THE IMPACT OF
JEWISH COMMUNITY PROGRAMS
ON JEWISH TEENS
& YOUNG ADULTS
FROM THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

Dr. Joel Streicker

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Institute for Community and Religion
BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY
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This assessment was undertaken by Brandeis University to aid the Bay Area Jewish community in evaluating the impact of its programs for teens from the former Soviet Union. This issue is particularly important because of the demographic weight of the emigres in the local Jewish community. It is estimated, for example, that teens from the former Soviet Union now comprise about one-third of San Francisco’s Jewish teens.

The study reveals a great success story for the organized Jewish community. This study shows that the Jewish community’s programming has had a major positive impact on the Jewish identity of teens from the former Soviet Union and on their participation in Jewish life. Emigre teens have felt welcomed to the Jewish community and have participated enthusiastically in many different community-sponsored programs.

The study also reveals that much remains to be done, both for those already here and for those who have yet to arrive. The process of acculturation into American society and integration into the American Jewish community is far from complete, as teens continue to face linguistic, cultural, and financial barriers to full involvement in Jewish life in the Bay Area.

The Jewish community’s programming for emigre teens should be used as a model for improving programming for all Jewish teens. The efforts on behalf of emigre teens are comprehensive, covering virtually the entire population of emigre teens. The emigre teen programming approach relies on coordination among agencies, provides guidance for teens through various forms of involvement in Jewish activities or groups, and makes subsidies readily available where needed. These efforts clearly demonstrate what can be accomplished when the community has a vision and the will to act.

We wish to gratefully acknowledge the support provided by the Koret Foundation to conduct this vitally important research.

Dr. Gary A. Tobin, Brandeis University
The arrival of Jews from the former Soviet Union is changing the face of the American Jewish community. This massive immigration presents opportunities and challenges both to the emigres and to the Jewish community as a whole. As one of the largest emigre destinations in the country, the Bay Area Jewish community has made great efforts to help newcomers adjust to American society and to assist them in integrating into American Jewish life.

This study explores teens’ and young adults’ experiences of growing up Jewish in the former Soviet Union, and of how they have dealt with their new situation in the United States, including their contact with American Jewish institutions and with their American-born peers. Given concerns with the transmission of Jewish identity, it is imperative that the local Jewish community work to strengthen these young people’s Jewish identity and commitment. They represent a key component of the Jewish community’s future. It must be recognized that the present generation of emigre teens and young adults constitutes the core of leadership for tomorrow’s emigre community—and can constitute a significant portion of future leadership for the Bay Area American Jewish community as well. The Jewish community needs to build leadership development designed for the emigre population into its existing system of programming. Leadership development should be accompanied by a communal investment in expanding existing and creating new institutions organized by emigres.

Nurturing such organizations will enable the emigre community to assume increasing responsibility for resettlement, as well as to conceive of and implement programming to build newcomers’ Jewish identity. Working as partners with the organized Jewish community will better ensure that emigres smoothly integrate into American Jewish life while retaining the social networks and cultural heritage that are so crucial to their adjustment.
MAJOR FINDINGS

SOCIODEMOGRAPHICS

TEENS
Most teens live in low-income households, many of which contain members of the extended family. Thirty-seven percent live in households that earn less than $10,000 a year and 36% live in households that earn between $10,000 and $24,999; 15% live in households that earn between $25,000 and $49,999.

Nearly all of the teens (94%) are full-time students; 56% work part-time; and 2% have full-time employment.

YOUNG ADULTS
Most young adults live in low-income households. Fifty-eight percent live in households that earn less than $10,000 per year, while 27% live in households that earn between $10,000 and $24,999. Twelve percent of young adults’ households make between $25,000 and $49,999, and only 3% make $50,000 or more.

Twenty-four percent of respondents are currently married. Twenty-three percent of respondents live with a spouse or partner apart from parents and in-laws, 22% live alone, and the remaining 55% live with their parents or in some other household arrangement.

JEISH IDENTITY PRIOR TO LEAVING THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

Growing up in the former Soviet Union severely limited teens’ positive experience with Judaism and being Jewish. Emigre teens have been unable to integrate easily into Jewish life in the Bay Area because of the particular ways that antisemitism and prevailing definitions of Jewishness shaped their Jewish identity.

Antisemitism has had a marked negative impact on emigre teens’ Jewish identity. Nearly all teens directly experienced antisemitism in the former Soviet Union. Most suffered discrimination from non-Jewish peers, teachers, and other adults. Some teens were the victims of antisemitic violence. Therefore, many teens grew up with some negative feelings about being Jewish due to the unremitting antisemitism of the surrounding society. Indeed, many were afraid to acknowledge publicly that they were Jewish in their former homeland.

Most teens grew up with very little knowledge and practice of Judaism or information about Jewish history, and little or no experience of living in a Jewish community. Official and cultural
Nearly half (48%) of teens report that their family was matched with an American volunteer through Jewish Family and Childrens Services’ Volunteer Match Program.

Informal Jewish education also reaches a large proportion of teens. Nearly half (47%) of teens have attended a Jewish summer camp. Twenty-six percent of teens have been to Israel, including 19% on the summer confirmation class trip, and 10% have participated in a Jewish youth group.

**Youth Adults**

Forty-two percent of young adults have had a formal or informal Jewish education.

