Outbound On The T:
Jewish Young Adults in Cambridge, Somerville, and Jamaica Plain

Fern Chertok
Annette Koren
Rachel Bernstein
Tobin Belzer

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The Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), founded in 1980, is dedicated to providing independent, high-quality research on issues related to contemporary Jewish life.

The Cohen Center is also the home of the Steinhardt Social Research Institute (SSRI). Established in 2005, SSRI uses innovative research methods to collect and analyze socio-demographic data on the Jewish community.
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# Table of Contents

List of Figures ................................................................................................................................. iv
Executive Summary ............................................................................................................................ 1
Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 3
  Methodology .................................................................................................................................... 4
The Lives of Young Adults .................................................................................................................. 7
  Building Adult Lives .......................................................................................................................... 7
  Friends are Community ..................................................................................................................... 9
Choosing Where They Live .............................................................................................................. 10
Jewish Identity and Young Adulthood ............................................................................................... 13
  Jewish Background .......................................................................................................................... 13
  Jewish Identity is not Central or Highly Salient ................................................................................ 13
  Jewish Identity is about Culture and Community, not Religion ......................................................... 15
  Jewish Social Networks .................................................................................................................... 17
  “Dropping In” on Jewish Life ........................................................................................................... 19
  LGBTQ and Jewish .......................................................................................................................... 20
Intermarriage and Interdating .......................................................................................................... 21
The Expressed Needs of Jewish Young Adults .................................................................................. 25
  Looking for Jewish Friends and Community ................................................................................... 25
  Looking for Content/Education .......................................................................................................... 27
  Looking for Social Justice and Volunteer Opportunities .................................................................... 28
  When Social Justice Commitments are Perceived as being at Odds with the Jewish Community ................................................................................................................................. 30
Dealmakers and Dealbreakers in Attracting Young Adults ............................................................... 31
  No One Wants to Go Alone ............................................................................................................... 32
  Location, Location, Location ............................................................................................................ 32
  Not Focused on Religion ................................................................................................................... 33
  Not Too Formal, Not too Often .......................................................................................................... 34
  You Need to Know to Go ................................................................................................................... 34
Summary and Conclusions ................................................................................................................ 37
References .......................................................................................................................................... 39
Appendix: Interview Guides ........................................................................................................... 41
  Individual Interview Protocol ........................................................................................................... 41
  Focus Group Protocol ....................................................................................................................... 43
  Demographic Questionnaire ............................................................................................................ 44
List of Figures

Figure 1: Profiles of Jewish Involvement .................................................................14
Figure 2: Involvement in Jewish Activities and Organizations in Past Year ..................15
Figure 3: Young Adult Jewish Identification ................................................................16
Figure 4: Elements of Jewish Identity .......................................................................17
Figure 5: Perceptions of Boston Jewish Community Welcoming of Interfaith Families ....22
Figure 6: Reasons for Not Participating in Programs ..................................................31
Figure 7: Jewish Sponsorship and Decision to Participate in Programming ................31
Figure 8: Sources of Information about Local Jewish Activities ...............................35
Boston has been described as a “city of millennials,” home to the largest concentration of 18 to 37-year-olds in the United States. The 2015 Greater Boston Jewish Community Study found that young adults make up almost one-quarter of the local Jewish population but also noted that the plurality are largely unaffiliated and are most likely to be engaged culturally, if at all. This report describes research conducted for Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston (CJP) by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies. Designed to develop a nuanced portrait of Jewish young adults living in Cambridge, Somerville, and Jamaica Plain, the report focuses in particular on those who are marginally or not at all involved in Jewish life. The study employed two sources of information: reanalysis of the Boston 2015 Jewish Community Study and new interviews with 50 young adults and key informants.

Findings

The Lives of Young Adults

- **Busy Building Adult Lives.** Young adults are busy with work, internships, and graduate school. Most also make efforts to build a rich and meaningful adult life investing themselves in creative, recreational, and volunteer activities. Young adults are willing to allocate time and resources to activities they deem personally important.

- **Friends are Community.** Young adults find connection and belonging through their networks of friends rather than within the local neighborhood. They are proud of the friendship circles they have forged but are also keenly aware of the transient nature of these networks.

- **Choosing Where to Reside is about Pragmatics and Lifestyle.** Interviewees choose their residential neighborhood based on cost and access to public transportation. They also seek areas with diverse options for recreation and nightlife. The availability of Jewish institutions play no role in their decisions about where to live.

Jewish Identity and Young Adulthood

- **Jewish Identity is not Central.** Young adults are proud of their Jewish identity, but Jewish observance is not a priority. They point out that they are not religious. For these individuals, Judaism is about community, heritage, culture, and values.

- **Jewish Social Networks are the Nexus of Jewish Experience.** For many young adults, Jewish life is rooted in and bounded by a circle of friends. They typically express their Jewish identity through episodic Shabbat dinners or informal celebration of major Jewish holidays with their friends.

- **Dropping in on Jewish Life.** Many young adults occasionally try out Jewish programs and groups but often decide not to return because the experience did not match their expectations or hopes. At least one-quarter have a desire to be involved in Jewish activities but feel that they do not know enough to fully participate.

- **Intermarriage and Interdating.** Most currently coupled young adults have non-Jewish partners. Some report that their non-Jewish partner influenced them to focus on their Jewish heritage. Most feel that their non-Jewish partner has had positive experiences with the Jewish community.
Most young adults who are not currently in a relationship would, ideally, like to find a Jewish partner.

The Expressed Needs of Jewish Young Adults

- **Looking for Jewish Friends and Community.** Many young adults are interested in expanding their Jewish social connections. Their preference is for informal, small-scale or interest-focused options where they can get to know other young Jews in their neighborhood. They do not want events akin to “meat markets” or other awkward social gatherings.

- **Looking for Content/Education.** Although the majority had formal Jewish education, many young adults feel they retain only a modest body of knowledge. As young adults, they want to re-enter the discussion of Jewish thought, heritage, and values.

- **Looking for Social Justice and Volunteer Opportunities.** Many young adults see social justice as the point of intersection of their Jewish and secular identities. Their focus is often on universal issues of race, class, and privilege, but many are open to Jewish forums and avenues for volunteering and social action.

Dealbreakers in Attracting Young Adults

- **No One Wants to Go Alone.** Young adults are reticent to go to an event when they do not have a friend to accompany them. They don’t want to feel like an outsider.

- **Location, Location, Location.** Young adults are less likely to consider programs that are not easily accessible by public transportation. Specifically, young adults who live in Cambridge, Somerville, or Jamaica Plain are unlikely to attend events in Brookline or anywhere else that requires them to change trains.

- **Not Focused on Religion.** Many young adults do not want activities or settings organized around the religious aspects of Judaism. Even when events are related to Jewish holidays, they want the focus to be on community and not religion.

- **Not Too Formal, Not too Often.** Young adults prefer opportunities where they can “drop-in” when they have the time but not feel that they are disappointing others when they cannot attend. They also prefer options that do not require a decision far in advance of the event.

- **You Need to Know to Go.** Many young adults know little to nothing of the Jewish opportunities available to them. Their reliance on word-of-mouth and social media means that unless members of their friendship circle are plugged into this information, they are unlikely to ever hear about an activity.

The challenge for CJP is to respect the perceptions and proclivities expressed by young adults but at the same time enlist their collaboration in creating new avenues for Jewish engagement that are generationally and developmentally relevant. The successful strategy is likely to be one that focuses on relationship and community building. This might include the placement of dynamic community organizers in neighborhoods. Organizers can help further shared goals and interests by leveraging and linking existing, but currently disconnected, networks of Jewish young adults.
Introduction

A recent policy brief described Boston as a “city of millennials,” noting that the area is home to the largest concentration of 18 to 37-year-olds in the United States (Vance & Ciurczak, 2017). According to Forbes magazine, Cambridge and Boston are among the top ten destination cities for young adults (Dill, 2016). Millennials are attracted to the area’s concentration of institutions of higher education, growing high tech and business sectors, public transportation, ethnic diversity, and access to restaurants and nightlife.

