage with formal institutions that may be less inclusive of their personal social networks and friends.

While overall many young Jewish adults feel increasingly unconnected to and unsupported by formal Jewish institutional Jewish life, this generation is entrepreneurial in spirit. According to the Pew Report, "a third of Jews under age 30 say being Jewish is very important to them" and feel a sense of pride belonging to the Jewish people. Young Jews feel very

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28 Ibid.
connected to the broad concept of Jewish Peoplehood, which is why they may feel less inclined to join a localized Jewish community. However young Jewish adults also believe in their ability to change the status quo. In order to obtain the meaningful experience that they are searching for, they are not afraid to start their own organizations. This is not just a characteristic of young Jewish adults, but the Millennial generation as a whole. Winograd and Hais argue that "Millennials have a strong desire to find meaning in all their transactions, whether is it buying an eco-friendly product or in agreeing to go to work for a particular company” and this can be extended to young adults searching for meaningful religious experiences. Millennials largely believe that if an experience is unfulfilling, they can successfully create a different experience that speaks to their values and personal identity.

Such an entrepreneurial spirit has made way for an exciting new time in Jewish institutional life. Jewish institutions founded by entrepreneurial 20-and 30-something American Jews have proliferated in recent years. These institutions address the gamut of all aspects of Jewish life, including literature, music, film, art, social justice, and religion and spirituality. Young Jewish adults are exploring the nuances of their Jewish identity, Jewish ethnicity, Jewish Peoplehood, Jewish tradition, and the Jewish relationship to the State of Israel. In the realm of

31 The term Jewish Peoplehood gained traction in the Jewish community following the Soviet Jewry movement in the late 20th century. The first significant use of the Jewish Peoplehood concept can be attributed to Mordecai Kaplan, father of Reconstructionist Judaism. It is typically used to describe the concepts of Jewish collective belonging, the global Jewish community, and mutual responsibility. It has become a popular way for educators to teach about Jewish communal belonging in contemporary times. For further reading please see jpeoplehood.org, the Peoplehood Papers, and Israel Education Matters: a 21st Century Paradigm for Jewish Education by Lisa Grant and Ezra Kopelowitz (2012). http://jpeoplehood.org/library/
spirituality and religion, young Jewish religious leaders and other spiritual innovators are challenging conventional models in worship environment.\textsuperscript{34} This spiritual reinvention coincides not so surprisingly at a time when young Jewish adults are less likely to ascribe themselves to a particular Jewish denomination.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the results of the Pew study found that religious disaffiliation is growing most quickly amongst young Jewish adults. However, instead of throwing their hands up in the air in defeat, Jewish leaders of more traditional institutions are attempting to provide spaces for Millennials to grapple with Jewish identity and connection in today's world. Many of these spaces are built on a foundation of open-mindedness, a quality highly valued by many young Jewish adults.\textsuperscript{35} In understanding the generational characteristics of Jewish Millennials, it is not entirely surprising that they may feel uncomfortable with denominational Judaism, as it has historically divided Jews from one another. Millennials see themselves as holding multiple identities simultaneously, and their faith constitutes only one of those identities. Young Jews do not want to be branded or divided by denominational affiliations; they want a content-rich, pluralistic Jewish life.\textsuperscript{36}

Perhaps in a throwback to 1960s and 1970s Judaism, independent \textit{minyanim} are once again on the rise. These \textit{minyanim} and other “Jewish Emergent” communities (like IKAR in Los Angeles and Judaism Your Way in Denver) are reaching young Jewish adults and “challenging

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
conventional expectations about the roles and parameters of a synagogue.”\textsuperscript{37} These organizations “create warm, hospitable communities and worship experiences that extend ‘beyond the walls of the synagogue.’”\textsuperscript{38} Take for example the mission statement of IKAR Los Angeles:

“IKAR, an innovative model for Jewish engagement, launched in 2004 in an effort to reclaim the vitality and relevance of Jewish religious practice and reimagine the contours of Jewish community. Recognized nationally for its success in engaging young and disaffected Jews, IKAR is a positive and proactive response to the declining trend in affiliation in the Jewish community. IKAR is dedicated to reanimating Jewish life through imaginative engagement with ritual and spiritual practice and a deep commitment to social justice.”\textsuperscript{39}

Rabbi Sharon Brous, the founding Rabbi of IKAR along with other religious Jewish innovators, like Elie Kaunfer co-founder and Executive Director of the independent minyan Mechon Hadar in New York, hope to reengage the Jewishly “disaffected” through moving and powerful Jewish practice.\textsuperscript{40} And while these organizations are still relatively small in comparison to established synagogues, they are drawing “small, but growing, numbers of 20-and 30-something Jews to regular worship communities.”\textsuperscript{41} J. Shawn Landres, former Director of Research at Synagogue 3000 has written prolifically on the rise of Jewish Emergent communities similar to IKAR and Mechon Hadar. Landres believes this movement is able to reach Jewish Millennials due to its

\textsuperscript{40} "Home Page | Mechon Hadar." Mechon Hadar. Accessed April 7, 2015.
focus on “devotional experiences that move beyond the walls of the synagogue, build community, and perhaps most of all, create what they call an authentic connection to their traditions and to God. De-emphasizing the 20th-century themes of Holocaust memory and ‘Israel right or wrong,’ … and a community-based spirituality through a return to Judaism’s sacred pillars of Torah, prayer, and social justice.”

Jewish Emergent communities are seen by many young adults as authentic and genuine, but what about other Jewish organizations that are trying to engage Jewish Millennials? How is it possible to translate these experiences and feelings into other meaningful parts of Jewish life? The Pew Report tells us that despite a decrease in religious denominationalism and affiliation, young Jews are still proud of being Jewish. Furthermore, according to Pew data, for a majority of American Jews, culture and ancestry is an integral part of their Jewish identity. Young Jews are not only seeking out religious connections to Jewish community, they are also looking for spaces diverse enough to fit a wide range of Jewish practice and belief and self-understanding.

Organizations geared towards Jewish Millennials are addressing this increasing need for diversified Jewish experiences. One of the organizations doing it best is Moishe House. Founded in 2006, Moishe House subsidizes the rent of groups of three to six residents in exchange for a commitment for the house residents to organize events for other Jews in their 20s and 30s. The aim of Moishe House is to help this population foster relationships on their own turf, in their own

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language, and with their own ideals and values at heart.\textsuperscript{43} Moishe Houses come in many different shapes and sizes, and are located in over 17 different countries around the world. Some houses are more traditional and observant, and others are not. Programming runs the gamut from educational to religious to purely social. What is unique about the Moishe House model is that programming comes from the residents themselves, which means that instead of someone trying to figure out what 20-somethings want, actual 20-somethings are programming for their peers. This is part of what has made Moishe House such a success; programs are seen as genuine and authentic to the communities they serve, and thus more readily consumed by 20-somethings. Of the organizations that have emerged in the past two decades aiming to engage 20-somethings, Moishe House has arguably been one of (if not the) most successful.\textsuperscript{44}

As touched on above, Moishe House programming is incredibly diverse, dependent mostly on the interests of the house residents. However the Friday night Shabbat dinner is a core program to many Moishe House calendars. Communal Shabbat dinners are often the most successful programs in engaging new participants, as they are often perceived as the most welcoming, familiar, and comfortable experience for new participants.\textsuperscript{45} Because Friday night Shabbat dinner is communal in nature (eating family style or buffet style, group participation for prayers) participants enjoy the comfort of being invited into someone's home to break bread.

While Friday evening Shabbat programming may be a new engagement tool for some


\textsuperscript{44} Evaluation Report: Moishe House. TCC Group, 2011.

post-college age Jews, using Friday night Shabbat services and dinner as an engagement tool is not a new concept. The Friday night Shabbat dinner has been a central program for years for Jewish organizations working on college campuses. In fact, the most central program for Chabad on Campus is their Friday night Shabbat dinner, which usually takes place in the local Chabad House (which often doubles as the Chabad Rabbi's home.)

In a study done in 2006 on the Chabad Shabbat experience, authors Barry Chazan and David Bryfman offer numerous reasons as to why this program has been so successful in engaging young Jewish adults on college campuses. Participants shared that one of the reasons why they continued to come back, regardless of their own Jewish practice, is that Shabbat at Chabad felt personal. Students felt comfortable being in the Rabbi's house, enjoyed the fact that they were eating a home cooked meal, and looked forward to simply hanging out with their friends after dinner.46 Likewise at Hillel the Shabbat experience is paramount to the Hillel mission of challenging students to "explore, experience, and create vibrant Jewish lives."47 In both places, students enjoy the intentional break in their weekly schedules. This is also expressed in the Moishe House literature -- the Friday night dinner is a weekly ritual event that, for most participants, marks the space between the weekend and the rest of the week. This is evident in the use of Shabbat rituals as well as the shared communal meal.