One quarter (25%) of young adults have received a formal Jewish education. This relatively low figure is most likely due to the fact that most young adults arrived in the United States past the age at which the Jewish community normally offers youth education.

Nineteen percent of young adults have become bar or bat mitzvah.

Forty-three percent of young adults attend a synagogue.

Forty-three percent of young adults have attended a program, activity, or event at the JCC. English classes, religious events such as community holiday celebrations, and social events are the most common programs attended.

Only 10% of young adults currently go to the JCC for a program or event.

Thirty-eight percent of young adults have attended a special holiday celebration for emigres at the JCC.

Thirty-nine percent of young adults’ families have been matched with an American volunteer.

**Program Impact**

**Teens**

Participation in Jewish life in the United States has had a dramatic positive impact on teens’ Jewish identity. Taking part in Jewish programming has enabled teens to build upon the sense of belonging to the Jewish people that most teens brought with them from the former Soviet Union.

Being Jewish clearly matters to teens. About three-quarters of teens say that being Jewish is important or very impor-
The focus groups indicate that some older teens have been involved in Hillel events. Hillel’s program of outreach to emigre young adults has been closely coordinated with Jewish Family and Children’s Services and the Jewish Community Center’s initial resettlement programming. Prior to intensive outreach almost no emigres participated in Hillel events. Other sources indicate that between 350 and 400 emigre teens regularly participate in Hillel events since outreach efforts began in 1993.

For almost half of the teens, volunteers from the Jewish Family and Children’s Services helped them and their families adjust to life in the United States. Volunteers were also important in facilitating their experience of Judaism.

**Young Adults**

Jewish programming has had a major, positive effect on young adults’ Jewish identity. This programming has encouraged young adults to feel more positively toward Judaism, membership in the Jewish community, and themselves as Jews.

Being Jewish is important to most young adults. Thirty percent of young adults believe that being Jewish is very important, and 45% feel that it is important, to them. Yet 20% state that being Jewish is not very or not at all important, and 6% do not know whether it is important.

**Israel is important to most young adults.** Forty-five percent say that it is very important, and 31% say that it is important, to visit Israel; 70% of those who have been to Israel say that it is very important, and 30% say that it is important, to return to Israel. Twenty-one percent report that they strongly agree, and 40% agree, with the statement that caring about Israel is a very important part of their being a Jew. However, 39% disagree or strongly disagree with that statement, indicating that many young adults feel only a weak attachment to Israel.

Most young adults believe that their formal Jewish education has had a positive impact on their Jewish identity. Eighty-one percent of young adults believe that their formal Jewish education has had a very positive or positive effect on how they feel about being Jewish. Eighty-one percent of young adults believe that their formal Jewish education has had a very positive or positive effect on their feelings toward Judaism, and 92% state that this education has been very positive or positive in
Half (50%) of teens prefer to socialize with other emigre teens rather than with their American-born peers.

Most (77%) teens agree or strongly agree with the statement that they would like to feel more a part of the American Jewish community.

The focus groups indicate that teens have found initial adjustment to life in the United States difficult. This finding contradicts popular perceptions that children and teens adjust relatively easily to life in a new culture because of their age. Most feel a loss of parental support during this critical period in their lives because of parents' lack of knowledge of the language and culture and thus their inability to provide guidance. Teens themselves confront significant language, psychological, and cultural barriers. Moreover, teens' families face economic hardship.

**Young Adults**

One-quarter (24%) of young adults feel that they are outsiders in their new homes.

Many young adults (43%) report having difficulties making American friends. Indeed, about half (49%) say that they prefer to socialize with Russians than with Americans.

Young adults are not tightly integrated into American Jewish social circles. Half (51%) report that they have no close American Jewish friends. Seventy-five percent of young adults say that most or all of their closest friends are emigres.

Emigre young adults tend to date other emigres. Sixty-two percent of young adults report that most or all of the people they have dated are emigres. Sixty-four percent of young adults state that they have not dated any American Jews, and 44% have not dated a non-Jewish American.

Most young adults feel part of the Jewish community. Twelve percent strongly agree, and 56% agree, that they feel part of the Jewish community. However, one-quarter (26%) disagree, and 7% strongly disagree.

Young adults have an intense desire to become more integrated into the Jewish community. Eighty-six percent of young adults strongly agree or agree with the statement that they want to feel more a part of the Jewish community.
COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Emigre teens' and young adults' adjustment to American life, and their integration into the American Jewish community, require that their families be supported materially, socially, and psychologically during the initial stages of resettlement. They come to this country at a particularly difficult stage in their development. They are struggling to consolidate their identity as young people in the context of the great uncertainty inevitably brought about by emigration. They are searching for role models, clarifying values, and making important decisions about their futures, often without the needed support of family members who are themselves caught up in the difficult adjustment to a new culture. The Jewish community must continue to devote adequate resources to meeting the resettlement needs of emigre families. Jewish acculturation and identity building should remain integral aspects of the Jewish community's holistic and successful initial resettlement programming.

A community-wide task force on emigre young adults should be convened in order to devise ways of integrating emigre young adults into existing organizations, as well as creating new organizations and programs for this group.

FUNDING

The community must provide adequate funding to preserve the existing system of effective coordination of emigre teen programming among agencies. One of the major reasons for success in Jewish programming for emigre teens is the coordination between Jewish Family and Children's Services and other Jewish communal organizations that provide services to teens.