Reflecting these demographics, the recent Greater Boston Jewish Community Study found that young adults (ages 18-34) make up almost one-quarter of the local Jewish population (Aronson et al., 2016). These Jewish young adults are concentrated in the geographic areas of Cambridge, Somerville, and Central Boston. Not surprisingly, these are the same communities where recent growth in the young adult population has outpaced growth in the overall population (Vance & Ciurczak, 2017).

The presence of a large concentration of Jewish young adults presents exciting possibilities for communal growth and creativity. Jewish young adults have been described as “a laboratory where new kinds of community are being formed, aided by the latest technologies, and participants are engaging in innovative cultural and artistic expression” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2005). However, the 2015 Jewish community study noted that the plurality of Boston-area Jewish young adults do not identify with a denomination, are largely unaffiliated, and are most likely to be engaged culturally, if at all. Jewish communal leaders, like their peers from other faith communities, have noted “the seeming absence of an entire age cohort from organized religious life” (Belzer & Miller, 2007).

There are many reasons that Jewish young adults are not found among the ranks of the affiliated and engaged. Developmentally, most millennials are in the stage of “emerging adulthood,” characterized by exploration of personal identity, values, and lifestyles (Arnett, 2004). Religious participation and identification with institutionalized religion is less important to emerging adults of all faith backgrounds than is the exploration of their own set of beliefs (Arnett & Jensen, 2002). Contemporary Jewish young adults, like their peers, have also delayed adoption of adult responsibilities and roles including marriage and parenting (Fry, 2016). These developmental milestones traditionally served as the preamble to adult membership in religious life and community.

Millennial Jews, like other members of their generation, are also characterized by their disconnection from conventional institutions (Levine, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2014). They relate with some distance and skepticism to organized religious institutions (Greenberg, 2005). Millennial Jews also live in a world where social boundaries between Jews and non-Jews are blurred (Alba, 2006). For this cohort, universal values overshadow particularism (Elcott & Himmelfarb, 2014), diminishing the pull to be involved in specifically Jewish organizations and groups.

The 2015 Boston Jewish Community study raised important questions about how millennials understand and express their Jewish identities and the potential for enhancing their connections to the Jewish community. This report describes research conducted for Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston (CJP) by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS). Designed to develop a nuanced portrait of Jewish young adults, the report
focuses in particular on those who are marginally or not at all involved in communal life and activities. The study goals include:

- exploring the lived experience of Jewish young adults in three parts of the Boston urban landscape (Cambridge, Jamaica Plain and Somerville)
- understanding their identities and the salience and meaning their Jewish identity holds at this stage of their lives
- assessing young adult familiarity with opportunities to engage in Jewish life
- identifying the factors that influence their choices about whether and in what ways to participate

We begin with a brief overview of the report methodology and continue with a discussion of findings, divided into four sections. The first provides context by describing the “life space” of contemporary young adults in the targeted Boston communities. Special attention is given to their priorities, social networks, and choice of where to live. The second set of findings explores the salience and enactment of Jewish identity for these young adults. The third section describes three categories of interest in programming and resources expressed by young adults; and the fourth section details the characteristics and logistics of programming that young adults perceive to be barriers to participation. The report closes with a discussion of how communal leaders might best empower young adults to develop a sustained and meaningful sense of membership in the local Jewish enterprise.

Methodology

The analyses described in this report are based on two sources of information: reanalysis of the Boston 2015 Jewish Community Study and new interviews and focus groups with young adults and key informants.

- Reanalysis of Boston 2015 Community Study. We reanalyzed data on 659 young adults ages 22-35. One hundred twenty-six were included in the primary sample and 533 in the full sample.1 Young adults with children were excluded. The numbers reported below are for the full sample. Frequencies from the primary sample were compared to the frequencies for the full sample. Where the two differ, no crosstab data is reported. Crosstabs were run on two variables: religion of the respondent’s parents and whether the respondent had any Jewish education.

- Key informant interviews. We interviewed four key informants about their perspectives on resources available to Jewish young adults in the three target communities. These interviews were used to aid development of interview protocols and to contextualize findings.

- Young adult interviews and focus groups. We interviewed a total of 46 young adults; 35 individually in person or by phone and 11 participating in one of the two focus groups held in Cambridge and Jamaica Plain.

The target sample for this study consisted of young adults who are not already extensively involved in Boston-area Jewish life. Finding

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1 The full sample includes the primary sample (randomly selected from the original sampling frame) and the supplementary sample (from the remainder of the sampling frame). The original sampling frame was based on lists from Jewish organizations and ethnic names/behavior list from a commercial data broker. See the Boston Community Study Appendix, pp 2-8.
This group can be difficult expressly because they often do not appear on the member lists of local Jewish institutions. We recruited individuals by using several strategies. First, we distributed information about the study through the social networks available to the research team and millennial colleagues, including posts on Facebook by CMJS staff members, InterfaithFamily, and Moishe House. Second, we advertised the research study through the listservs of several local synagogues and asked parents to forward information about the study to their children if applicable. Finally, we utilized the application lists of Birthright Israel.

Below we describe the demographic profile of young adult interview and focus group participants:

- Most interviewees were in their 20s (84%), split evenly between the early and late 20s; 16% were age 30+
- Eighteen percent of our sample identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer
- Over one-third (38%) of participants lived in Somerville, with almost equal portions (27%) living in Cambridge or Jamaica Plain. Several interviewees lived in different parts of the city or had recently moved out of the target communities

- The final sample of young adults included more female (69%) as compared with male (29%) participants; 2% identified their gender as “other”
Outbound on the T
The ongoing exploration of vocation and relationships resonates throughout any discussion of emerging adults (Arnett, 2004). This section of the report describes several key aspects of the lives of the young adults we interviewed. The discussion focuses on their efforts to establish meaningful adult engagements through and outside of work and graduate education. Also discussed are the central role of friends in creating a sense of community and belonging and in deliberations about where to live. Although this list of topics is in no way exhaustive, each aspect is included because it provides a context for later discussion of the Jewish identities, engagements, and preferences of Jewish young adults.

**Building Adult Lives**

The young adults we interviewed often describe their lives as busy with work, internships, and graduate school. Among our interview sample, 82% are currently working part- or full time. The remainder are in graduate school. Both of these endeavors are central to the identity and focus of the young adults interviewed. For some, the demands of work and school preclude or curtail other extracurricular commitments.

I do extracurriculars but they’re all centered around law school... My education is what I care about most right now. (Female, 24, Cambridge)

I think I’m pretty focused on my career at this point, I’m pretty early on, trying to figure out my path. So that’s definitely taking up a large portion of my cognitive space. Other than that, I think just making sure that I’m staying connected with my family and my friends, my social network. I think those are probably the most prominent things in my life. (Female, 24, Somerville)

Recently I haven’t had a great work-life balance, because we’re really busy, but I try to go to the gym a decent amount. A lot of my life revolves around... my job, and how that’s progressing. [If] I felt like that was ever getting stagnant I would probably change most of my life circumstances almost right away. (Male, 25, Somerville)

Right now, growing as a young professional is important to me. (Female, 23, Somerville)

I’m committed to a job where I partially have to work evenings and weekends sometimes and having other personal commitments and whatnot that I haven’t looked super hard [for Jewish activities around Boston], but I also don’t necessarily feel like I’ve had a lot of time with which to look. (Other, 28, Somerville)

Many young adults describe their intentional efforts to build a rich and meaningful adult life. They seek out and invest themselves in a variety of recreational and volunteer activities. They are involved with sports and fitness, political advocacy, creative and performing arts, cooking and reading. It is important to note that when these young adults feel that an activity is important to them, they are willing to make the necessary allocations of time and resources.