Many organizations have tried to capitalize on the success of the Friday night Shabbat dinner. For Millennials, the largest one that comes to mind aside from Moishe House is the

Birthright NEXT Shabbat dinner. Birthright NEXT Shabbat offers Birthright alumni the chance to recreate, in their own home, the atmosphere of a Birthright Shabbat. Participants get a stipend per individual in attendance, and the only qualification for reimbursement is a photo taken of your Birthright NEXT Shabbat dinner guests. Individuals do not have to be Jewish to attend, nor does any sort of Shabbat ritual need to happen in order to be counted as a Birthright NEXT Shabbat. Like Moishe House, Birthright NEXT believes the best way to engage Millennials is to do it on their level; especially where one’s the level of "Jewishness" is not a barrier to entry.48

While there has been much criticism about the implementation of the Birthright NEXT Shabbat program, Michael Steinhardt, Chairman of The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life, believes the reason why Shabbat works as an engagement tool is its simple yet ingenious emphasis on the social: a community taking a break and celebrating life together.4950 Steinhardt, a key investor in Birthright Israel and Birthright NEXT, argues that the social connection, spiritual engagement and intellectual debate are part of what makes Shabbat dinner so special.51 As expressed throughout this paper, this sort of engagement works well with Millennials, who characteristically are inherently social and looking for connection and community.

According to The New Encyclopedia of Judaism, “the basic feature of the Sabbath is abstention from ‘work’ (melakahah), following the injunction in Exodus 20:10, ‘The seventh day

51 Ibid.
is a Sabbath of the Lord your God: you shall not do any work.”

Traditionally Shabbat “is to be a day of joy: relaxation, spiritual harmony, and a change of pace from the workdays. In the home, this is expressed by festive meals with choice dishes,” and a renewed devotion to studying, resting, and spending time with family. The Friday night Shabbat meal is a central focus of the Shabbat experience; traditionally women spend Friday morning and early afternoon preparing a family meal. In the traditional custom, just prior to the beginning of the meal, parents bless their children, and then gather around the dinner table to sing hymns to welcome Shabbat. The Friday evening Shabbat service and dinner are the events that traditionally mark the beginning of the Shabbat period for that week (Friday evening to Saturday evening.)

Interestingly enough, the concept of moving the dinner portion of the Friday night Shabbat evening out of the home and into a third-party space, like a synagogue or community center, is a relatively new phenomenon. All major streams of Judaism stress the “centrality” of Shabbat, however many have distanced themselves from its traditional observances and practices. According to Jonathan Sarna, many of these traditional observances (such as not driving a car, or not using electricity) became “incompatible” with a modern lifestyle as Jews became more acculturated into mainstream American society. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when synagogues and other organizations began to host Friday evening Shabbat dinners after

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53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

their services – however the current relevant information in the field points to it as a more modern endeavor. It very well may have started in the 1950s, when the traditional at-home Friday evening Shabbat dinner become less commonly practiced by non-Orthodox Jews in the United States. Many non-Orthodox individuals (Millennials included) who may attend a Friday evening Shabbat service and dinner do not practice or are even knowledgeable of the traditional Shabbat observances and practices, and yet still enjoy the demarcation that Shabbat provides between the work-week and the weekend.

In 2013 Dr. Ron Wolfson, a professor at American Jewish University, published Relational Judaism, a key book that gets at the heart of how organizations can successfully engage their constituents. In his introduction, Dr. Wolfson writes:

“Estimates suggest 80 percent of Jews affiliated with some institution – a synagogue, a Jewish Community Center, a Federation, a school, a youth groups – at some point in their lives. We get ‘em, but then, we lose ‘em, usually at key transition points. Why? Because we have failed to develop deep relationships with many of the individuals who come into our midst, and we are, frankly, terrible at transitioning our people from one organization to another, from one city to another, from one life stage to another.”

Wolfson’s main point is that while individual programs can be great, they are only half the battle. Programs get individuals in the door, but relational Judaism is most successful when these programs think about how “the experience will offer participants a deeper connection to each

56 Ibid.
other, with the community, and with Judaism itself.” As demonstrated throughout this chapter, the ideas that motivate relational Judaism lend itself well to Friday night Shabbat dinner programming. In the next chapter I will examine four specific initiatives in the Boston Jewish community that aim to engage Jewish Millennials through Friday night Shabbat programming.

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58 Ibid, pg 2.
Chapter Two: Methodology

In order to obtain a comprehensive picture of Millennial Shabbat engagement opportunities, it was my goal to observe different Friday evening Shabbat experiences offered to the Boston Jewish community. This included attending Shabbat programs that are apart of synagogue life, as well as experiences that occurred outside of denominational space. The only requirement for the program was that it needed to be organized specifically towards post-college young adults ages 20-34.

I feel privileged to have the opportunity to conduct the bulk of my research in Boston, as Boston is a community heavily focused on young adult programming, and rich with Jewish opportunity and innovation. It is a community heavily invested in Jewish continuity, and among the nation’s most relevant and exciting places to conduct this research. My research focused on four institutional organizations that are making the Millennial demographic a priority – Kavod on the Road (a program produced by Moishe Kavod House in Brookline;) the Chai Center of Brookline; and the Riverway Project, and Havurah on The Hill, both of which are located in downtown Boston. These organizations are among some of the most inventive, and provide unique and exciting Shabbat programming to Jewish young adults. It is my belief that the best way to gain a true understanding of these programs is actually to attend them. Therefore I made sure to attend at least one Friday night Shabbat experience from each of these programs.

In addition, I conducted interviews with program participants and program professionals. Program participants were either selected by me based on who I spoke with at an event, or were
referred to me by word-of-mouth. Participants I interviewed were both long-time attendees of these programs, and newcomers as well. This helped to provide in-depth insight into the organizations themselves, and the objectives behind each program. The next section will provide an overview of the four organizations I chose to analyze for this project

The Riverway Project at Temple Israel, Boston

Founded in 2001 by Rabbi Jeremy Morrison, the Riverway Project is an outgrowth of Temple Israel, one of Boston’s oldest and most well established Reform synagogues. The Riverway Project organization reaches a large number of Jewish young adults in their 20s and 30s and focuses heavily on the young professional, young families, and graduate student crowd. “Approximately 50% of participants are married or in ongoing relationships; about 25% of the participants are in interfaith relationships.” Additionally, “roughly 15% of participants describe their Jewish background as Conservative, Reconstructionist, Humanistic, or secular, and an estimated 2% of Riverway Project participants report they are from Orthodox homes. What unifies most Riverway Project participants is a low level of Jewish knowledge and a beginner’s experience of Jewish ritual. Few have studied Jewish texts before engaging with the Riverway Project; most have only a rudimentary or no understanding of Hebrew.” You do not need to be a member of Temple Israel to attend Riverway events, and it is not the intention of the program to obligate membership to anyone.

For many participants, Riverway Project is a first encounter with organized Jewish communal life; therefore Riverway is constantly looking for new ways to re-engage and re-invent itself. Currently, Riverway Project has four main areas of programming: Riverway Café (Torah Study in a local coffee shop); Soul Food Shabbats (large monthly Kabbalat Shabbat

60 Ibid.
services followed by catered dinner); Neighborhood Connection Shabbat (a smaller Shabbat program hosted in someone’s home or apartment); and volunteering opportunities with other Jewish organizations in Boston. In addition, Riverway also provides a “ticketless” open service at Temple Israel for Erev Rosh Hashanah and Kol Nidre. The “ticketless” service is in collaboration with Combined Jewish Philanthropies. Very little prior Jewish knowledge is required to attend any of the Riverway Project programs, and all programs are open to Jews and non-Jews alike who are interested in exploring Judaism.

The Riverway Project’s core Shabbat program is Soul Food Fridays. Soul Food Fridays is a monthly Kabbalat Shabbat service held at Temple Israel for 20s and 30s. There is no prior registration required to attend a Soul Food Shabbat. There is always a wine & cheese meet-and-greet just prior to services, as well as a catered dinner afterwards. Instead of being held in the main sanctuary, the service is held downstairs, includes live musicians and instruments, and the service itself is mostly musical. Rabbi Matt Soffer, who now oversees the Riverway Project program, leads services. An average Soul Food Friday Shabbat experience is usually between 150 – 200 people.

_Havurah on the Hill at Vilna Shul, Beacon Hill_

Founded in 2002 by a group of Jewish young adults, Havurah on the Hill (HOH) is a non-denominational Jewish organization in Boston. While HOH is based at the Vilna Shul, it is not officially part of the organization. The Vilna Shul is an historic (1919) synagogue located in one

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61 _Kabbalat Shabbat_ is a term often used to describe the hymns, Psalms, and blessings that collective make up the Friday ma’ariv service. Ma’ariv is the Jewish prayer service held in the evening or the night. It consists primarily of the evening Shema and Amidah. Different denominations of Judaism conduct their Kabbalat Shabbat services differently. For more information see: http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ritual/Shabbat_The_Sabbath/In_the_Community/Shabbat_Liturgy/Kabbalat_Shabbat.shtml

62 _Erev Rosh Hashanah_ refers to the evening before _Rosh Hashana_ day. It is generally considered a festive evening in anticipation of _Rosh Hashanah_, the Jewish New Year. _Kol Nidre_ is used as the name for the evening service of _Yom Kippur_. _Yom Kippur_, also known as the Day of Atonement is the holiest day of the year in the Jewish religion.
of Boston’s oldest neighborhoods, Beacon Hill. It is a cultural center, not an active religious congregation, and is one of the foremost locations in Boston for exploring Jewish culture and tradition. Havurah on the Hill does not share the same staff as the Vilna Shul; it is a completely volunteer-run and lay-led organization. Havurah on the Hill aims to engage young adults in their 20s and 30s in Jewish life regardless of their own personal affiliation within Judaism. Similar to Riverway Project, Havurah on the Hill attendees tend to be part of the young professional or graduate student communities. Currently the core programs of Havurah on the Hill are monthly Friday night Shabbat services, Jewish holiday events (Purim and Sukkot specifically), and High Holy Day services.