Financial aid should be expanded in order to involve more emigres in Jewish programming for greater lengths of time. Most teens and young adults require financial aid to participate in various programs, Jewish summer camps, and Israel trips. Given most emigre families' precarious economic situation in the early years of resettlement, it is crucial that the Jewish community provide such aid. Aid should continue in order to ensure that participation in Jewish life is unbroken during these vital identity-building years.
distanced from the Jewish community after their teen years.

The Jewish community should offer Russian-language adult Jewish education courses designed specifically for young emigre adults. Many young adults arrive in the United States past the age at which they could receive a formal Jewish education in a synagogue or day school. Russian-language adult Jewish education programs are needed in order to satisfy this group’s great desire for Jewish knowledge.

The Jewish community should use the emigre teen programming system as a model for developing programming for all Jewish teens. Its comprehensiveness, coordination among agencies, guidance through a variety of activities and groups, the ready availability of subsidies, and recognition of the importance of strong teen programming, make the emigre teen system a model to replicate.

**LEADERSHIP**

The community should develop leadership programs for emigre teens and young adults. Efforts should be made to involve emigre teens and young adults in planning and running programming in which they participate. Moreover, developing leaders will be key to the next phase of the emigres’ integration into the American Jewish community: the expansion of existing and the establishment of new organizations specifically for emigres.

**ISRAEL**

The Jewish community should organize emigre teen and young adult trips to Israel, providing scholarships and other necessary subsidies. Visiting Israel is the most powerful Jewish experience for emigre teens and young adults. The recent Hillel-sponsored trip for emigres demonstrates the profound impact on college students. An emigre young adult trip to Israel should be organized using the Hillel trip as a model.

The Jewish community should create follow up programs to Israel trips and summer camp. Pre-trip and post-trip education are crucial components of these experiences. It is important to provide on-going guidance to stimulate participation in Jewish life. For example, trip participants may be required to serve as interns in Jewish organizations upon return in partial payment for trip expenses.
Jewish programming has achieved ample coverage of the teens and young adults in the survey sample and of the teens in the focus groups. This programming has been crucial in helping teens and young adults construct a strong Jewish identity, building on the solid identification with the Jewish people that teens and young adults bring with them from the former Soviet Union. Young people from the former Soviet Union confront many obstacles to incorporation into American Jewish life. Linguistic, cultural, and economic barriers limit teens’ and young adults’ participation in organized Jewish life and in American Jewish social networks.

**SOCIODEMOGRAPHICS**

**TEENS**

Fifty-seven percent of teen survey respondents are female, 43% are male. The majority (58%) are between 16 and 18 years old; 20% are 19 and 20, and 19% are 12 through 15. About half (49%) left their homeland between 1989 and 1992, and the other 51% left between 1993 and 1995; half arrived in the United States between 1989 and 1992, and half arrived between 1993 and 1995.

Nearly all (94%) are full-time students; 56% have part-time employment and 2% work full-time. Most (62%) are in high school; 31% are in college, and 7% are in junior high school.

**FIGURE 1: INCOME OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH TEENS**

- Under $10,000: 37%
- $10,000-$24,999: 38%
- $25,000-$49,999: 15%
- $50,000-$99,999: 10%

Source: Parent Survey

Most teens live in low-income households, many of which contain members of the extended family. Thirty-seven percent live in households that earn less than $10,000 a year and 38% live in households that earn between $10,000 and $24,999; 15% live in households that earn between $25,000 and $49,999 (see Figure 1).
The parent respondents are concentrated in three types of businesses: 18% work in businesses relating to accounting and bookkeeping; 16% are employed by firms working in engineering or scientific firms; and 16% work in medical establishments. An additional 9% are employed in factories.

Parents report that they or their families have considerable contact with and participation in the American Jewish community. The majority of households participate in Jewish Community Center programs or events. Sixty-three percent of parents report that someone in their household uses the JCC’s services. Moreover, about half (54%) of parent respondents attend a synagogue. A plurality of those who attend synagogue do so infrequently: 44% go once or twice a year, on special occasions, or on High Holidays, and 26% go three or more times per year but less than once a month. However, a fairly large number—30%—of parent respondents attend once a month or more.

About half (51%) of those who attend synagogue go to Sherith Israel, 9% go to Beth Sholom, 9% go to Beth Am, 7% go to Temple Emanu-El. Eleven percent attend Chabad, Chevra T’hilim, or Anshe Sefard.

Nearly half (47%) of parent respondents report that their household has been matched with an American volunteer. Of those, the majority (65%) have had a volunteer for a year or less, 20% have been matched for between one year and two years, and 15% have had a volunteer for more than two years.

![Figure 3: Denomination of Parents](image)

Identification with a Jewish denomination is rare among parents. Most parents consider themselves "just Jewish" (74%) or atheist (6%). Twelve percent identify themselves as Reform, 4% as Conservative, 3% as Jewish Renewal, and 1% as Orthodox (see Figure 3).
households that earn less than $10,000 per year, while 27% live in households that earn between $10,000 and $24,999. Twelve percent of young adults’ households make between $25,000 and $49,999, and only 3% make $50,000 or more (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Income of Households with Young Adults**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Range</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$10,000-$24,999</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$25,000-$49,999</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000-$99,999</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under $10,000</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Young Adult Survey*

**Jewish Identity Prior to Leaving the Former Soviet Union**

The following account of teens’ Jewish identity in the former Soviet Union emerged during the focus groups, which were conducted solely with teens. However, emigres and American-born individuals who work with emigre young adults indicate that young adults’ Jewish identity was formed under similar conditions and thus this account is also representative of young adults’ experiences.