I travel a lot, both for work, and for pleasure. I think I’m probably gone a good percent of the weekends. I also try to go to events in Boston or exercise... [My passions are] travel [domestic or international] and running. (Female, 25, Cambridge)

I spend a lot of time with my girlfriend, rock climbing, cooking, hanging out, playing, listening to music, going on trips, going on adventures. (Male, 28, Cambridge)

I volunteer [at Women’s Lunch Place] and I’ve been trying to strengthen the volunteer affinity network there and build my own social network in a meaningful way.
I also volunteer with Youth Enrichment Services which is located in Boston and they provide primarily outdoor programming for low and middle income youth in Boston. (Female, 24, Jamaica Plain)

I just started doing improv comedy about a year and a half ago, so I perform and I do comedy. (Male, 24, Somerville)

I exercise a lot, so I run, or I belong to a boxing gym, and that’s sort of how I spend my actual free time. (Female, 25, Somerville)

I used to volunteer for an advocacy program at a shelter. I like being productive. I would much rather spend my time doing something that actually is worthwhile than maybe sit around watching TV or chilling out. I’m one of those people who likes to stay busy. (Female, 26, Jamaica Plain)

One theme emerging from our discussions with young adults is that, for most, spirituality is not prominent in how they view their lives. When directly asked, there is a reluctance among some to entirely dismiss the role that spirituality might play in their lives. Even when young adults mention spiritual needs, they are described in vague terms. This attitude aligns with trends in religious and spiritual expression in the United States generally which shows that younger adults are less likely to identify as religious or spiritual than are older adults (Pew Forum of Religion & Public Life, 2012).

I’m not a very spiritual person. Yeah, it comes up every once in a while as kind of a discussion point but doesn’t really come up in my personal thoughts that often. (Female, 24, Somerville)

I don’t know if I have any spiritual needs right now. (Female, 25, Somerville)

I feel sort of uncomfortable with the idea that I would even have spiritual needs. I think I do have them but I think that I’m not very comfortable thinking about them, acknowledging them to myself, much less to other people. (Female, 37, Somerville)

I don’t really know how I feel about spirituality. I’m not really sure. I feel like I can be open to it, but I don’t really feel like I need it and if I did, I wouldn’t really know how to go about participating in that. I think I like the idea of it—it’s not something that I feel is missing, so I don’t really pursue it. (Female, 25, Somerville)

Even among those who describe themselves as spiritually inclined, the pursuit of this aspect of their lives is underdeveloped and thinly, if at all, tied to religion. Spirituality is often connected to nature, music, or time spent with close associates. These young adults might have intentions about developing a personal spiritual practice, but it is infrequently a part of their day-to-day lives.

Interpersonal connection is where I feel the most spiritual. I don’t have as strong a spiritual practice as I would like. I kind of would like to meditate more and be more in touch with myself in a spiritual way than I am right now. (Male, 25, Cambridge)

The incredible beauty of nature is—it feels very spiritual to me. (Female, 27, Cambridge)

I feel spirituality when I encounter things that seem authentically beautiful, and so I’ve encountered that in Judaism, here and there. I’ve played some Sephardic music that’s really compelling, and distinct, and gotten a sort of spiritual path from those things. (Male, 28, Jamaica Plain)

Spirituality to me is not like a religious thing. It’s more just being connected to the people around you and the things around you. (Male, 24, Somerville)
I find the music that I engage in, playing guitar and those kinds of things, are the way that I engage with spirituality. (Female, 25, Somerville)

**Friends are Community**

In his essay on Jewish young adults, Steven Windmueller (2017) noted that community is a core value for millennials, “but their definition of ‘community’ is also quite different from their parents’ perspective.” The young adults we interviewed describe filling their needs for community through their networks of friends. They focus on cultivating post-college circles of friends rather than on developing deep roots with neighbors, local settings, or groups. In many ways their needs for connection, belonging, and mutuality are filled through their friendship groups.

I don’t feel strongly a part of any community that has real identity. I just feel connected to people that I like and care about, but I’m not really a part of a community. (Male, 28, Cambridge)

I don’t really feel a need for any specifically defined community. I feel like my groups of friends are my community. (Male, 23, recently moved from Somerville)

I don’t think I feel really much of a connection. I like my neighborhood quite a bit. It’s nice to walk through and what not. I like the people around. But a connection to the community, I don’t think it’s that important to me to have that. (Male, 36, Somerville)

Spending my personal time in a social way is also pretty important to me. I’m glad that I have a diverse group of friends, and I can rely on different people for different things on different occasions. (Male, 25, Somerville)

Friendships are more important than ever now that I’ve graduated. (Female, 23, Somerville)

I’m always trying to find community just so I basically feel like a part of something. (Female, 25, Somerville)

Interviewees describe networks of friends from college, summer camp, and work but also speak of the challenge of moving to a new city after college and recreating the social fabric of their lives. They often note that unlike their experiences during college, they now need to be more intentional and strategic in their efforts to make and maintain friendships.

I did not know anyone when I moved to Boston at all. I just moved here cold. I didn’t have any friends or family here, so all the friends I’ve made I just made through either work or continuously putting myself out there to try and meet different people…When I first lived here I did a lot of like meetup groups. (Female, 26, Cambridge)

I was really aggressive about meeting people, so I just talked to everybody. With lots of different results, but I think that I really quickly filled up a social network. (Male, 22, Cambridge)

Maintaining friendships is more an intentional choice, where in school you see someone everywhere or you lived on the same campus. It was easier to maintain those friendships. I try to be intentional about who I see, like which of my friends I’m keeping relationships with. (Female, 24, Jamaica Plain)

I do want to branch out and make more friends…Now my social circle is a little bit smaller. It’s…different making friends when you’re not in school. (Female, 25, Somerville)

Particularly striking is their response to the question, “What are you most proud of?” Many speak of their relationships: with friends, family, partners, and spouses. They express pride in the new circles of friends they’ve forged.

I’m proud of having friends and a girlfriend that I really love. (Female, 25, Cambridge)

I guess [I] feel fortunate and I guess I am proud of the connections that I have made with people…Even
though maybe my central friend group isn’t always available, I feel I have a pretty wide array of friends and pretty strong connections. (Male, 30, Somerville)

I’m very happy with my relationship with my boyfriend. I’m very lucky that we’ve been able to just easily have this relationship and it be so successful. (Female, 24, Somerville)

My relationships, I’m proud of the work I put into relationships specifically with my family, I’m proud of that. (Male, 25, Cambridge).

Young adults are also keenly aware of the transient nature of their social networks. Many have recently experienced friends moving away from Boston for work or graduate school. Social networks also change in response to couple development.

One of my regrets is that because we have moved so often as adults, we don’t have the kind of deep social network that you have when you stay in one location for a long time. (Female, 32, Somerville)

I’ve moved a lot as an adult, so I’ve certainly lost friends that I used to be in touch with in previous cities. I guess that’s life. (Female, 32, Jamaica Plain)

I have a lot of friends that are looking for jobs in other cities. Some might be moving back, some might be moving away. A lot of friends are applying to grad school, and three of my really close friends might be moving out of Boston in the next six months, so I don’t know how that will change my social network here. (Female, 26, Somerville)

I feel like in general the trend is as my friends get significant others, serious significant others, and some of them are even married now and starting families, I definitely see less of them as they’re dedicating more time to their relationships. (Male, 30, Somerville)

I’m really happy with the friends that I have, with people I’m involved with at this age. It’s kind of a transient nature so a lot of them will be moving this summer which I’m kind of upset about. I worked so hard to find a group of friends here and now they’re all moving. (Female, 26, Cambridge)

Choosing Where They Live

The Boston housing market is on an upward trend in terms of cost. One recent study noted that “half of renters pay more than 30 percent of their income on housing” (Bluestone et al., 2016). Another study of Boston millennials found that their top concern was finding “safe and affordable housing” (Vance & Ciurczak, 2017). Interviewees tell us that their choice of what neighborhood to live in is largely pragmatic based on cost and access to public transportation. The location and availability of Jewish institutions play no role in their decisions about where to live in the Boston area.