Monthly Shabbat services are volunteer-led by different members of the Havurah on the Hill steering committee. Wine, appetizers and schmoozing take place prior to the services, and afterwards a kosher buffet dinner is served. Individuals are encourage to register for the event prior to Shabbat, and while a $10.00 suggested donation is asked upon registering, it is not required. After wine and appetizers, services begin in the main sanctuary of the Vilna Shul; there is a Ma’ariv service as well as candle lighting and Kabbalat Shabbat, all led by different members of the Havurah on the Hill council.63 HOH council members each take turns leading different parts of the service, and while there is no official D’var Torah (a talk or essay based on the weekly Torah portion), HOH council members share their own anecdotes throughout the service. The Havurah on the Hill council considers their services to be “teaching” services, and therefore make an extra effort to explain prayers and tunes that may be unfamiliar to the community. Members pray out of the *Siddur on the Hill*, a siddur created specifically by HOH council for members of the community. Men and women sit together in the historic Vilna Shul,

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63 Ma’ariv is the Jewish prayer service held in the evening or the night. It consists primarily of the evening Shema and Amidah.
and while there are no official musicians or instruments, microphones are used. Members of the community who feel comfortable to lead prayers are asked to volunteer to do Kiddush and Hamotzi. As volunteers leading a volunteer-led organization, board members believe that it is important to incorporate members of the Havurah on the Hill community into the service portion of the evening.

Every month as part of Shabbat services, Havurah on the Hill invites a leader to address the Havurah on the Hill community. Speakers are generally local Boston Jewish culture-makers who are considered “interesting” by the Havurah on the Hill board. In the past speakers have included Idit Klein, CEO of Keshet; Isaac Akiba of the Boston Ballet, and Harvard Astrophysicist Roy Gould. Speakers are invited to address the community, and if time permits, the community is invited to ask question.

“Kavod on the Road” Moishe Kavod House at Havurat Shalom, Cambridge

Founded in 2004, Moishe Kavod House (MKH) is a “vibrant, home-based Jewish community for people in their 20s and 30s dedicated to Tikkun Olam, the repair of the world.” Moishe Kavod House is part of the international Moishe House network, and a leader in the Moishe House community. There are three parts that make up the structure of the Moishe Kavod House: the resident organizers, the Moishe Kavod House Board, and community volunteers. Resident organizers are housemates who live at Moishe Kavod House, and in exchange for subsidized rent, are responsible for much of the day-to-day operations of the Kavod House. The Moishe Kavod House Board, which is made up of five elected members as well as the four Kavod housemates, oversees all of the organizational operations of the Kavod House

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64 Kiddush is the blessing over the wine, and Hamotzi is the blessing over the bread. It is usually said in the synagogue on behalf of all the attendees before the meal begins.
organization. The board is responsible for membership, communications, as well as leadership
development and the overall vision of Moishe Kavod House. Finally, community members are
encouraged to take leadership roles in everything that Moishe Kavod House does, including
running programs or helping to volunteer within the organization. The addition of a full board
along with a membership structure sets Moishe Kavod House apart from other houses in the
Moishe House network.

Moishe Kavod House runs many programs aside from its Friday evening Shabbat
services. The programs offered by Moishe Kavod House are influenced by the values of the
house and its residents, and are mainly social justice oriented. Moishe Kavod House also has
Jewish learning programs as well as community organizing retreats. It hosts two Shabbat dinners
a month, one at the Moishe Kavod House in Brookline Massachusetts, and a second at Havurat
Shalom in Cambridge. Shabbat services in Cambridge are held in cooperation with Havurat
Shalom, one of the first egalitarian independent minyanim of its kind. This Shabbat takes place
on the third Friday of every month, and includes a vegetarian potluck dinner afterwards. Many of
the participants who come to Moishe Kavod House at Havurat Shalom live in the
Cambridge/Somerville area, and enjoy attending MKH services, but do not feel inclined to drive
to Brookline on Friday evenings.

Kavod on the Road services take place in the style customary to Havurat Shalom.
Participants are invited into the Havurat Shalom house, and are encouraged to take off their coats
and shoes in the foyer. Havurat Shalom is a Shabbat observant community, so participants are
asked to silence their phones, and if they must use them throughout the evening, to either do so
upstairs or outside on the porch. Those who bring food for the pot lucks are given a piece of
paper to indicate if their dishes are gluten-free, or include wheat, soy, dairy, nuts, or other
allergens. However since Havurat Shalom is Shabbat observant, participants are given stickers to indicate what allergens may exist in their dish, so they do not have to write if they themselves are also Shabbat observant. Most participants arrive in groups, schmoozing takes place, and the house soon fills up with familiar laughter as friends greet one another. Moishe Kavod House members and board members do not wear any sort of nametags to indicate who they are, but seem to be pretty observant about who may or may not be new to Kavod on the Road.

Services are split between Kavod House and Havurat Shalom, and both leaders take turns reading from the combined siddur. Havurat Shalom uses a community created egalitarian siddur, and Kavod House uses a more traditional formal siddur. A few years ago members of the community took it upon themselves to create a joint siddur, so worshipers could have the freedom to choose whatever prayer version is most comfortable them. Both Moishe Kavod House and Havurat Shalom are lay-led communities, and thus services are lay led. A D’var Torah is usually shared from a member of the Moishe House community, and the evening is closed out by Moishe Kavod House and Havurat Shalom announcements.

After Hamotzi and Kiddush, participants are invited to help themselves to the vegetarian buffet. Participants convene in the main rooms of the Havurat Shalom house, and there is a good amount of schmoozing and mingling. New people are invited to sit and join in on conversations, and given the size of the rooms (pretty small) large groups of new and veteran participants end up sitting together.

*The Chabad Chai Center, Brookline*

Located just across the Charles River, the Chai Center of Brookline is the local Chabad chapter serving the Brookline community. The Chabad Chai Center offers “spiritual guidance, Jewish Holiday events, Shabbat dinners, Passover Seders, traditions and culture for families in
Like Chabad centers around the world, the Chai Center promotes itself as a “home away from home” for everyone who walks through its doors, regardless of Jewish affiliation or level of observance. The Chai Center website offers insight into the myriad of programs offered by the organization. The Chai Center acts as a community center for the Brookline area, and hosts programs for kids, teens, as well as holiday events. In addition, the Chai Center has a full Hebrew School of the Arts, Mommy & Me classes, a Rosh Chodesh society, and a full Saturday Shabbat schedule with a Kiddush buffet after services. The Chai Center is run by Rabbi Mayshe Schwartz and Mrs. Shifra Schwartz.

The Chai Center Young Jewish Professional organization serves young Jewish adults in the Greater Boston and Brookline area. According to the Chai Center website (www.getchai.com) “in just over 5 years The Chai Center has become the most popular and sought-after organization for the 52,000 young Jewish adults in the Greater Boston and Brookline area. [We] offer religious as well as social activities that act to connect and enrich members of the Jewish young adult community of Boston and Brookline and acts as a gateway into the broader Jewish community.” The Chai Center estimates that there are around 52,000 young Jewish adults living in the greater Boston and Brookline area, but I have no information to corroborate that number.

Interestingly enough, the Young Jewish Professional website of the Chai Center has its own unique URL, indicating that it is viewed as part of The Chai Center, but also distinctly its own function. The Chai Center YJP offers holiday parties thrown at interesting venues around Boston (for instance Lights & Strikes Chanukah Party at Lucky Strike bowling lanes), as well as more formal Shabbat events. YJP also offers participants the ability to join professional

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67 Ibid.
networking hubs, including the Chai Real Estate network, Chai Finance, Chai Med Division, and Chai Legal Society. These networking groups often host events throughout the year that include panels by professionals in the community, meet-and-greets, and cocktail events. Each networking hub has its own committee of young professional leadership located throughout the Boston community.

*Ethnographic Observation*

In order to obtain the most robust analysis for my project, I set out to attend at least one Shabbat experience from each of the four organizations listed above, and in many cases, I ended up attending the organizations more than once. After attending each event I went home and wrote copious notes based on my own personal experience. As someone who does not regularly attend Friday night Shabbat services, I found myself entering each experience with completely new eyes, akin to many other newcomers. Please see the Appendix for the guidelines for my program observations; this guideline helped me focus my experiences and provided a grounding framework for my observations.  