Teens’ Jewish identity has been shaped by very different factors than that of their American-born peers. Three key factors shaping teens’ Jewish identity emerged from the focus group discussions: pervasive antisemitism; the equation of Jewishness with “nationality” in the former Soviet Union; and, for a small group of the most recent emigres, exposure to Orthodox Judaism. This marked difference in Jewish identity makes it difficult for emigre teens to become fully integrated into the local Jewish community.

**The Impact of Antisemitism**

The various forms of antisemitism that teens were exposed to growing up had a contradictory effect on them. On the one hand, antisemitism restricted their knowledge and practice of Judaism, while adversely affecting their attitudes toward being Jewish. On the other hand, experiencing antisemitism strengthened their feeling of belonging to the Jewish people. Almost without exception these teens expressed in one way or another a feeling that their fate was tied to that of the Jewish people.
Given the unremitting antisemitism of the surrounding society, it is understandable that many teens grew up with ambivalent feelings about being Jewish. Many were afraid to acknowledge that they were Jewish. For example, one girl stated: “I think that I was proud to be Jewish, and I’m still proud. But I couldn’t do anything like wear a Magen David. You’re always afraid of something if people know that you are Jewish.” Another recalled: “Everyone was afraid to say that they were Jewish.” “When I was small,” another girl said, “I didn’t like being Jewish. I was asking my parents why am I Jewish ... I was scared to tell anybody that I am Jewish.”

Official and cultural antisemitism had severely inhibited Jews’ ability as parents’ and as a community to transmit knowledge of Judaism. As a result, some parents did not tell their child that they were Jewish until the child had experienced antisemitism. This means that some learned antisemitic norms before having a chance to build a positive Jewish identity. One girl reported that she found out that she was Jewish when she saw her mother’s passport stamped “Jewish”: “My parents didn’t feel good about my finding this out because I heard from the people in my class that Jews were like terrible. And then I saw this in the passport and I said, ‘Are we Jewish?’ I couldn’t believe it.”

Given the Soviet Union’s and former Soviet Union’s history of pervasive antisemitism, it is not surprising that most teens grew up with very little knowledge and practice of Judaism and information about Jewish history, and a very fragmented Jewish culture. In the virtual absence of Jewish religious and educational institutions, most teens reported learning little about Judaism and engaging in few Jewish religious practices. Asked what she knew about being Jewish while growing up, one girl said: “I knew that I was Jewish.” She reported: “I never got the meaning [of Judaism and of being Jewish] until I got here.” “We never celebrated any holidays,” another youth reported.

Most teens’ parents were neither knowledgeable about Judaism nor very observant, and thus were able to pass on little to their children. For example, one girl recalled: “My mother was not raised in any traditions of the religion; they just know that they were Jewish and they know that holidays exist.” Regarding the Jewish holidays, one boy stated: “In Russia, we had no idea. I asked some-
Grandparents were especially important in transmitting Jewish identity. Many teens learned bits and pieces of Judaism from their grandparents in the form of an isolated holiday observance or a special food associated with a holiday. For some, aspects of different holidays were mixed together. One boy remembered: “When I was about six, my grandfather ... they told me I was Jewish before, but actually he came to me about Chanukah time and said you know you are Jewish. He told me the story of Chanukah and said kids usually get presents from their parents or grandparents. He gave me money. Then the next day he told me the story of Purim and then like Passover.” His grandfather also led a family seder once, and fasted and prayed—behind closed doors—on Yom Kippur. A girl remarked that, although her family was very “assimilated,” her Yiddish-speaking grandparents were adamant about her marrying a Jewish man: “One thing that was made clear from I guess the age that I was two was that I had to marry a Jewish guy ... I know that I wouldn’t marry somebody out of the religion because I would be afraid to face my grandparents.” In general, little integration or coherence existed between the few disparate elements of Judaism that teens learned.

**Jewishness as Nationality**

 Teens understand being Jewish exclusively or primarily as membership in a “nationality,” that is, as a people, or what Americans would call an ethnic group. This culturally specific way of understanding Jewishness, enforced by the state through the legal system and through official and cultural anti-semitism, further distanced teens from Judaism. At the same time, some teens identified belonging to the Jewish nationality with a special bond among Jews. One young man explained the meaning of being Jewish in the former Soviet Union:

I was told that being Jewish was national...it was national, not religious. Even though I was aware of existence of certain religious people around me. Also another thing, there was a feeling of certain unity when people were talkin ...a family or something, but about a person whoever it might be... and he would say that he is Jewish—that would bring that person closer even though you might not know him ...So being Jewish was something that you belong to a certain group—a small group here. On the one hand, it was a group of oppressed by government and
match with an American volunteer; involvement in the activities of a Jewish organization other than a synagogue or JCC; a trip to Israel organized by a Jewish agency; Jewish camp; volunteer work for a Jewish organization; and Jewish youth group. Many teens in the focus groups stated that they became connected with Jewish programs initially through a referral from the Jewish Family and Children’s Services.