I’d been in Central Square for a couple of years and it was very convenient for me these past few years because it’s right sort of geographically between my internship and my school. It’s also nice just being in sort of the center of things. (Male, 28, Cambridge)

When I graduated college, I found a job in Waltham, so I basically said I wanted the easiest for my commute and chose that neighborhood. I can’t really say that the Jewish community in any neighborhood really swayed my decision. I was totally focused on my commute there. (Female, 24, Cambridge)

I didn’t choose it for any Jewish reasons. I’m in Somerville, and I ended up there because [I was] in grad school and at a law firm at the time and wanted to live kind of in the city, but close enough that I could drive. (Female, 30, Somerville)

We moved to within walking distance of Porter Square so we could be on the Red Line, because the Red Line was the line that my wife needed to be able to get to work and I wanted to be within walking distance of
the Porter Square commuter rail so I could get out to [school] relatively more easily. (Other, 28, Somerville)

I've lived in the neighborhood that I'm in since I moved here. It's a little bit more suburban than being right inside the city, so that's why I liked the idea of living here. When I moved here I didn't know where my placement would be, so I kind of had to choose a somewhat central location. (Female, 23, Jamaica Plain)

Within their pragmatic parameters, young adults also want to live in neighborhoods known for their young adult “scene.” They want easy access to diverse and attractive options for recreation, dining, and nightlife.

When my boyfriend and I were looking for the apartment we live in now, he had been living in Cambridge and I really liked Central Square. There’s lots of restaurants and bars and things, so that’s what drew us into living over here. (Female, 24, Cambridge)

It’s a very diverse neighborhood so there’s a ton of ethnic diversity just on the streets. (Female, 24, Somerville)

Most of the young adults we interviewed do not describe themselves as settled down. They are still transient and their current residence is not where they expect to live long-term. Even during the period of time we were engaged in interviews, several participants moved, or planned to move, to a different part of Greater Boston or somewhere else entirely.

I might be moving this summer…to Somerville…trying to fill volunteer time on the other side of the river, in a new apartment with a new roommate dynamic in a new neighborhood. (Female, 24, Jamaica Plain)

I plan to stay in Boston for probably a little longer. I don’t know how much longer. I don’t know that I like…setting my roots here, but I enjoy it. I feel like, at least, maybe like a year or two more, I’ll probably stick around. (Male, 25, Somerville)

I’m going to grad school this fall for public policy. I’m moving back to California. (Female, 24, Cambridge)
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Jewish Identity and Young Adulthood

Research indicates that emerging adulthood is an exceptionally important stage in shaping the religious and ethnic identities of millennials. Among Jewish young adults, for example, many of those raised by intermarried parents grew up with an impoverished set of Jewish educational and social experiences. Recent research indicates that involvement in Jewish experiences in college—through Birthright Israel, Jewish campus groups, and courses—can substantially change trajectories of Jewish identity and engagement (Sasson et al., 2015).

This section of the report focuses on the Jewish aspects of the lives of young adults. The discussion starts with a brief overview of their Jewish educational and family backgrounds and then shifts to how Jewish identity is experienced and expressed by these young adults, paying special attention to how friendship networks, having a non-Jewish partner, and being LGBTQ factor into identity and participation.

Jewish Background

Most (71%) of the young adults we interviewed grew up in homes with two Jewish parents. This is higher than the proportion, just over half, found in the 2015 Boston study. Most of the young adults we interviewed grew up with exposure to Jewish learning and communal engagement. The majority (85%) of interview and focus group participants experienced formal and/or informal Jewish education while growing up. This pattern of childhood Jewish experience is very similar to the 2015 Boston Jewish Community Study which reported that four out of five young adults had at least some Jewish education growing up. Among our interviewees, 71% attended Hebrew school, 27% attended day school, and 54% attended Jewish camp. Among interviewees with a background of supplementary Jewish education, the average number of years of attendance was 7.5. Among those with a history of day school attendance, the average number of years of such schooling was eight.

Jewish Identity is not Central or Highly Salient

Religion and Jewishness is neither salient nor central in the lives of most of the young adults we interviewed. For the most part they do not feel any need to express that aspect of their identity in their day-to-day lives. Even though most of our interview participants have extensive Jewish educational backgrounds, this history does not translate into current communal engagement. In many ways, their limited expression of Jewish identity is a continuation of patterns adopted during their college years. Almost two-thirds (65%) of interview participants had no or only occasional involvement in Jewish life during their college years.

"It [Jewish identity] feels like something that I can like put on the backburner a little bit more, because…I don’t really feel particularly spiritually connected, or religiously connected. (Female, 23, Somerville)

"I’m comfortable with the level [of Jewish involvement] in my life right now… I love being able to keep it up with my family and observe rituals that we did when I was growing up because…it keeps those memories alive for me. But I’d say it’s more about that, family and community, than it is about the faith, and so I’m not really necessarily looking to increase my Jewish observance in my life right now. (Male, 25, Cambridge)"
If I’m being honest, it never really occurs to me to partake in the Jewish community around me. It’s just like not a priority for me. On a very personal level, I do it within my immediate family, and friends, but that’s about it. (Male, 25, Somerville)

According to our reanalysis of the 2015 study, most Jewish young adults are involved with their Jewish identity through their families, cultural life, or through affiliation with Jewish institutional life (Figure 1). They are, not surprisingly, less likely to be affiliated than older cohorts and more likely to be minimally involved.

The 2015 study also indicated that Jewish young adults are not apt to be substantially involved in any particular type of Jewish organization (Figure 2). Only small portions, usually less than one-fifth, indicated modest participation in Jewish young adult activities or synagogues, even when including the religious schools in which some of them teach.

The 2015 study also reported that almost four-fifths of unaffiliated young adults do not see belonging to a synagogue as a priority. About half identify cost and/or lack of time as reasons not to affiliate. As previously noted, young adults will allocate resources to activities they value. The fact that they find cost and time to be barriers to congregational membership may indicate the lack of priority that they place on this form of expression of their Jewish identity.

Figure 1: Profiles of Jewish Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Involvement Level</th>
<th>Young adults</th>
<th>36+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minimally involved</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familial</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliated</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immersed</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Jewish Identity is about Culture and Community, not Religion

Young adults tell us that their Jewish identity is cultural or ethnic in nature and not religious. They feel proud of their Jewish identity, but in almost the same breath clarify that they are not religious and Judaism, for them, is about heritage, culture, and values.

I absolutely identify as Jewish, and the fact that I was raised Jewish is important to me. I love a lot of the traditions and values. I think the values probably especially. The religion itself, not really much at all. (Male, 36, Somerville)

I still identify ethnically. That doesn’t really change. Culturally for sure. Religiously, I don’t really know if I’m religiously Jewish. (Male, 22, Cambridge)

While we were in Jerusalem [on Birthright]...one of the quotes that stuck with me was ‘my father was the best Jew I’ve ever met, and he was an atheist.’ To me being Jewish is not necessarily...paired with the religion. It’s paired with a racial identifier, your genetics...but it’s not religion based. (Female, 26, Jamaica Plain)

I have a very strong relationship with Judaism and I very strongly identify as a Jew and I’m proud to be a Jew and all that stuff, but I don’t really identify as a spiritual person. (Female, 24, Jamaica Plain)

So I’ve always been proud to identify as Jewish. My ethnic Jewish identity is definitely stronger than my religious Jewish identity. (Male, 23, recently moved from Somerville)

I see Judaism as something that is somewhat secular that it’s very much about your heritage, and exploring this really sort of amazing story, and being proud of it. ...My Jewish heritage is not necessarily a connection with God. (Male, 25, Cambridge)
These interview findings dovetail with the results of our reanalysis of data from the 2015 study. Young adult respondents to that study are much more likely than older community members to think of themselves as secular or culturally Jewish rather than identifying with a particular denomination (Figure 3).

Interviewees often note that the aspect of Judaism with which they most resonate is the feeling of belonging to a community. Their sense of connection to other Jews is based on shared heritage and history and not typically on religious belief or practice.