*Interviews*

I spoke with five senior leadership individuals, representing the four organizations I chose to study. Two of the four organizations reviewed (Havurah on the Hill and Moishe Kavod House) rely on lay-leadership and volunteers, which is why I do not classify them as program professionals. The other two organizations examined, the Chai Center in Brookline and the Riverway Project, have dedicated, full-time professional staff. All of these conversations took place by phone, and were around 45 minutes to an hour in length. The first 15 to 20 minutes

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68 The guidelines for observations have been adapted from Chazan, Barry., Joseph Reimer, and David Bryfman. *Home Away From Home -- A Research Study of the Shabbos Experience on Five University Campuses: An Informal Educational Model for Working with Young Jewish Adults*. Chabad on Campus International Foundation, 2006.
were a general introduction and covered the professional background of the participant, followed by a thorough examination of the organization and its programming. The interview concluded with a word association of the word “Shabbat.” The formal interview questions can be found in the appendix.

Additionally, I spoke with 7 program participants about their experiences attending Shabbat programming in Boston. The majority of these participants have experience attending numerous Shabbat programs, including the Riverway Project, the Chai Center, Havurah on the Hill, and Moishe Kavod House. Because of this, my questions varied between being specific about the individual program in question, and general questions about Shabbat programming. The majority of these interviews took place by phone (on account of not wanting to write down answers during Shabbat), with one being conducted by e-mail and one interview being conducted in person. These interviews were generally between 25 and 30 minutes each. The first 10 to 15 minutes were spent getting to know the participant, followed by a reflection of their experience. All interviews concluded with the same word association. The informal interview questions can also be found in the Appendix. I spoke with people on the condition of anonymity, especially pertinent to sensitive programmatic information, and the content of the next chapter is based off my interviews as well as own experiences attending each program.
Chapter Three: Findings

Introduction

My interviews, observations, and research yielded both expected and unexpected results. I have divided the findings chapter into sections and subsections based on common themes found from collating my interviews. These sections include the physical and logistical aspects of Shabbat programming, as well as the different types of engagement models that each organization employs. Other sections include specific characteristics of each organization, intended outcomes of Shabbat programming, and what young adults are looking for when they come to a Shabbat event.

Space & Accessibility

“I think that [accessibility] is a big plus for our generation, and I think that’s a huge piece that most people don’t think about. When it’s nice out I can walk.”

“I live in Jamaica Plain and Temple Israel is very close to me. Location is really important.”

Many of the people whom I interviewed during this process, be they programming professionals or Shabbat participants, commented on the importance of the actual place and space for Shabbat experiences. Many Jewish organizations that do Shabbat programming on campus, like Chabad and Hillel, usually do so within the physical space of their organization, and as a consequence, this space ends up feeling like a Jewish home base for students on campus. Chabad on Campus specifically is an incredibly rich example of how a Jewish space is

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transformed into feeling like “home away from home” for many Jewish students while at college. As Friday night Shabbat programming has become more popular with synagogues and other organizations, how to create an intimate experience has become a popular topic of conversation. Of the four organizations I visited, two -- Moishe Kavod House and the Chai Center Chabad of Brookline -- have dedicated home spaces to host Friday evening Shabbat experiences. For many Moishe House’s around the world, the Friday evening communal Shabbat dinner has become a fundamental part of the Moishe House experience. In fact it is the communal Shabbat dinner experience that inspired David Cygielman to found Moishe House in 2006.

In all four organizations I visited, the Friday night Shabbat experience is one of, if not the biggest program they run, and because of this, program space is incredibly important. The Riverway Project is currently on the verge of outgrowing its space in the downstairs chapel at Temple Israel in Boston. One of the big questions organizers of the program have had to ask themselves is whether or not to move the popular Friday Night Soul Food Shabbat upstairs to the main synagogue space, which is much larger. While it would be more accommodating logistically to move into a larger room, there would inevitably be a loss of intimacy that has come to characterize the Soul Food Shabbat experience.

“We have come close to maximum fire code this year and we are pushing the boundaries of our current space and we may have to move space within the temple. We are always downstairs and if we have to move upstairs, how might that affect people? If we outgrow the space we outgrow the space, but it will be interesting to see how that affects the feel of the Riverway Project.”

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In addition to Soul Food Friday, Riverway Project offers a monthly Neighborhood Connection Shabbat. It is typically a much smaller and more intimate Shabbat experience as it takes place in someone’s apartment or home. Riverway leadership helps organize the logistics of the event but the content is solely up to the person hosting (for example the host can choose to have Riverway Rabbi Matthew Soffer lead a Kabbalat Shabbat service but it is not required.) The juxtaposition of offering both large and small Shabbat experiences is completely intentional, and both programs have different intended outcomes. Riverway recognizes that traditionally Shabbat has been a home experience, and that there is an inherent intimacy that comes from being in someone’s living room that is simply unachievable in a synagogue. Additionally, by giving participants the freedom to choose the makeup of their evening, Riverway is helping “people become owners of their own Jewish identities.” This is significant, as it explains that full ownership of the Shabbat experience is not solely the responsibility of a third party organizer (in this case, Riverway Project) but should also come from the participants themselves. In this program, Riverway works in partnership with whoever is hosting the Neighborhood Connection Shabbat, which means that participants have as much ownership over the Shabbat experience as the organization itself. Though Riverway Project mainly does outreach into the Boston Jewish community, Riverway programs are open to individuals of all faiths and interests. In the case of the Neighborhood Connection Shabbat, the host does the inviting, and invitees can be Jewish or not Jewish.

Similarly, the largest program run by Moishe Kavod House is their monthly Shabbat dinner. In the past Kavod has hosted two Shabbat dinners at their home in Brookline, Massachusetts. These Shabbat dinners are communal potluck vegetarian dinners, with Hechshered food available upon request. Brookline is a centrally located neighborhood close to

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downtown Boston, easily accessible by public transportation, and known colloquially as a hub for Jewish life in Boston. Its central location makes Moishe Kavod House a popular destination for young adults on Friday evenings. Because of its popularity, Moishe Kavod House has recently had challenges accommodating the number of people attending Shabbat dinner. After receiving several noise complaints from neighbors, Moishe Kavod House was forced to change their twice-monthly Shabbat dinners to once a month, and also re-evaluate the importance of space and accessibility for their Friday night Shabbat dinners.

“We can’t use the downstairs very fully because it is right over the downstairs neighbors fully, so there used to be a ton of people hanging out downstairs before dinner, but because we are not supposed to do that anymore – people are not quite as welcome to just hang out.”

Because the community was still committed to having twice-monthly Shabbat dinners, this meant that Kavod would have to find a second home, once a month, to host them. This led to “Kavod on the Road” – a monthly Shabbat dinner partnership with a different cooperative living houses in the Boston, but this soon became too logistically time consuming. Eventually Moishe Kavod House partnered with Havurat Shalom in Cambridge, and now the two organizations together host “Kavod at the Hav” once a month. The two communities share the prayer experience and have developed a joint Kavod/Hav Shabbat siddur; and everyone is invited to bring a vegetarian dish for a potluck dinner.

For the Moishe Kavod House community, the move across the river (even for just one Friday a month) has brought unintended consequences. Many members of the Kavod leadership that I spoke with expressed dissatisfaction with the experience, sharing that it doesn’t feel quite feel like the Moishe Kavod House Shabbat experience. This is significant because it explains that for many, the physical structure of the house is an integral part of the Kavod House Shabbat

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experience. While some feel dissatisfied with the move across the river, many people also expressed positive aspects – for example Havurat Shalom is physically more accessible than the Kavod House in Brookline (which has many stairs). Kavod at the Hav also gives Kavod House a chance to engage the Cambridge/Somerville population, which otherwise many not happen at their monthly Shabbat dinners in Brookline.

In Desperate Need of Relational Leadership

“You need to have at least one or two people that are driving the ship and we don’t need to be rabbis but need to be trained enough and inspired enough to bring that experience out. Need to have a skillset to have the table sing together and dance.”76

In the 2006 Chabad on Campus study Home Away From Home, authors Barry Chazan and David Bryfman found that many students, who attend Chabad regardless of their own religious identity, feel a personal connection to the Chabad on Campus Rabbi. Indeed, one of the ultimate successes of a Chabad Shaliach is his or her ability to connect with any Jew who walks through the Chabad doors.77 The husband and wife team see themselves as emissaries of the Rebbe, and as spiritual leaders or guides in whatever community in which they take root. On college campuses around the country, shluchim may also see themselves as Jewish surrogate parents, who offer not just a home cooked meal and a place for Jews to meet, but oftentimes-Jewish learning as well.78 This model is appealing to so many because it is not just about the learning; it is more importantly about the people.