Seventy-six percent of teens have received some type of formal or informal Jewish education (see figure 8). Most teens (64%) have received a formal Jewish education (see Figure 5); 61% of these teens have attended religious school, and 11% have attended the Sherith Israel summer emigre program. Twenty-three percent of teen respondents have become bar or bat mitzvah; 8% are currently studying and 29% intend to study to become bar or bat mitzvah; and 40% have not become and have no intention of studying to become bar or bat mitzvah. Thirty-seven percent of teen respondents have been confirmed, 12% are currently studying, and 11% intend to study, to become confirmed. Forty percent have not become confirmed and do not intend to study for confirmation. Nearly half (49%) of the teens have attended a Jewish day school, and 19% are currently enrolled.

Source: Teen Survey, Young Adult Survey

FIGURE 6: SYNAGOGUE ATTENDANCE OF TEENS & YOUNG ADULTS

Source: Teen Survey, Young Adult Survey

% who sometimes attend

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Teens</th>
<th>Young Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Teen Survey, Young Adult Survey
summer camp. Twenty-six percent of teens have been to Israel, including 19% on the summer confirmation class trip.

Twenty-four percent of teens have performed volunteer work for a Jewish organization in the past year. Ten percent of teens have participated in a Jewish youth group, and 12% have taken part in the activities of a Jewish organization other than the JCC or a synagogue.

**Young Adults**

Most young adults have taken part in an activity or program sponsored by a Jewish agency. However, their participation rate is lower than that of teens.

Young adults are much less likely than teens to have received formal or informal Jewish education (see Figure 8). Forty-two percent of young adults have had a formal or informal Jewish education, compared to 76% of teens. The disparity is almost certainly due to the fact that most young adults arrived here past the normal age for participating in Jewish educational programs.

Only one-quarter (25%) of young adults have received a formal Jewish education, compared to 64% of teens (see Figure 5). Of these young adults, 21% attended a one-day a week religious school, 21% received private tutoring, and 12% attended day school. Forty-six percent reported some other form of Jewish education.

Nineteen percent of young adults have become bar or bat mitzvah, 22% are studying or intend to become bar or bat mitzvah, and 59% have not studied nor do they intend to study to become bar or bat mitzvah. Twelve percent have been confirmed; 17% intend to study to become confirmed, while 71% have have not studied nor do they intend to study to become confirmed.
Thirty-nine percent of young adults’ families have been matched with an American volunteer.

Many fewer young adults than teens have participated in informal Jewish education. Given their age upon arrival in the United States, it is not surprising that only 9% have attended a Jewish summer camp, and that 8% have participated in a Jewish youth group. Likewise, only 11% of young adults have been to Israel on a trip organized through a Jewish agency (an additional 7% have been to Israel on a family trip or for other reasons). Nearly all (9 of 10) of those who have gone on a Jewish community-sponsored Israel trip did so on the emigre trip recently organized by San Francisco Hillel and the Israel Center.

At the same time, young adults are more likely than teens to participate in the activities of a Jewish organization other than the JCC or a synagogue. Yet the participation rate remains low: only 22% take part in such activities, compared to 12% of teens.

Young adults are less likely to have volunteered for a Jewish organization in the past year: 14% of young adults, compared to 24% of teens, performed such volunteer work.

**Program Impact**

**TEENS**

Participation in Jewish life in the United States has had a dramatic impact on teens’ Jewish identity. Taking part in Jewish programming has enhanced the sense of belonging to a people, sharing an historical past and future, that teens brought with them from the former Soviet Union.

Being Jewish matters to teens. Thirty-seven percent state that being Jewish is very important, and another 37% say that it is important. However, 14% report that it is not very or not at all important, while 12% do not know whether it is

![Figure 9: Importance of Being Jewish for Teens & Young Adults](chart)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% who answered &quot;Very Important&quot; or &quot;Important&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37%</td>
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</table>

Source: Teen Survey, Young Adult Survey
Figure 10: Parents' Assessment of the Effects of Programming on Their Teens' Jewish Identity

<table>
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<th>Activity</th>
<th>Very beneficial</th>
<th>Beneficial</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Israel trip</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private tutor</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish day school</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish youth group</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish summer camp</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-day-a-week formal Jewish education</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer emigre program</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JCC programs</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time formal Jewish education</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>76%</td>
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Source: Parent Survey
ficial effect (including 45% who said that it was very beneficial). Eighty-eight percent of parents believe that a private tutor for their children’s religious education has had a very beneficial or beneficial effect (including 44% who said that it was very beneficial). Seventy-six percent of parents said that part-time formal Jewish education programs meeting more than once a week were very beneficial or beneficial to their children’s Jewish identity, including 40% who considered it very beneficial (see Figure 10).

Most teens gave high marks to the quality of their Jewish education. Eighteen percent of teens rate it as excellent, and 50% rate it as good; 27% term it fair, and 6% believe it was poor.

Teens’ in the focus groups report that their experience with the confirmation class, and with Sherith Israel in general, has been overwhelmingly favorable; a majority of the focus group teens participate or have participated in Sherith Israel’s confirmation class. One girl stated: “I love the people there. I think it is fun. We have a really good confirmation class. We all get along and we have a really great class. The rabbi is really good to us.” A boy concurred: “I like Sherith Israel. A lot of my good experiences with Judaism was there … We had a really good class and we had a lot of fun.” Some teens have been teaching assistants at Sherith Israel, an experience that they have found meaningful to their Jewish identity. One boy said of his teaching assistance: “There, I really like nailed the details. I was helping the teacher and I was doing some research myself and I found out stuff that I would have never found out.” Despite some of the difficulties many experienced in forming close bonds with the American-born students at Sherith Israel, all stated that an important motivation for them to attend Sherith Israel’s program was to meet Jewish peers.