What I like most about Judaism—I keep mentioning this—but that community aspect. I do like the religious service. I like that it’s something that I feel like my ancestors, my grandparents have all participated in. (Female 32, Jamaica Plain)

I feel like for me, Judaism has often always been about having those family and community and friend gatherings and learning about history and how we each celebrate in different ways. (Female, 28, Jamaica Plain)

I feel like any type of Jewish stuff I’m thinking of more from a community perspective than any type of spiritual perspective. (Female, 26, Cambridge)

Figure 3: Young Adult Jewish Identification
Again, there are parallels between our interview data and the results of the 2015 community study. Almost universally, young adult respondents in that study consider being Jewish somewhat or very much a matter of culture (Figure 4). More than half describe being Jewish as related to heritage, ethnicity, or belonging to a people. In a departure from the interview findings, over half of respondents to the 2015 study also indicate that Jewish identity for them is tied to religion. This may indicate a difference between the less engaged young adults targeted for our interviews and the overall young adult population, over one-fifth of which identify as Orthodox or Conservative.

**Jewish Social Networks**

Just as friends are the core of community for young adults, most interviewees describe their social networks as the nexus of their current Jewish experience. Most of our interviewees do not describe actively or intentionally seeking out Jewish friends. Their current networks are the result of who they are meeting at work, in school, and through friendship networks.

Some of the young adults we interviewed have long-standing circles of friends from Jewish camp, Hebrew or day school, or from their college involvement with Jewish fraternities, Hillel, or other Jewish campus groups.

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**Figure 4: Elements of Jewish Identity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging to a people</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heritage</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Outbound on the T

I still have these really deep ties to the peers I grew up with, who obviously are all Jewish [from day school].
(Female, 30, Somerville)

I have a lot of [Jewish] camp friends in the area.
(Male, 24, Somerville)

Another group of interviewees explain that this is their first experience of having a substantially Jewish social network. For these young adults, having Jewish friends opens the way for their exploration and appreciation of their Jewish identity. Some of these young adults grew up in communities with only a small Jewish presence, while others were raised in intermarried homes with little or no communal affiliations. For example, one young woman, who was raised Catholic by intermarried parents, describes the profound impact of her new network of Jewish friends. She notes, “I’m more open to exploring the religious side of my Judaism, but I’d never really done that before.” She continues that it feels “really good to be in a community with people who celebrate Shabbat regularly” (Female, 26, Jamaica Plain).

A lot of my friends that I’ve met in the past couple years were Jewish. My high school friends, I’m the only one who’s Jewish. My college friends, I have one friend who’s Jewish. Post college, a lot of Jewish friends.
(Female, 25, Somerville)

It’s really now in my adult life that I feel I’ve gotten much more in touch with my Jewish side, because I have a lot of friends in the Boston area who are very strongly Jewish-identified, and participate in a lot of Jewish events and organizations. (Female, 33, Jamaica Plain)

I have exponentially more [Jewish friends] than I did when I did not live in Boston, which is really cool… I’m finding heritage, culture, or religion that I belong to…learning that there are people similar to me has essentially changed my life as a Jewish person. (Female, 26, Jamaica Plain)

Friends are clearly the source, means, and inspiration for however these young adults express their Jewish identity. The typical pattern consists of episodic Shabbat dinners or informal celebration of major Jewish holidays (e.g., Hanukkah or Passover) in the homes of friends.

I have one friend from [college] who is up here and lives in Cambridge. I spend a lot of time with her…She’s also Jewish. She invites me to do stuff with her pretty regularly. She has Shabbat dinners and stuff like that.
(Female, 24, Cambridge)

I think a lot of that [being Jewish] is based on who I’m friends with…We’re probably going to get invited to a lot of Passover seders because our friend across the street’s going to have one, my friend is probably going to have one…there might be one or two others that we get invited to…So I think a lot of it’s about that community gathering and getting people together for different traditions. (Female, 28, Jamaica Plain)

We actually hosted our own little seder and had a bunch of friends over during Passover. We always light the candles together during Hanukkah. (Female, 24, Cambridge)

I see my camp friends and we hang out and we try to do something for Shabbat every so often. (Female, 24, Cambridge)

Sometimes we have Shabbat dinners with my roommates, and do Jewish things here and there for sure. (Female, 25, Cambridge)

Since getting home from the [Birthright] trip, a bunch of the Boston people have gotten together to do Shabbat and stuff like that so that’s been really nice to be able to do that more but that’s really it. I’m not actively doing many other things in that realm. (Female, 24, Cambridge)
“Dropping In” on Jewish Life

Many of the young adults we interviewed are aware of and have sampled some forms of Jewish activity in Boston. Over half report episodic involvement in Jewish life. The majority, however, have not settled into any regular involvement in a Jewish setting or program but instead tend to “drop in” occasionally. The most frequently mentioned avenues for Jewish experiences are Eser, Temple Israel and the Riverway project, Birthright Israel, local Hillels, and Gin and Jews. Less frequently mentioned are the Jewish Arts Collaborative, Moishe House/Moishe Kavod House, YJP Boston, Reach Out, Keshet, Workman’s Circle, CJP events, and JOIN.

Reanalysis of the 2015 study indicates that three out of four young adults agree that they were warmly welcomed the last time they attended a Jewish religious service; more than half agree that they were inspired or emotionally involved and/or connected to other people there. Only 10% agree that they did not understand what was going on, but 30% acknowledge being bored in the service.

A particular subtext to many of our interviewees’ comments about their experiences with Jewish programs includes “trying out” Jewish activities but deciding not to return because the experience did not match what they were hoping for or expecting. At the same time, they express or demonstrate only a limited sense of “agency” about seeking or creating their own Jewish experiences. For example, one young woman from Somerville describes attending a CJP event about activities in Boston but then confesses she did not follow-up on any of the opportunities offered.

At least what I know of being available is Boston, is singles and more informal [events]. There are other happy hour-type things like Gin and Jews, but it’s not something that actually appeals to me. (Female, 24, Cambridge)

The ball is so in my court to do something with the Jewish community, but...I have done very little to reach out and engage in that, and I feel like I have to take that first step, because obviously they can’t find me. (Female, 25, Somerville)

I think what I love about Eser is they really are targeting my peer group, [but] I don’t want it to be too much or too text heavy. (Female, 30, Somerville)

A number of interviewees (at least one out of four) note they feel a desire to be involved and participate but are held back by a feeling that they do not know enough. In everything from worship services to social activities, these young adults see themselves as “imposters” and feel that they do not fit in. It is important to note that many of the young adults expressing this sentiment did have a Jewish education, celebrated their b’nai mitzvah, and took part in informal Jewish education experiences growing up.

I wish that I had the education that I would need to be an active participant in that kind of service environment, but I just don’t have the education that I would need to do that. (Female, 32 Somerville)

My concern is that at a lot of these events people like me aren’t showing up because of these same fears or feeling...we’re not being Jewish enough or just feeling out of place because [we're] not familiar with all of the prayers. (Female, 26, Cambridge)

I sometimes would be hesitant to go to an event because I would think, ‘Oh, most of these people know so much about Judaism and are religious’ and I would feel stupid. (Female, 23, Jamaica Plain)

As an adult, who really doesn’t know a lot...but feel like this is part of who I am...I think I’d be afraid of going to certain things, and being like, ‘Oh, I don’t
know enough to participate.’ I have a lot of friends who are very deeply connected to their Jewish faith and... it almost feels like I’m an imposter. This is me coming and supporting my friend, versus me coming and feeling like I’m fully a part of it. (Female, 33, Jamaica Plain)

LGBTQ and Jewish

In many ways the experiences and concerns of the LGBTQ young adults we interviewed echo those of their straight peers. Both groups seek non-religious avenues to Jewish expression, ways to learn about Jewishness, and potential Jewish friends. The intersection of Jewish and LGBTQ identities also generates specific needs as well as different approaches to Jewishness and Jewish community.

Finding ways to combine their Jewish and queer identities is important to many of the young adults with whom we spoke. Many fulfill this synthesis by configuring a “chosen family” of LGBTQ peers and allies. The opportunity these relationships provide for expressing all of the different facets of their identities is vital.