77 According to the Chabad website, a Shaliach is an emissary of the Rebbe, who is dispatched throughout the world to do commandments. They are oftentimes a husband and wife team who are responsible for bringing Chabad and the Hasidic movement throughout the world.
78 Plural of shaliach. Often used to refer to the husband and wife team.
What organizations can learn from the Chabad on Campus experience is that relational leadership is an integral part of the overall success of an evening. When students walk through a Chabad door they are automatically greeted by someone, generally either the Chabad Rabbi or Rebbetzin, or possibly some other student leader. Not only are the Rabbi and Rebbetzin easily identifiable (oftentimes by their dress) but they, or some other student leader, avidly seek out newcomers to welcome into the Chabad community.

Over the past six months, as I attended Friday evening Shabbat services at these four different organizations, I was struck by how different my experience was even during the first 20 minutes. Some organizations were incredibly good at acknowledging that I was new, and introduced me to other newcomers, especially if I arrived on my own. Other organizations said hello and thanked me for coming, but did nothing to integrate me into the experience. While it is always difficult to find the balance between being welcoming and overbearing, my most successful experiences occurred when I felt that someone was personally invested in whether or not I was having a good time.

Many individuals with whom I spoke with cited the importance of having leadership to help guide the Shabbat experience. The leader does not need necessarily to be the de-facto spiritual leader of the community, but it does need to be a person (or team of people) outgoing enough to reach out to newcomers and help facilitate connections. Ron Wolfson, author of Relational Judaism, writes that good relational leaders are able to build both personal and community relationships. When a Friday evening Shabbat dinner is taken out of the home and transported to a larger often more formal space, it loses a sense of intimacy. One individual who
I spoke with shared that she prefers the “home based Friday night service and potluck dinner” because of the intimacy that occurs when you share a meal in someone’s home. 79

Many individuals with whom I spoke while attending Shabbat events spoke about the importance of relational leadership. In fact some of the best events that I attended were excellent because of the peer-to-peer interactions I experienced. Because there was a culture of relational leadership, regular attendees could spot newcomers (like myself) and actively engage me in a full on conversation or a simple “hello.” This is not something that is simply cultivated overnight, and certainly not something that happens by accident. Many program professionals that I spoke with shared how they actively work to engage a core group of leaders who then turn around and engage in these vital peer-to-peer networks. As Wolfson writes “the task for the communal professionals is twofold: build personal relationships vertically – between staff and many, many individuals – and build relational microcommunities and individuals horizontally.” 80

Relational Leadership extends far beyond needing someone to guide the Shabbat experience. Moishe Kavod House, Havurah on the Hill, the Riverway Project, and the Chai Center all depend on word-of-mouth outreach to engage young adults. All four organizations employ minimal advertising to get their word out (a posting on JewishBoston.com and some Facebook activity.) The Chai Center, the Riverway Project, and Moishe Kavod House have an advantage of being associated with a larger and more established organization (Chabad, Temple Israel, and Moishe House International, respectively) and the Chai Center and Riverway Project both have full time paid-time staff. Still, all four organizations rely on word-of-mouth to get their name out to their intended populations. In my conversations with all four organizations, the

79 “Shabbat Program Participant.” E-mail interview with the author. November 17, 2014.
Riverway Project and Moishe Kavod House specifically spoke about community organizing when I asked about their approach to outreach. Program professionals at these two organizations specifically mentioned using community-organizing principles to help facilitating relationship building and reaching out to the population, or as Ron Wolfson calls it a model of “Congregation-Based Community Organizing.” 81 In the case of Riverway and Moishe Kavod House, both spoke to me about how community organizing is not just about organizing around a specific social justice issue; it is also about empowering individuals to become leaders themselves.

Arguably, this approach is working. One program participant shared with me that she was initially attracted to the Riverway Project and Temple Israel because of her childhood background growing up in a large Reform synagogue. She also acknowledged however, that as much as she liked the fact that Riverway is so big, she was also apprehensive about getting involved on account of not knowing anyone and being new to Boston. For this particular individual, the size and strength of Temple Israel and the Riverway Project was both a blessing and a curse. She enjoyed the energy that came from a service of 100 or 150 people, but realized she would go, not talk to people, and then leave. She reached out to the Riverway organizer who followed up with numerous coffee dates and one-on-one meetings. In many cases organizers also make sure to reach out to newcomers after the event takes place. Making the connection with the staff member was the key to her feeling comfortable and familiar with the Riverway Project. Soon enough the coordinator began to involve her in the once-a-month community service events Riverway hosts. Her involvement in the organization has since grown, from being

involved in the Neighborhood Shabbat program, to helping shape Soul Food Friday. She credits her entrance to the Riverway community and her continued involvement in the organization almost entirely to the relationship she first built with the Riverway Project coordinator.

Likewise, community organizing and empowerment is also what makes Moishe Kavod House a successful model serving young Jewish adults in Boston. Leadership development is part of the core mission of Kavod House and the organization is serious about its communal model of leadership development. As discussed earlier, the Moishe House model relies on house residents to create Jewish programming for 20s and 30s in their neighborhood. Most leadership done in Moishe House is from the house residents, and Moishe House typically looks for young adults who have good relation skills. Kavod House expands on the Moishe House model of peer-to-peer engagement and takes it one step further to peer-to-peer empowerment. Moishe Kavod House has numerous committees that are responsible for different facets of the Kavod community, from membership to development to spirituality and kindness. According to one leader in the community, Kavod House uses the community organizing model “that recognizes where the energy is and where to be led by that energy. Meaning if an initiative comes and goes that’s okay because it is where our leaders are excited.”

Furthermore, Kavod also uses the community-organizing model to empower individuals to take “serious authentic ownership” over Kavod programs. Leaders are given opportunities to learn about relational leadership and community organizing, and then employ these tactics to engage and empower other members (both new and old) in their community. According to one leader, this is how the most successful engagement and recruitment happen at Kavod House.

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84 “Moishe Kavod House Committee Chair.” Telephone interview with the author. November 13, 2014.
85 Ibid.
“[We] are very intentional about how people meet new people. [We] are always thinking about who should this person know, and who is a leader, and who is a teacher.” In addition, community members are often assigned roles during the pre-schmoozing time before the Friday evening service. As was shared to me, “there are new people who either come together or come by themselves almost every week. When people come and they are new the first thing we have set up is a volunteer role for Shabbat greeters who are at the front who welcome you and usually these are people who know other regulars and know if people are new.” Leaders are intentionally chosen to be Shabbat greeters based on their own comfort level with facilitating connections. According to Rabbi Jonah Pesner, Senior Vice President at the Union for Reform Judaism, one of the goals of Congregation Based Community Organizing is to “help transform the synagogue into a congregation in which members are more deeply connected to one another.” Kavod House employs this sort of relationship building and community organizing, and in the end has been successful. As shared with me by one program participant, her favorite thing about Shabbat at Kavod is “the focus on communal ownership and leadership. There is a sense of being sincere and building [Kavod] together and doing it together.”

**Intended Outcomes**

“[Our] Goal is to find a way to connect to your Judaism in whatever way is authentic to you and other people in their 20s and 30s who are in the same boat as you. Find some meaning in it and connect to Shabbat experience and give people who might not otherwise be connected a Shabbat experience in whatever they mean to you and find a community. Judaism is not something you do alone in your apartment.”

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86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
89 “Moishe Kavod House Program Participant.” Telephone interview with the author. February 1, 2015.
“[Our outcomes are] multi faceted. At the core we want people to leave feeling like they felt at home and belonged, [and] that they were able to connect with other people [and] find commonalities that were spiritually connecting ... and that they were turned on to something, [and] that they would come back ... or if they get followed up with that they would respond. [Our] real main kicker is people should feel at home when they are in the right place, and however Jewish they are they are Jewish enough.”

“[We want to] make people think and feel ... when they walk home you cant help but think and reminisce and say ‘I connect to that and that is what I want in my life’”

“Good question, not sure that it is framed that way. A lot of our ways [are] inherited, and it is a “lets just do it like the last time.”

It is vital that organizations have clearly defined intended outcomes for all programs they produce, not just Shabbat experiences. It is imperative that organizations develop a mission statement for their program. Once an organization has established its programmatic mission, then it can determine how best to go about achieving those goals.

A great example of this is can be seen in the different goals of Soul Food Friday and Neighborhood Connection Shabbat. As described earlier, Neighborhood Connection Shabbat is a more selectively intimate experience offered by the Riverway Project. Why offer a second, more intimate type of Shabbat experience when Soul Food Friday, which reaches on average 150-200 participants monthly, continues to grow in size and notoriety? The answer goes back to the intended outcomes of the Riverway experience, and the outcomes for Soul Food Friday and Neighborhood Connection Shabbat are not necessarily the same. While all Riverway programs have an underlying goal of empowerment and ownership, Neighborhood Connection Shabbat is

91 “Moishe Kavod House Committee Member.” Telephone interview with the author. November 13, 2014.
93 In response to the question: “What are your intended outcomes for your Young Adult Shabbat programming?” “Havurah on the Hill Lay Leader.” Telephone interview with the author. November 4, 2015.
meant to “help people become owners of their own Jewish identity with the recognition that Shabbat is a home thing.”