Parents give the summer emigre program a high rating. Eighty-two percent of parents said that program was very beneficial or beneficial to their children’s Jewish identity.

Most of the focus group teens who attended Hebrew Academy considered this a positive experience because of the Jewish learning that was imparted to them. One girl said: “I went to Hebrew Academy for like two years and without that I wouldn’t have known the history behind the Judaism … and all the prayers behind it as I do right now.”
that the JCC has made them feel very positively or positively about their place in the Jewish community (see Figure 11). The JCC’s role in providing teens the opportunity to establish friendships should not be underestimated. According to one boy: “I like to go to the JCC. You can go to the pool. You can spend time playing basketball. After, when you go to school the kids recognize you from the JCC. My first friends I found here, I found them at the JCC. These kids I played basketball with they come up to me in school and they said, ‘Hey, you remember me?’”

About three-quarters (74%) of teens also state that JCC programming has made them feel very positively or positively about being a Jew, while two thirds (66%) say that it has made them feel positively or very positively about Judaism (see Figure 11).

Parents agree with this assessment. Eighty percent of parents said that the JCC programs were very beneficial or beneficial to their children’s Jewish identity, including 44% who considered it very beneficial (see Figure 10).

Most teens report that camp had a positive impact on their Jewish identity.

Eighty-four percent said that camp made them feel very positively or positively about being a Jew, and 80% stated that it made them feel very positively or positively about Judaism and about being part of the Jewish community (see Figure 11). Parents’ views are consistent with the teens’ evaluation. Eight-six percent of parents said that Jewish summer camp was very beneficial or beneficial to their children’s Jewish identity (see Figure 10).

Teens in the focus groups described the camp experience as very important in several ways. First, teens learned about and experienced Judaism and Jewish culture in a special way. Second, at camp teens came into close contact with their American Jewish peers. Finally, camp helped teens feel more sure of themselves. For example, one girl stated: “I went to Tawonga for two weeks. I loved it so much that for the next three years I went for like three weeks ... Last year I went to Canada on a quest ... We had to go on a hike and we had to fast ... I fasted and we had this whole discussion about it. On Shabbat, it was great. It was the best Shabbat that I’ve ever spent anywhere.” A boy recalled: “I went to Camp Swig after 8th grade. It was fun. I was the only Russian person in my group. For some reason I was shy and didn’t
gogues and they pray all the time. Even if I don’t do this stuff, I feel connected to it very much.” She concluded: “I can’t say that I’m religious ... I think it is important for me ... I will study more just for myself. Just to identify myself more, and maybe after this I will decide what is it and what role it plays for me, I will go in the world and find some Jewish ... I don’t know ... community or something. Right now it is like more in the process of learning.”

Two teens in the focus groups report that a course at the University of San Francisco that deals with Judaism has been extremely important in enabling them to better understand Judaism and Jewish history. USF requires that all students take two courses in religious studies. Two religious courses are popular with Jewish students: one course on Tanakh, and the other on major world religious traditions, including Judaism. The latter course made a big impact on the emigre teens. One girl stated that taking the course made her become “proud and I realized who I am. Before I was just Jewish. I didn’t know... it was like I have my race, I have my nationality. Now I understand myself more and all the situations and all my background. I feel like more of ... meeting people of the same nationality because I know what are the connections that there is.”

Yet participating in Jewish programming in the United States has not led many teens to assume a religious identity; most teens continue to identify being Jewish with membership in an ethnic group. About half (48%) consider themselves, as Jews living in the United States, part of a nationality, and 29% feel part of a cultural group. Only 10% report that they are part of a religious group. These findings are supported by teens’ statements in the focus groups. Speaking of how her involvement in a Jewish dance group makes her feel as a Jew in America, one girl said: “I don’t do synagogue ... I’m not very religious, but it doesn’t mean that I am ashamed of being Jewish. I’m not—I’m proud. It is just that I’m not a religious person. For me, [being Jewish means]...just participating in the Jewish community because I don’t go to synagogues and don’t do much stuff outside of that.” A boy stated that his participation in Jewish life in the United States has not changed his stance toward Judaism: “I know religion. I know the history. I know what happened and how it happened—everything. I went to Sunday school or whatever. I know it. I’m more educated. More aware. I don’t
United States. Volunteers were also important in facilitating their experience of Judaism. One girl recalled that a couple “used to come to our family each weekend. They were really nice. They helped us with our language. They spoke like about different topics with us. They helped my parents a lot. They developed their speaking ability. So, that was my first experience in America and I felt really good about it. We celebrated [Passover] with them. They introduced us to many American people too. We used to go to their house. They had … what was that like circle … like we were singing songs in Yiddish.” One boy stated that his family’s volunteer helped “in teaching us English and invite us to Shabbat at their house. We were coming there almost every Saturday.” Both families are still in touch with their volunteers.

Although the number of teens in the sample who participated in a youth group is too small to permit valid generalizations, it should be noted that these teens report a positive impact on their Jewish identity: all these teens say that the experience made them feel very positively or positively about Judaism, being a Jew, and being part of a Jewish community.