I often refer to it through the visual metaphor of a pendulum like what’s inside a grandfather clock: if the two sides of the pendulum are queer identity and Jewish identity, then I swung really hard to the Jewish side for my formative years, really hard to the queer side for my adolescent and very young adult years, and my life since 22 has been finding the balance in between them. (28, Somerville)

I want a group of queer Jewish friends because I feel like it would be this like melding of all of these identities. (26, Somerville)

Some LGBTQ young adults report finding connections through organizations that are not specifically Jewish but have Jewish participants such as queer choir groups. Others discuss turning to Jewish organizations to build a queer Jewish network, for instance the Keshet partnership with Eser and the JOIN Fellowship. As members of a marginalized group, involvement in social justice organizations is often cited as an important value and pursuit.

I do the Eser/Keshet partnership. I tried it specifically because I wanted to see if I could make Jewish queer friends. (24, Jamaica Plain)

I’ve become really good friends with people who have either done the JOIN Fellowship, who have been involved in JVP, who have been involved with Keshet, because of the queer Jewish connection. (33, Jamaica Plain)

In my relationship, in my house, and in my queer community, pretty much daily I’m talking about capitalism and racism. (24, Jamaica Plain)

LGBTQ interviewees often mention intentional selection of a geographic neighborhood known for its sizeable LGBTQ population. All of our LGBTQ interview participants live in Somerville or Jamaica Plain/Roslindale.

We live in JP, and there’s actually a pretty large queer Jewish community in JP. (33, Jamaica Plain)

My impression of Somerville? I like it a lot, it’s pretty eclectic and it’s pretty queer, which is a positive for me. (23, Somerville)

While several participants express their disinterest in finding specifically Jewish activities in which to engage, others are not sure whether or not Jewish spaces, especially more observant religious settings, will be welcoming.

My big reservation with a lot of Jewish spaces is whether or not they’re LGBT friendly or not. And that’s hard to gauge from a website. (24, Somerville)
**Intermarriage and Interdating**

Over one-third (38%) of the young adults we interviewed are not currently in a relationship. Of those who are in a relationship, including a minority that are married (16%), most have non-Jewish partners. Young adults describe the many ways that they hold similar values and world views with their non-Jewish partners. Many specifically mention that their relationships are, at least in part, based on equal distancing from their religious backgrounds.

To be honest, I don’t think our religion is very important to either one of us. We haven’t spent much time talking about that, maybe a little bit. (Male, 36, Somerville)

She grew up in an Episcopal Christian household, very religious. She doesn’t any longer identify with that, but her family’s still very observant…We align pretty closely in how observant we are, which is not very. (Male, 28, Cambridge)

[My partner’s] mom is very religious. So we both have similar experiences in certain ways of purposefully choosing to have things that we care about related to religion, but not practicing our faith in that way compared to some other people we know who are much more religious. (Female, 28, Jamaica Plain)

Most of the LGBTQ individuals we interviewed who are in a relationship have a non-Jewish partner. These young adults might want to find a Jewish partner but describe the additional challenges they face with a small pool of potential partners.

I made the decision in high school that if I knew I was going to be dating while queer as an adult and forming relationships with a queer person as an adult, I already wasn’t necessarily going to be solely looking for a Jewish partner. Because the world of Jews is not big, the world of queer Jewish people, really not big. (Other, 28, Somerville)

We asked young adults with non-Jewish partners whether they feel welcome in the Jewish community as a couple. For the most part, perceptions of their partners’ comfort in the Jewish community are positive.

Riverway services…they make it very friendly to non-Jews I would say. You don’t have to read Hebrew. You don’t need to know what’s going on. So [my non-Jewish husband] feels very comfortable. (Female, 32, Jamaica Plain).

Our interviews also parallel the findings of our reanalysis of the 2015 study. The 2015 data indicates that among young adults that have an opinion, most—including those raised in in-married or intermarried households—consider the Boston community welcoming to interfaith families (Figure 5). Only a relatively small proportion (14%) consider the community unwelcoming.

Another interesting theme among our interviewees is that some have been influenced by their non-Jewish partner to give more thought to their own Jewish heritage. In some cases, it is the non-Jewish partner that is motivating exploration, as a couple, of Jewish engagement.

I think [my involvement with the Jewish community started] when I met my partner. She is not Jewish, but she actually had a really large Jewish community, and I’d say since we got together…I have a big Jewish community in Boston. (Female, 33, Jamaica Plain)

But I think especially being married, and…around my wife’s family, or just sort of being with my wife. If you were to ask me five or ten years ago if I ever wanted to make Judaism a part of my life I would have said, ‘Absolutely not.’ I had no interest in it. But now that it’s become a bit closer to reality, the idea of just dropping it entirely seems a bit sad, and maybe inauthentic. (Male, 28, Jamaica Plain)
Our interviews with single young adults included questions about what they were looking for in a life partner. Interviewees have many different criteria for potential partners. For some, religion is inconsequential, although they would like to pass on their Jewish heritage to future children.

"I guess my ideal partner is somebody that I can...talk to all the time and I'll never get bored...somebody that is fun, that I can sort of throw them into a situation and that I know that they’ll basically just be open to trying it even if it’s not something they may necessarily like and that they’ll always be up for having a good time." (Male, 30, Somerville)

"Is it important to me that who I date be Jewish? Not really. I think I would like them to be open to other cultures and ideas and the idea of raising kids with an understanding of a lot of different religions...I'm not religious and so it would be important to me to have a partner who's also not religious, but I also would like to teach the Jewish traditions that I learned as a kid to my kids, so a partner that's open to that would be important to me." (Female, 25, Somerville)

For most, being Jewish is an important aspect of an ideal partner. They are hoping to find someone who will fit into their extended families, have a similar background and values, and will help pass on a shared heritage to their children.

"[My ideal partner] would be male, around my age, a little older, maybe a little younger, but hopefully not too much difference. In terms of personality, smart, intelligent, funny, kind. I think funny is the biggest one, but obviously they've gotta be nice too...I guess in an ideal world, they'd be Jewish but it's not really a deal breaker if they're not. I was raised [with a non-Jewish father]. It never really posed an issue. So if I were to ever have kids, I would definitely want them to be raised Jewish. So it would be an issue if my husband wasn’t okay with that." (Female, 25, Somerville)

"So, long-term they would have to be Jewish. That’s something that I struggle with but I think ultimately, at the end of the day, especially because of my grandparents and my family background which is really important to me, I really need to raise my family Jewish. So, in terms of long-term partner I'd be looking for someone Jewish. Otherwise, I don't know, around my same age and a nice person." (Female, 26, Cambridge)
[My ideal partner would be] Jewish. I mean, this is a topic that has been a really strong factor in my experience and is very prevalent in my life right now. (Female, 30, Somerville)

Regarding finding someone serious, I’d like to find someone who’s Jewish, and I think comes from a similar background, and interests, education level, that kind of thing. (Female, 25, Cambridge)
Outbound on the T
The Expressed Needs of Jewish Young Adults

Analysis of our interview and focus group conversations yielded three areas of interest among young adults based on their expressed needs and preferences for Jewish engagement. We found that young adults are primarily looking for Jewish community and friends, content and education, and social justice and volunteering. This section of the report describes young adult interest in each of these arenas of Jewish activities.

Looking for Jewish Friends and Community

As previously noted, for many of the young adults we interviewed friendships and social networks are of paramount importance. Many aspects of their lives, including their Jewish life, revolves around these relationships. Young adults also frequently express the perspective that Jewish identity and connection is primarily about community and a sense of shared history and culture. Recall that they also describe the transient nature of their social networks. Given this confluence of perceptions, it is not surprising that many young adults are interested in expanding their Jewish social connections.