Additionally, Riverway offers a great example for other programs of how intended outcomes and goals do not just influence one specific program, but how programs can work alongside each other. Of the four core programs offered by the Riverway Project, three programs can be viewed as co-centric circles. Neighborhood Shabbat and Riverway Café (a Torah study program that draws a smaller audience and typically takes place in young-adult heavy population areas) are both smaller programs designed for more intimate experiences. Both Riverway Café and Neighborhood Shabbat serve to create micro-communities that eventually all come together once a month for Soul Food Friday. One of the intentions of this approach is to keep people consistently engaged with Riverway programming, and always meeting new people while expanding participant’s social circles.

But Why?

In the aftermath of the Pew Study it seemed like everyone had his or her own opinion about young adult engagement. Anxiety over young adult engagement is not new to the Jewish institutional world. In fact “a significant portion of the 2007 United Jewish Community’s General Assembly was dedicated ‘next generation’ leaders, issues, and concerns.” For the past 40 years, young adult engagement has been on the minds of Jewish communal institutions big and small, and the release of the Pew Study has only seemed to reinvigorate this important conversation.

A quick search for “young adult engagement” on the Berman Jewish Policy Archive yields around 3000 results, with the bulk of publications being from 2000 onward. Organizations  

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are interested in answering *what* are the characteristics that lead young adults to feel engaged (or not engaged), *what* programs are producing the best results, *why* certain experiences yield a stronger feeling of connectedness than others, and *how* organizations can best harness this information to create effective programs. An impressive number of community federations, foundations, campus organizations, and other non-profits have all commissioned studies on this particular demographic. Currently the most comprehensive work is being done by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, located at Brandeis University. Over the past 15 years, Leonard Saxe and his team at the Cohen Center have been studying the effects of the Birthright experience on the formation of young adult Jewish identity. The Cohen Center is not just researching the immediate effects of Taglit, but whether or not it continues to effect trip participants as they grow into adulthood. *Why* is the Birthright experience so transformative? This is only part of the question that the researchers at the Cohen Center are trying to answer.

Likewise, my research tried to answer a similar question – *why* do young adults show up to Shabbat events, and *why* do they continue to come back time and time again? On a personal level, this is the question that I find most interesting. Young adults live in a world where it seems like *everything* is competing for their time. “Today’s young Jews have multiple identities shaped by many factors, including intermarriage in their families, diverse social networks, and dynamic boundaries around geography and other identity characteristics such as gender and sexual

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96 The Rose Community Foundation’s impressive study on NextGen Jews in the Boulder/Denver area attempted surveyed over 200 young adults in an attempt to answer what are the characteristics that lead young adults to feel engaged or not engaged with the Jewish community. Additionally, the research done by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University is a good example of comprehensive work on a specific program focused on YA engagement. Furthermore, studies have been conducted on the impact of Jewish identity on involvement in Hillel on Campus.

97 UJA-Federation of New York commissioned a community study in 2011 that in part focused on Jewish engagement and connections. Furthermore, the Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life has produced a large amount of studies on this particular demographic, as has the Andrea & Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, Reboot and the Avi Chai Foundation.
orientation. Being Jewish is part of a larger identity mosaic for today’s Jews.”98 These trends affect how young adults engage with Jewish activities; and they increasingly are choosing a “patchwork of diverse Jewish opportunities” that reflect their specific interests.99 These may include a wide variety of cultural, social, intellectual, and religious activities.

In the case of Shabbat, something that is explicitly religious in nature, what makes young adults take time at the end of a long work (or school) week, to attend? Interestingly enough, many participants I spoke to attend Shabbat programs because it is a way for them to mark the end of their workweek and beginning of their weekend.100 These participants may not keep traditional Shabbat customs, but still seek out the Friday evening Shabbat experience as an intentional marker for the end of their week. According to one Riverway Project program professional:

“[People come for the] music and the spiritual escape from the week. – More and more people are coming for that and the needed to breathe…. [They are coming for] the message and the experience. The gathering and the food.”101

What organizations can do is try to take advantage of what makes the Friday night Shabbat experience a welcome respite from the rest of the week. For example, Moishe Kavod House, Havurah on the Hill and the Riverway Project all have a dedicated “schmoozing” time prior to their Shabbat service. People come in, take off their coats, catch up with friends, and it sets the tone for the service and helps to mark Shabbat as a departure from the rest of the week. Havurah on the Hill and the Riverway Project take it one step further and provide light refreshments and wine in a dedicated half hour time slot prior to their service starting. According

100 “Riverway Project Participant.” Telephone interview with author. March 5, 2015.
to one program leader at Havurah on the Hill, one reason for the wine and cheese schmoozing time beforehand is because they found that people did not want to be ushered too quickly into services. 102 The half hour period gives participants time to settle in and accommodates participants’ desire for a social catch up with friends before the service begins. However, the responsibility of maintaining the flow of the event (and getting everybody to take their seats) then falls on the leadership, who may also wish to enjoy the social schmooze half-hour. This is something that Havurah on the Hill has struggled with – being respectful of the wine and cheese schmoozing that occurs while also being conscious of the timing of the service.

In addition, Boston is an interesting community because of its transitory nature. Given the fact that a large number of students living in Boston do so for a pre-determined number of years (say the length of a college or graduate school experience), this influences how participants may approach and interact with Jewish young adult events. Several program professionals I spoke with all mentioned the transitory nature of this age group, and how people often come to young adult Jewish events because they may be looking for connection and community after moving away from home. As one program professional shared: “People come here to have a community, whether it’s Shabbat or whether it’s Kol Nidre or Erev Rosh Hashana. Nobody wants to be alone on holidays or Shabbat.” 103

A few program participants mentioned to me utilizing JewishBoston.com to search for young adult events in the community. JewishBoston acts as a clearinghouse for Jewish events in the Boston community, a sort of “one stop shop” resource that gives users the power to search for Jewish events that may be of interest to specific demographics, such as 20s & 30s, interfaith couples & families, families with young children, etc. Professionals shared that while the most

effective method of advertisement is still word-of-mouth, having this resource is a nice advantage as well. Similar to social media, professionals and lay-leaders recognize the importance of having the tool, but do not rely on it to be their most effective advertising tool. While not all communities may have such a space to advertise, it is important to recognize the role that social networking and the Internet play in outreach and marketing. Those participants that did not use the Internet to find their respective event generally came by word-of-mouth or as part of a group of friends.

And Why Not?

It is not enough to simply get people through the door; once they are there, how do programs make sure that participants feel comfortable enough to want to come back? In all of my conversations, I asked people to share with me either what makes them personally feel uncomfortable about Friday night Shabbat services, or what they believe makes other people feel uncomfortable about attending Friday night Shabbat services.

One constant theme that kept coming up in many of the different conversations I had (both formally and informally) was that of self-confidence and self-consciousness. Many people I spoke with felt that a big reason why young adults do not attend Shabbat services is due to a lack of confidence when it comes to understanding and practicing Jewish ritual, liturgy, and text. This is not surprising to anyone familiar with Jewish communal life. A recent study done by the Cohen Center on post-Birthright young adult engagement found that “with limited knowledge of the rituals and choreography of Jewish observance, most Taglit alumni anticipate feeling like outsiders, uncomfortable and incompetent, in Jewish religious settings.”\(^{104}\) Combine this lack of

understanding with a healthy dose of skepticism about formal religious institutions, and you have a combination that can make young adults feel alienated from religious observance.

It is important for an organization to be upfront about its mission and what sort of experience it hopes to provide. An interesting insight came from my interview at the Chai Center of Brookline, when I asked what might keep people from a Chai Center experience. As I learned in my interview, there is skepticism about Chabad and its version of Orthodox Judaism. I learned, “at the end of the day we are Chabad [and] someone may have a chip on their shoulder with regards to Orthodox Judaism. We don’t claim to be all things for all people all the time.” This comment however, made me appreciate that Chabad is upfront about not being something for everyone all the time.

Additionally one program participant shared that “hidden motives” would be what keeps him from returning to a Shabbat experience. He shared that he recently attended a program that did not seem welcoming (despite claiming to be) to a non-Jewish friend he brought along. Another participant shared that he would be less likely to attend a young adult Shabbat event if he felt like he was being pushed towards membership of a certain synagogue or organization. According to him, there is a sense of “openness” and “casualness” that participants have come to cherish at open Shabbat dinners, and that feeling would change if organization started to push participants towards membership.

For solo newcomers, one participant mentioned to me that she feels turned off when organizers at programs say, “bring your friends!” For many people this may not be a problem, but for some it can be discouraging if they do not feel like they have friends to bring. As she

107 Ibid.
said, “as a solo newcomer, I don’t have friends to bring; I am here because I want to make friends.”¹⁰⁹ This particular participant recognized that organizers want to try and reach as many people as possible, and that one of the best ways to do so is by peer-to-peer engagement. However by asking people to bring friends, this particular participant feared this would lead to people only socializing with their friends, and not necessarily with other people at the event. She also feared it would lead to a cliquishness at programs, with veterans only socializing with veterans, and newcomers left feeling unwelcomed.