Parents agree with their children’s assessment of the effect of youth groups. Eighty-two percent of parents said that a Jewish youth group was very beneficial or beneficial to their children’s Jewish identity, and 36% stated that it was very beneficial. (However, the disproportionate response rate for parents compared to their teens’ response rate may indicate that the parents interpreted the question to mean any Jewish program in which their teens have participated.)

Two older teens in the focus groups value their involvement in Hillel. A girl who has been here barely a year said: “I go sometimes to Hillel. It is interesting. I feel really Jewish when I was there. Like having Shabbat and talk to other Jewish people.” Going to Hillel has made her feel more proud to be Jewish; she has also made some friends there. Another teen has become involved in Hillel organizing; he also occasionally attends services there.

Teens’ participation in American Jewish life has led them to greater self-assurance and security about their Jewish identity. As one boy put it: “I’m Jewish and I am proud to be Jewish. I’ll always be proud to be a Jew.” Adolescence is a stage of life in which young people seek to under-
formal Jewish education has had a very positive or positive effect on how they feel about being Jewish. Eighty-one percent of young adults believe that their formal Jewish education has had a very positive or positive effect on their feelings toward Judaism, and 92% state that this education has been very positive or positive in making them feel part of the Jewish community (see Figure 12).

Young adults are more critical than teens of the formal Jewish education they have received: 52% report that their education was good, 37% consider it fair, and 11% rate it as poor; 68% of teens report that their education was excellent or good, 27% rate it fair, and 6% thought it was poor.

**Figure 12: Effects of Jewish Education, Jewish Community Center Programming, and Summer Camp on Young Adults’ Feelings About Jewish Identity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% who responded “Very Positive” or “Positive”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On being a Jew</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Young Adult Survey
ON-GOING BARRIERS TO JEWISH INVOLVEMENT

Adjusting to Life in the United States

TEENS

Contrary to the popular perception that children and teens adjust relatively easily to life in a new culture because of their age, the focus groups indicate that teens have found initial adjustment to life in the United States difficult—more difficult than they themselves had anticipated. This fact is crucial to understand.

Although most teens knew that they would be leaving long before their actual departure, most were not prepared for the realities of leaving their country of origin when departure actually came. As one girl said: “I didn’t understand the concept of leaving until the last day when we had all the people saying goodbye to us and we were getting on the bus. When I was getting on the bus like when I stepped on it I backed away, and ... I just broke out crying. It came as a shock.”

It should be noted that friendships are especially crucial in the pre-teen and teen years when youths are beginning to desire independence from their parents and invest more of their selves in peer relationships. Emigration tore these youths away from intense friendships that they had formed with classmates through years of shared experience at school. Many youths reported that the most difficult aspect of leaving the former Soviet Union was leaving friends and family behind. One girl described these friendships: “In Russia, we used to go to school with the same class for ten years. They were like family with us. Then we would go to the college, where we are again in the same class for four years.”

The images of life in the United States that teens had before emigrating also shed light on why adjustment has been so difficult. Most teens thought that it would be easy for their families to attain a high standard of living in America. One girl stated, “For me, too, America was something bright and sparkling. The life here seems from there without any problems. But there are problems. They think that America is total paradise and that money is coming from the sky.”

Many teens formed their ideas about America based on movies that they saw in the former Soviet Union. One boy stated: “Being 16 most of your expectations and most of your knowledge comes from like television and movies. When you watch a movie from America, for example, you see all about the luxuries and I
you have to explain it like four times and you don’t have words. I think it will come later, but right now I’m mostly in the Russian Jewish community. It is hard to communicate. That’s the main problem.”

Nevertheless, teens’ adoption of American cultural styles does not necessarily mean that teens accept American teens’ values, nor that they are or feel fully integrated into American Jewish social circles. For example, half (50%) of teens prefer to socialize with other emigre teens rather than with their American-born peers. For some teens, American culture promotes negative values, such as extreme individualism and materialism. One boy phrased his critique tersely: “I don’t like the individualism, the materialism of [American society].” Another youth, recounting the close relationships that develop between classmates in the former Soviet Union, stated that “we [Russians] are more like community people. Here, people are more individualistic ... They are not as close as in Russia ... That’s what I found a little bit different from Russian ... what I didn’t really like.”

Given this clash of values, and some discomfort with the English language, it
At the same time, teens’ dating and marriage preferences may indicate a high degree of assimilation into American culture, which discourages strong preferences of group loyalty in decisions regarding dating and marriage. Teens are divided between wanting a Russian Jewish partner and not caring about the partner’s ethnic, cultural, or religious background. Thirty-seven percent would rather date a Russian Jew, 7% would rather date an American Jew, and 47% have no preference for any particular group. Thirty-five percent would rather marry a Russian Jew and 8% would rather marry an American Jew, while 43% have no preference.

Parents report that they have little preference regarding the ethnic/religious background of the people that their children date, although they prefer Russian Jews over American Jews. However, they are much more likely to prefer that their children marry Russian Jews than American Jews or to state that they have no preference. Twenty-three percent of respondents say that they prefer that their children date a Russian Jew, and 10% would like their children to marry an American Jew. Sixty percent report that the ethnic or religious background of the people that their children date does not matter.

In contrast, 45% of respondents say that they prefer that their children marry a Russian Jew, and only 5% say that they would rather that their children marry an American Jew, while 23% say that ethnic or religious background does not matter.