I do regularly wish I had more Jewish friends, because I just don’t. (Female, 25, Somerville)

Part of the reason I really was seeking to be involved is because I want to have more of a community, I came to Boston without knowing anyone…I think I wish that I had more of a community here. I think the Jewish community is great because that would kill two birds with one stone because I want my Jewish life to be more important to me, and I also want more of that community feel. (Female, 26, Cambridge)

I was actually talking about this with my boyfriend the other day that it would be nice to find some sort of Jewish group to belong to so that when there are holidays and things, we don’t find ourselves without any sort of option to do something. I think that would be nice to explore. (Female, 24, Cambridge)

In my mind, being a piece of a community, you feel more supported and there’s more people that you could go to for certain things…I guess just that feeling of familiarity that I guess comes with when you are part of more of an organized group or a religious group, sounds kind of appealing I guess. (Female, 25, Somerville)

As I get older I want a sort of solid enough group of friends that becomes like family. Friends in the sense that, you know, when I have kids, my kids will hang out with their kids, and I’ll hang out with the parents and that level of closeness which would make it feel like a community. (Male, 23, recently moved from Somerville)

If we were to have a kid, we don’t have a community that would celebrate that with us or where we would feel comfortable being embraced. Our family does not live here. (Female, 32, Somerville)

Many express a yearning for the kinds of Jewish community they experienced while growing up. They want to recreate the sense of easy familiarity and shared identity that they experienced with their families, in youth group, or at Jewish camp. For some, the model experience of Jewish community was more recent and grew out of adult experiences.

I also think about that a lot, being a transplant and what that means, specifically in a Jewish context, but also in a life context of when you grew up with a Jewish community that’s far away, how do you create one?...I think that there’s this sense of community that I feel like I had growing up that I wish I still had now. Like this ritualized community, having Shabbat dinners…sitting down with the people that I care
about and having meaningful conversations once a week or taking time to reflect. And that’s what I long for and itch for when I think about a Jewish community. (Focus Group Participant, Jamaica Plain)

The times when I’ve felt the strongest in my Jewish identity, when I’ve been the happiest, have been when I was surrounded by Jewish community that wasn’t necessarily ritually based. (Other, 28, Somerville)

Every time I do something Jewish, whether it’s the Ramah Young Alumni Reunion or something like that, I do feel that I walk away feeling more grounded almost, even if we’re not doing spiritual exercises. Going through the motions of just sitting for a service and things like that brings me back to being Jewish again and not just like in a blasé way. I’m realizing that it’s cultural and that it makes me feel a little bit better. I don’t know exactly what type of community I’m looking for, but I think I am looking for something that’s more than me and friends hanging. (Female, 24, Cambridge)

What we really got out of it [Intro to Judaism class through RJOB] is that community sense. We were with a lot of other interfaith couples, newly married just like us. Several are now pregnant just like us. It provides that common bond where you can feel like you’re connected to other people who are similar to you. (Female, 32, Jamaica Plain)

What these young adults describe is an informal setting where they can find other young Jews in their neighborhood and get to know each other. In many ways what they are seeking is a means to identify and meet local Jewish peers.

I think it would be cool to meet other Jewish people, but not necessarily under the pretense of Jewish activities, more just like, ‘Hey, we’re here, and we like to do normal things, like go to bars, and get food, or whatever.’ Kind of just like, ‘This is your Jewish community, but we don’t expect you to go to temple, or do the holidays.’ I know it kind of sounds like a ‘get out of jail free card,’ or something, but ‘These are the people who are in your area.’ I think that would be something that I would probably check out. (Male, 25, Somerville)

I think there aren’t a whole lot of ways to just meet friends as an adult. There’s definitely ways like Tinder… that’s obviously not for people who are just looking for friendship. I wish there was something similar to that for girlfriends or community building. (Female, 23, Somerville)

The young adult interviewees also mention their preference for a small-scale activity or interest-focused groups where they could get to know each other gradually and in an organic manner. These are the settings that would feel authentic and manageable to many.

Something that’s an activity… because sometimes you show up for things and it’s kind of awkward. But if it’s more of an activity, like trivia or whatever, it can be easier to go to those things. (Female, 23, Somerville)

I’ve been going to these types of things that can be large group settings, where you’re talking to a lot of people, I would rather have two great conversations that were a half an hour each with two people at the event in the night, than talk to every single person in the room. So I think when I go to something like that and I feel like I’m not able to have something that lasts longer than five minutes with a person, I can be pretty disappointed. When I feel like that person can do the same for me and stay focused and present instead of getting overwhelmed by all of the other things going on in the room, that is really nice. (Female, 23, Somerville)

One of the biggest draws is just doing everyday things with people my age. And then all of a sudden that will build, because those are the people that you begin to trust, and you begin to share values with, and then building from there, I guess. (Male, 25, Cambridge)

I would like there to be more opportunities to play music, and socialize in a relaxed setting. (Male, 28, Jamaica Plain)
For me, it would be something centered around cooking or food or dining. Some sort of activity where you can meet up with other people who are in the Jewish community and go try a new restaurant or try new food or try new drinks or learn how to cook something. (Female, 25, Somerville)

You can sit in on like a lecture or a tour. You can go to a Shabbat dinner. You can do all that stuff, but it isn’t until you really have a common goal that you bond with someone or that you can really experience something on that higher plane. I’m a kind of [an] introverted person, so it’s harder for me to break those interpersonal barriers right away. It would have to be through some sort of community. (Male, 24, Somerville)

Many young adults stress that they are not interested in gatherings akin to “meat markets” or other awkward social events. Even though many hope to meet potential Jewish partners, they want to do so in settings that are not specifically focused on finding a date.

On the one hand you want to meet somebody that’s young and Jewish, and where else do you meet another Jewish person [than] at a Jewish event. But then when you go… it feels very uncomfortable, like not natural. So then I end up just talking to the people I went with, and the two Jewish friends that I have walking into it. I didn’t talk to anybody else, and so we could have just done that in a less uncomfortable situation. (Female, 25, Somerville)

I’m in a relationship and my friends were, ‘Oh you should come to this event [Gin and Jews]!’ and I was totally down to go and meet new people and see the city. When I got there [I] realized it was kind of a singles’ event. I had a weird time. It just was a very uncomfortable thing because I truly just wanted to go to meet new people but then it felt like a dating situation, and it also felt like kind of a forced socialization thing. (Focus group participant, Cambridge)

I’m worried they’re all going to be married and have kids or like it’s going to be a ‘meat market,’ it’s going to be awkward because everyone’s looking for a significant other. (Female, 30, Somerville)

I’ll go to these events with a few Jewish friends that I do have, and don’t really talk to other people. It also feels like when you go to some of those things they’re sort of breeding grounds, like mating, and it’s weird, and it feels uncomfortable. (Female, 25, Somerville)

Looking for Content/Education

Religious capital refers to a body of knowledge about both the content of religious thought and the choreography of religious rituals and services (Finke, 2003). Unfortunately, as our interviews suggest, many Jewish young adults may not feel that they meet an imagined minimum threshold of religious knowledge. Although the majority had formal Jewish education, they also talk about what they did not learn and how much they have forgotten. As one young woman exclaims, “I slept through Hebrew School.” This young woman, and many other interviewees who feel they don’t know enough to participate in Jewish programming also express the desire for adult education.

I think if there was like a Hebrew school for adults I would [participate]: “What have you forgotten from your Hebrew school days, and we’ll reteach that to you.” I would be interested in that. (Female, 27, Cambridge)

Some of these young adults are seeking forums to learn about and explore Jewish thought. Many of our interviewees described their formal Jewish education ending in their early teen years. Now that they are adults they want to re-enter the discussion of Jewish values and apply them to their own lives.
Opportunities to discuss with other Jewish people or people who were raised Jewish, the ways that they...grappled with their faith...and specifically how people...who are not very observant...see themselves continuing to observe traditions or rituals or stay a part of communities as they get older, or with future families...I can definitely see myself participating in something like that. (Male, 25, Cambridge)

I would be interested in speakers or panels or lectures, especially if there's some type of discussion component. I would be open to some type of educational discussion. (Female, 23, Somerville)

Looking for Social Justice and Volunteer Opportunities

Contemporary young adults have a strong commitment to issues of social justice and are willing to act on their beliefs through advocacy and volunteer service. They have been called the “Ben Franklin Generation” for their prioritization of value-centered living (Hanft, 2014) and “Generation Q- the Quiet Americans...quietly pursuing their idealism, at home and abroad” (Friedman, 2007). The 2016 elections were a galvanizing experience for many young adults and they want to be involved in political discourse and action on the local and national levels.