Young adult Shabbat programming in Boston are well-attended events, with each organization indicating to me that they regularly have upwards of 100 – 150 young adults attending Shabbat dinners. There is obviously a market for this sort of programming, and as I learned throughout my conversations, an energy as well. Participants, lay-leaders, and paid professionals are all excited to be doing this work. My findings are the main themes that continued to reappear throughout my interviews: the important of physical and actual space; the need for relational leadership; the need for clearly defined outcomes and impact measurement; the benefits of having a community-based organizing model; and the reasons why people would be feel comfortable or uncomfortable interacting with a religious experience. These are important themes that organizations should be aware of if they have young adult programming. While these findings came out of conversations I had about Shabbat programming, in reality, attention to many of these themes can inform any sort of young adult programming. The most vital thing I learned while conducting these interviews is the importance of listening and asking open and thoughtful questions. Only by listening to its participants organizers can truly know if a program is addressing the concerns and goals of its intended participants and if it is being successful and meeting its goals.

¹⁰⁹ “Shabbat Program Participant.” E-mail interview with the author. November 17, 2015.
Chapter Four: Recommendations

My main objective for this section is to provide recommendations based on my findings; recommendations to organizations that wish either to establish a young adult Shabbat engagement experience, or strengthen an already existing program. Over the past eight months I have attended over a half dozen Friday night Shabbat dinners in order to experience firsthand the offerings available to Jewish young adults in the Boston community. I have spoken with a variety of individuals, from professional staff to the barely engaged, all in an attempt to understand what makes programs attractive to Jewish young adults. It is my ultimate hope that the lessons I have learned will prove to be valuable, not just to the organizations I visited, but to Jewish organizations across the country. I believe that as a Jewish community we have a responsibility to engage the next generation of Jews, and to do so in a way that is respectful to this generations wants and needs.

To begin, no successful organization can exist without a mission statement, and neither can a successful program. A good program mission statement should be thoughtful and intentional, and for a Friday night Shabbat experience I urge professionals to think outside the box. Yes, we all want our program participants to get a warm and fuzzy feeling during Friday evening Shabbat services. We also want our participants to feel a connection to their local community, and possibly even to Jewish Peoplehood. While this is important, it is no longer enough. The Pew study showed us the hard truth; young adults are increasingly turning away from religious institutions and traditional Jewish outlets. And many do so because they feel ignorant of Jewish liturgy, text, and expression. However, Jewish young adults “have a strong
and positive sense of group identity” and see their Jewish identity, as a “fundamental” part of their character. As exemplified by the data in the field, there are definite barriers that many young adults feel impede them from fully engaging with a religious service, but that does not mean they are afraid to try. Programs often work hard to find ways to lower the threshold for entry (a good thing) but in doing so sacrifice meaningful content (a not-so-good thing.)

The goal of these programs should be *engagement* but also *empowerment*, and I strongly urge program organizers to start thinking in this framework. In what ways can a Friday night Shabbat program help young adults feel authentic ownership over their religion, tradition, and rituals? How do we do this without young adults feeling like they are being patronized or ignorant or incompetent? How do we provide a space where participants are excited to learn and incorporate aspects of Shabbat activity more regularly into their lives? One organization in Boston is exploring the idea of adding to their welcome table a simple typed sheet of paper with explanations of the different prayers typically used during their Friday evening Kabbalat Shabbat. Participants will be able to reference this cheat sheet throughout the service if they are confused about the rituals and traditions. At another program I attended, the service leader explained each prayer in one sentence or less before recitation. For unengaged Jewish young adults I think it is incredibly important to not make any assumptions on how much participants know or do not know. This is especially true for organizations that don’t host Shabbat programs every week, and where participants may only meet once or twice a month.

Additionally, choreography of the evening is important and should be taken seriously. The program should flow seamlessly from one part of the evening to the next, and how this is accomplished ultimately lies in the choreography of the evening. The best Friday evening

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Shabbat events I attended had a dedicated time (30 – 45 minutes maximum) prior to the service starting where participants could come and have a glass of wine and catch up with each other. This dedicated schmoozing time helps to establish Shabbat as the departure point from the normal routine of the regular week. Logistically, it also acts as a time buffer for some who may be coming straight from work. Like everything in the evening however, this time should be programmed intentionally as it really represents the first part of engagement in the evening. The following questions should be considered:

1. Where should the schmoozing take place, and for how long? Space and location should be strongly considered, because at some point someone will be responsible for ushering participants from the pre-service schmooze to the service itself. You don’t want to pick a location that is too far away from the service. The pre-service schmooze that takes place at the Riverway Project does so in the same room that the service itself takes place at. The pre-service schmooze at Havurah on the Hill takes place in the foyer just outside the main service area, and program leaders have shared that it is oftentimes a challenge to get everybody to take their seats in a timely fashion.

2. Will there be food and wine present? If you are going to have a dedicated period before the service for people to gather, then I also recommend investing in some food (vegetables and/or crackers and cheese) and wine. While this may seem trivial, having some sort of snack beforehand means participants are more likely to be engaged in services because they are not thinking about how hungry they are. This is especially true if your Shabbat program plans on going longer than the typical hour-long Kabbalat service. This may happen if you have invited a speaker to the service.
3. How are you going to engage people when they first walk in? First impressions are important, and the beginning of the program inevitably sets the tone for the rest of the evening. Choreography is really important here, and a program should be mindful of how people are greeted and engaged when they first walk into a space. If a program has a team of dedicated volunteers, then they should be given explicit roles during the pre-schmoozing time. These volunteers can be greeters, or help escort people to the event space, or make sure that bathrooms and coat checks are clearly marked and visible. I would encourage volunteers to have some sort of badge with their name on it, so newcomers can seek them out if they have specific questions.

In my experience this year, I learned that organizations that cater to Jewish young adults are providing a great space to give interested individuals the opportunity for leadership development. Moishe Kavod House, the Riverway Project, and Havurah on the Hill all have committed young adult lay-leadership vital to the organization. In fact, it became abundantly clear to me through my conversations that leadership development equally benefits the individual as well as the organization. Lay-leaders are able to look at programs more objectively, and help organizations determine programs strengths, challenges and opportunities.

If your program does not have a core group of dedicated volunteers, I recommend forming one. This can be done in numerous ways, and there is good research in the field on how to effectively engage young adults in leadership opportunities. As exemplified by my findings, the best way to begin to form these relationships is through one-on-one conversations. “Talking to people may be the most valuable act that communal professionals can do. It is not just an opportunity for ‘market research,’ but it is a chance to build relationships with people,

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111 Jewish on-campus organizations are in the business of leadership development. Hillel International is one of the most effective on-campus organizations doing this particular type of work, and this may be a good place to start.
one at a time. Though labor and time intensive, it fosters the growth of a network of relationships that can become the motor for community mobilization.”

This sort of method of relationship building is a tool often used by individuals with a community organizing background; I would recommend investing in a form of community organization training for whomever is responsible for building these types of relationships, be it a paid professional or dedicated volunteer.

Recently, a core group of dedicated Riverway Project leaders got together to discuss the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the Riverway Project. While a SWOT analysis is typically used for for-profit business ventures, it is popular in the non-profit world as a tool to “fine tune goals and strategies.” In this particular context, the Riverway Project used a SWOT analysis to identify key issues to approach. A few of the areas the group identified as important are diversity within the Riverway Project, flow of the Soul Food Friday service, and partnerships with other interesting communal organizations in the Boston area.

Aside from important behind the scenes work, volunteers should focus on being engaging throughout the entirety of the program. They should make sure to sit near newcomers, and should be encouraged to act as connectors between groups of participants. Volunteers should not feel responsible for engaging in conversation with new participants throughout the whole evening, but instead should work to connect them with other community members. “In his book The Tipping Point, Malcom Gladwell argues that ‘connectors’ play a critical role in bridging different communities and spreading information.”

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his book, program volunteers should have good understanding of regular participants and how they may be able to connect newcomers with veterans.

If dinner is to take place after the service, then dinner should also be thought of as an opportunity for intentional programming. If the dinner is taking place in another part of the organization’s space, that the room should be set up to accommodate the appropriate number of people. Also, an announcement should be made at an appropriate time during the service as to where dinner will take place, and volunteers should be responsible for helping guide participants from the service to the dinner. Buffet-style is often the most readily used for larger events, and it also invokes a more informal and casual dining atmosphere, as does open seating. Circular tables help facilitate conversation, and volunteer leadership should encourage newcomers and regular attendees to sit together and get to know one another. One interesting idea given to me by a regular Shabbat attendee from a participant is to have easy games and/or craft projects also on the dinner tables for people to engage with either during dinner or afterwards. Depending on the organization’s level of observance, the games may be Shabbat appropriate and might include SET, Apples to Apples, or Bananagrams. These games are easy for solo newcomers to join in, and there is an inherently friendly component with a group game that encourages people to interact with one another. From an organizational perspective, having games at tables encourages people to stay longer, so it’s important that there are no time constraints (i.e.: when buildings need to be locked up, or if there are neighbor and noise issues.)