The survey and focus groups present some conflicting data regarding teens’ feeling of integration into the Jewish community. The survey data indicate that most teens feel part of the Jewish community: 25% strongly agree and 55% agree with the statement that they feel part of the Jewish community (see Figure 14). However, most teens in the focus groups stated that they do not feel integrated into the American Jewish community.

**Figure 14: Teens and Young Adults Who Agree That They Feel Part of the Jewish Community**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% who &quot;Strongly Agree&quot; or &quot;Agree&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Teen Survey, Young Adult Survey
even stronger desire to become more a part of the community. However, it bears emphasizing that the survey data also attest to a widespread and rapid—though incomplete—process of Americanization and incorporation into the American Jewish community.

Young adults are more likely than teens to say that English language proficiency is a problem for them: 27% strongly agree or agree that this is a problem, compared to 10% of teens (see Figure 13). In absolute terms, the percentage is quite low, given the short period of time that most have lived in the United States. Likewise, only one-quarter (24%) feel that they are outsiders in their new homes, a low figure in absolute terms, yet considerably higher than that for teens (11%).

Despite confidence in their English language skills, and not feeling like outsiders, many young adults (43%) report having difficulties making American friends. Indeed, about half (49%) say that they prefer to socialize with Russians than with Americans.

Moreover, young adults are nearly equally divided in their culinary and musical preferences. Forty-six percent of young adults prefer Russian to American food, and 46% like Russian music better than American music.

Young adults are not highly integrated into American Jewish social circles. Half (51%) report that they have no close American Jewish friends, compared to 37% of teens. Seventy-five percent of young adults say that most or all of their closest friends are emigres.

Young adults also tend to date other emigres. Sixty-two percent of young adults report that most or all of the people they have dated are emigres (compared to 51% of teens). Sixty-four percent of young adults state that they have not dated any American Jews (compared to 44% of teens), and 44% have not dated a non-Jewish American (compared to 29% of teens).

Young adults’ dating and marriage preferences are split between an attraction to emigres and an indifference to ethnic or religious background. Thirty-eight percent of young adults prefer to date emigres, 9% prefer American Jews, and 41% say that ethnicity does not matter. Similarly, 46% of young adults (compared to 35% of teens) would rather marry an emigre, 5% prefer an American Jew, and 38% say that ethnicity does not matter.
pating.) Moreover, 61% of teens stated that it is not very or not at all likely that their family could afford to send them on a trip to Israel; 21% said that it was likely, and 9% said that it was very likely, that their family could afford the trip, while 9% did not know whether their family could afford it.

The teens in the focus groups were extremely grateful for the financial and other aid that the American Jewish community has provided them. Teens have received financial aid enabling them to attend Hebrew Academy and Jewish summer camps, go on Israel trips, and even enroll in college. These teens consider that the aid they have received shows that American Jews care for newcomers. One girl said: “I get a lot of help from JCC in helping with my education because I got a grant and loan and they made it possible for me to study at the university. And I feel very grateful and thankful for this. This was the only way that I can get education. I feel that someone cares. It is very important when you know that the whole question of money is not so important, when you think that someone really cares about you and helps you.” Without this aid, teens would not have been able to participate in some of the most formative Jewish experiences of their lives in the United States. Said one boy: “My family was helped a lot. When I went to Hebrew Academy, when I went to camp, when I went to Israel, every time we couldn’t afford it.”

**Young Adults**

Young adults also report that financial constraints limit their fuller participation in Jewish activities. Fifty-eight percent of young adults believe that it is not very likely or not at all likely that their family could afford to send them on a trip to Israel. Financial considerations are less prominent in young adults’ reasons for not participating in Jewish summer camp and youth groups; age and other time commitments are more important factors. Eleven percent of young adults say that they did not attend camp because their family could not afford it, and 22% said that they did not attend because they needed or wanted to work; 45% said that their age prevented them from attending. Thirteen percent of young adults state that they have not participated in a Jewish youth group because their family could not afford it, while 44% said that they did not have time to participate and 54% said that they did not know of such a group (the percentages are greater than 100% because respondents could offer more than one response).
should be created that will provide continuity with their experience of participation in Bay Area Jewish community programs, as well as to welcome those who arrive in the United States after adolescence.

The success of programming for emigre teens provides the Jewish community with a model for designing more effective programming for all Jewish teens, as well as for emigre young adults. The approach to emigre teen programming includes wide coverage of the emigre teen population, coordination among agencies, assistance in involving teens in a variety of activities and groups, and subsidies to underwrite teens’ participation. Together, these attributes of emigre teen programming demonstrate a recognition of the importance to the Jewish future of reaching teens with high quality Jewish programming during this critical time in their lives.

It is also vital that the American Jewish community help these teens and young adults develop their leadership capacities. The next phase of emigres’ integration into the American Jewish community should involve the expansion of existing and the founding of new organizations directed by emigres. Leadership is needed to guide these organizations in their efforts to aid in resettlement and to help newcomers create a vibrant Jewish identity. With support and the right training, today’s emigre teens and young adults can provide this leadership.

The Bay Area Jewish community has responded with notable success to help ensure that young people from the former Soviet Union will become an integral part of Jewish life in America. It is imperative that the mainstream Jewish community expand its efforts to assist emigre teens and young adults to form a living link between generations of emigre Jews and between the emigre community and the entire Jewish community.