Additionally, follow up is absolutely crucial to the continued success of your program. This is another great way to encourage involvement from volunteers; I recommend that volunteers contact new participants in the week following the Shabbat program. It is a good way to grow a list of program participants, and an even better way to get people involved in other
facets of your organization. Since most programs discourage writing on Shabbat (in accordance with traditional practice) I recommend having an on-line registration made available where participants can sign up for the program prior to Friday evening. This will help get a head count for the program itself, and will also help create a database system so volunteers can follow up with participants afterwards. Additionally, if someone really does not want to be contacted by the organization (for example, if someone is not Jewish) the registration form can give individuals a chance to opt out of being contacted. During the week after the Shabbat program, a volunteer should follow up with a simple e-mail or phone call and an invitation to grab a cup of coffee; if there is a paid program professional, than this can also be his or her responsibility. Whoever is responsible for following up next, be it a program professional or lay leader, will be able to share with the participant other ways that they may get involved with the program based on their specific interests. It’s important to remember that not everybody is just interested in attending Shabbat dinners, and if the ultimate goal is to help young adults become engaged, then there are multiple ways to explore.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is important for an organization to know whether or not a program is meeting its goals. The need for measurements in some capacity cannot be stressed enough. Data does not need to be a large-scale expensive survey, but an organization should have some form of program measurement, as this is oftentimes the only way to know if programs goals are being achieved. There are excellent resources, such as SurveyMonkey.com that offer free and easy to use survey tools. Before sending out a survey, an organization should think to itself what they are hoping the survey will accomplish. Nowadays people are bombarded by follow up customer experience surveys, so it is important that a survey have an objective and not feel like a waste of time. I would recommend reaching out to a group
of dedicated volunteers (or a volunteer group if you have established one) and find out what they think should be present on the survey. If the survey is about a specific program (like Shabbat) than questions could potentially be about atmosphere, the program and service, and overall logistics.

One organization I met with sends out a yearly survey as part of the registration process for their young adult High Holiday services. They only do one survey a year, and use the data collected as a foundation for all of their young adult programs. On this particular survey, respondents are asked about their overall experience attending High Holiday services. In 2013, 84.25% of respondents shared they felt welcomed into the community. And while 84% is certainly a respectable number, this meant that 15% did not feel welcomed, and the program coordinator used this information to motivate volunteers to be more cognizant of how they were greeting and schmoozing with newcomers. When the same survey was sent out the following year, the number of people who felt welcome had risen to 96% of total respondents, indicating that the volunteers had been achieving their goal of welcoming new people into their community. This success would have only been made possible by sending out these yearly surveys and having concrete data to rely on. Organizations cannot simply rely on their gut-feelings anymore to make important programmatic decisions.

If your organization does not have a yearly young adult High Holiday service, than choose another program to attach a survey. An e-mail survey would be the most convenient method of data collection, and there are a few ways to collect participant e-mails. This could be as simple as asking people to pre-register (it should be done before Shabbat) for a Shabbat event, and then afterwards send out a customer experience survey to everyone who had pre-registered. Or similar to the above example, you can ask everyone to pre-register for an event, and have a
survey be a part of the registration process. Either way, it is important to understand how your community views and experiences the programs you are providing.

Building a successful program takes time, and the recommendations provided are only meant to act as a starting point. In all of the conversations I had and programs I experienced in my time researching, there was not one program I attended that I believed was perfect in every single aspect. The above recommendations come from the best experiences I had while researching this project and information conveyed to me by my interview subjects and the background reading and research I conducted. These recommendations are meant to give ideas and a solid foundation for an organization to grow its young adult engagement programming
Conclusion

For many reasons the Millennial generation is different than the generations that have preceded it, and deserves to be engaged in ways that are relevant to its needs. This generation is diverse, generally skeptical of institutional membership, and unwilling to accept programs at face value. It yearns for opportunities that are sensitive to its different needs, and appreciative of its diverse nature. During this project I learned a lot, about myself as a Millennial, and also about how my community is investing in my generation’s Jewish future.

The American Jewish establishment has found effective ways in the past to engage its community. Every year new organizations and new energy appear on the Jewish communal landscape, and work to push the conversation further, making sure that all parts of our community are represented in the communal conversation. These organizations exemplify how young adults are not going unnoticed in the Boston Jewish community.

The four organizations analyzed here serve as excellent guideposts for any organization wanting to start or improve their programming. All four organizations are staffed by volunteers and paid professionals who are incredibly enthusiastic about building effective programming for Millennials. They believe deeply in the Jewish future, and I was energized and empowered by their hard work. There is no doubt work to be done in communities all across the United States that have young adult populations. I truly believe that we have a communal responsibility to make sure that young adults are given opportunities to connect with their Jewish identities. It is up to us to find the best ways to do that, and to provide those opportunities to any young adult who wishes to seek them out.
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APPENDIX A: Guidelines for ethnographic observation

Event
- Location of where the event took place. Did it take place in a home, synagogue, or third-party location?

Participants
- Do people arrive in groups or do they arrive alone?
- What are people wearing when coming to Shabbat program? Is their attire an indication of what sort of program they are attending, or how formal/informal the organization is?

Pre-Event
- Whom are participants greeted by?
- Is there a formal greeting process or is it casual/schmoozing?
- Is there someone clearly responsible for the logistics of the evening?

Service
- Describe all aspects of the service. Who is leading services, what is the type of liturgy, and what is the set-up of the space.
- Is there music and instruments?
- Are men and women sitting together?
- Is the service participant led, or led by a Rabbi?

Meal
- Is there a meal afterwards? If so, describe all aspects of the meal.
- Is it home cooked or catered?
- Do participants have to pay for the meal?
- How many people stay after the services for the meal, or do not come to services and simply show up for the meal?
- What is the role of the Rabbi after services? Does he/she stay and participate in the meal?

Rituals
- What are the rituals that take place during the evening? Are they formal or informal?

Study
- Is there Torah Study or a Dvar Torah?
- What is the portion, and who is presenting?
- Is a clergy member or a program participant presenting it?
- What is the main point of the study/D’var Torah?

Post-Meal
- What happens after the meal?
- Do many people stay and help clean up? Do many people leave?
- What do people do after leaving?

Leaders
- Are there obvious leaders/highly involved individuals or is it simply led by a Program/Engagement Associate. If a Program/Engagement Associate leads it, is this sort of
practice his or her own practice? To what extent does it seem to be just a job?
• If there are leaders, what is their role during the Shabbat experience?

APPENDIX B: FORMAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Formal Interview Questions

• How long have you worked for your organization?
• What motivated you to work in the Jewish community? What motivated you to begin working at your organization?
• What types of Young Adult programming does your organization offer?
• Specifically, what sort of Shabbat programming does your organization offer for Young Adults?
• How would you describe the culture of your programming?
• What are the intended outcomes of your Young Adult programming?
• What are the intended outcomes of your Young Adult Shabbat programs?
• Are they the same or are they different than your general Young Adult programming?
• Take me through the program planning process. What are your goals when designing new programs for Young Adults?
• Specifically when planning Shabbat programs, what do you think is the most important part of a Shabbat experience?
  o In your opinion, what draws Young Adults to attend a Shabbat experience?
• Please describe to me a time where a Shabbat program was successful, and one that was not so successful.
• Word association: When I say “Shabbat,” what three words pop into your head?
APPENDIX C: INFORMAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Informal Participant Interview Questions

These interviews are meant to get an understanding of what motives a young adult to attend Shabbat, and what aspects of the program they most and least enjoy.

• Do you regularly attend Shabbat programs?
• Do you practice Shabbat at home?
• How did you find out about it?
• How do you characterize your personal practice outside of this particular program?
• What do you like/do not like about this Shabbat experience?
• Is there anything that makes you feel uncomfortable?
• Has going to Shabbat influenced any other aspects of your behavior/practice/belief?
• What makes a Shabbat experience feel comfortable for you?
• What do you believe young people are looking for when they attend Shabbat programs?
• Word Association: What are the three words you think of when I say “Shabbat?”
APPENDIX D: FOLLOW UP SURVEY IDEAS

Surveys should be short, and focus specifically on the how young adults view their program experience. A few ideas for good follow up surveys:

- Attach a survey to registration for a Shabbat program. This will only be useful to those who have prior participation in your program. For newcomers, send out a survey when they register. This survey can cover what participants are hoping to gain from the experience, if they have any prior experience attending Shabbat (in any form) and what they may be looking for in this particular experience.
- Send a follow up survey to all those who pre-registered for the event the Sunday after the event took place. Avoid sending out any e-mails Friday – Saturday.
- If your organization produces High Holy Day services for young adults, send out a yearly survey attached to the registration for that event.
- For further information check out surveys produced by Moishe House, Birthright Israel NEXT, and Taglit Birthright Israel.