For a substantial portion of young adults, the point of intersection of their Jewish and secular identities is social justice and political advocacy. According to our reanalysis of the 2015 study, one third of Jewish young adults say they volunteered in the past month. Of those, about a third have volunteered for all or mostly Jewish organizations. This pattern of volunteer activity did not differ significantly between young adults and older counterparts.

In interviews and focus groups we asked young adults which parts of their identity they would like to have more opportunities to express or explore. One woman from Cambridge, echoing the sentiments of many others, responds, “I think social justice, and politics are areas that I’d like to explore.”

I’ve been talking to some of my friends [about] a regular commitment, like a weekly commitment is really important to building relationships and bringing about change and that’s where a lot of the important work of activism is. That’s something that I’m trying to be more interested in. (Female, 24, Jamaica Plain)

I just want to be more involved in— I wouldn’t say it’s real government, but just local. Just activities and issues in Somerville. (Female, 25, Somerville)

There is oppression that people experience and there are things that you need to overcome, and that’s something that I carry with me. I need to be a warrior and a champion for others who have been oppressed. (Focus group participant, Jamaica Plain)

Although their focus is often on universal issues of race, class, and privilege, many of the young adults we interviewed are involved with or are open to Jewish forums and avenues for action. A young man from Somerville remarks, ‘If it was a volunteer type thing that would be good.’ No other type of Jewish experience appeals to him.

I wish I had more opportunity for meaningful political engagement. I feel the nation feels really broken to me right now...and that feels like the most urgent thing...Honestly, the way that I have felt most inspired to affiliate with the Jewish community recently has been the Jews who are standing up against the Muslim ban, who are claiming the heritage of Judaism and some of the ideals that are or should be central to Judaism to fight Trumpism, to fight racism, to fight misogyny, to fight Islamophobia, and xenophobia. This is a kind of Judaism I can be proud of. (Female, 37, Somerville)

Particularly in this current political climate. I’ve thought a lot about it, especially wanting to be an ally with Muslim people and people from other religious minority backgrounds. There are people who really
want to be engaged out there. So, there are some really good things related to being Jewish now, again, given the political atmosphere. (Female, 26, Cambridge)

I volunteer at a soup kitchen, which I love, and actually I’ve started volunteering there through a Jewish group. I’ve become more involved in the community…through the volunteering, and I do feel, even though it’s not structural, a lasting change. I’m proud of feeling every week when I leave the soup kitchen, I feel I’ve made a small difference, a small positive difference for someone that day. (Female, 27, Cambridge)

My friend and I did a little bit of community volunteering in Central Square one time with the homelessness initiative over there. [If the Jewish community provided such opportunities] that would be something I would do. (Female, 24, Cambridge)

I deliver Family Table with my cousin, and my sister once a month. Those kinds of things I feel add value to my life, and the important part for that is the Jewish connection there, where it’s like doing something for that particular community. (Female, 25, Somerville)

For some young adults, Jewish avenues for social justice and volunteering are appealing because they are not focused on religion. In other words, they have the opportunity to enact their Jewish values and to meet Jewish peers but through a secular activity.

I came to the realization that maybe if I wanted to meet Jewish people I should do more Jewish volunteer-based projects because going to things that were going to be more religious in nature wasn’t going to work for me…Something like volunteering which still is through a Jewish organization and has Jewish values like giving back to the community, maybe that would be more attractive because it doesn’t feel physically related to any religious kind of identity. (Female, 26, Cambridge)
When Social Justice Commitments are Perceived as being at Odds with the Jewish Community

We met with one small group of individuals who are active in social justice work but feel ambivalent at best and even offended by what they perceive to be inconsistencies in the underlying values of the Jewish community. In a focus group, the young adults describe features of Jewish communal organizations that violate their personal beliefs. Specifically, they describe the Jewish community as predominantly white, heteronormative, privileged, and uncritically supportive of Israel. Some feel estranged from home synagogues that they perceive as wealthy, insular, and even prejudiced.

One part of [my] struggling with my Jewish identity is just feeling that I got some notes of that justice leaning edge from growing up in the Jewish community. But also seeing the wealth and the racism and the hypocrisy that was present in that community and in the community at large...I just remember the experience of going to shul and being with this community that I was on the lower economic end of, and then going back to my house and thinking just how completely disconnected it felt from the city we were actually living in...So my experience growing up in Judaism was having to go to [Hebrew school] and just feeling really ‘othered.’

What does it mean to be Jewish? Does it mean to be white and affluent and detached from what’s happening in the world?

For these young adults, entering Jewish life, especially when it is sponsored or connected to the local Jewish establishment, is a difficult proposition. Their commitment to issues of race and class, both in the United States and abroad, leads them to fear that they cannot be authentically themselves. They feel they cannot fully express their beliefs in the Jewish community but must instead leave their beliefs and values ‘at the door’ when entering Jewish spaces.

I struggle with how I feel about Israel and it feels like the more Jewish you are in America, also the more detached you are from the Palestinian struggle, which is so challenging. I’ll be in a Jewish space and I will feel I have to swallow what I feel is right or wrong, and masquerade as if it’s not something that constantly irritates me.

For me it’s difficult being in spaces which unequivocally support Israel. I think the idea that any dissent towards Israel is seen as antisemitic by some communities—or a lot of mainstream Jewish communities—is morally incorrect.

I once tried to voice my opinions to one of the rabbis at our shul and talk about why I found her speech about Israel to be really offensive and just got a condescending response, and so it just felt like my voice wasn’t one that wanted to be heard.

I try to make peace with the conflicting parts in my head. I so fiercely believe in social justice and how wronged Palestinians are right now, but I also still believe that there has to be a State of Israel. I’m not informed enough to like intelligently argue those two and wrestle with those two points and how Judaism and Israel are so fiercely tied and I wish they could be tied in a way that was more open to dialogue, and it feels like it’s not—if you don’t agree with Israel then it’s really hard to be in these spaces.
Dealmakers and Dealbreakers in Attracting Young Adults

Reanalysis of the data from the 2015 study indicates that Jewish young adults’ reasons for not participating in Jewish programs are similar to those of older adults, including lack of interest and lack of time (Figure 6). However, younger adults are also more likely to say that they are unaware of the opportunities that exist. Location of programs is also a reason for more than half of them.

Compared to the 36+ group, a much larger proportion of young adults view programs as unwelcoming or not adequately inclusive.

When compared to middle age and older adults, Jewish young adults are no more likely or unlikely to participate in a program based on whether it is sponsored by a Jewish organization (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Reasons for Not Participating in Programs

Figure 7: Jewish Sponsorship and Decision to Participate in Programming

Does the fact that a program is sponsored by a Jewish organization make you more or less likely to participate?
This section of the report focuses on the factors that deter young adults from participating in programs and settings. In particular, we discuss the importance of social network factors, location, non-religious focus, the commitment of time and effort expected, and barriers to finding out what is available.

No One Wants to Go Alone

Emerging adults surround themselves with similar peers and, for the most part, explore activities as a part of this group (Watters, 2003). In addition to making new experiences more fun, the company of peers gives young adults confidence that an activity is appropriate for “someone like them.” Many young adults express their reticence to go to an event when they do not have a friend that will accompany them. They also worry that all the other attendees might already be connected, leaving them to feel like an outsider.

If [my friend] knew about a really cool event, I would go with her…she makes me feel a lot more comfortable (Female, 24, Cambridge)

I think if I were designing something I’d try to come up with a way to kind of break down those barriers because otherwise if you do get people to show up and they show up and everyone already knows everyone then [those who don’t know anyone] they’re not going to have a good time and they’re not going to want to stay involved which is kind of what happened with me… Instead of everyone just going and sitting wherever they wanted during the dinnertime, you [should] purposely group people up and say everyone who works [in] this type of field, sit at this table, or the people based on their neighborhoods or how they answer topic questions or something like that…I guess I would probably design something like that, that had kind of consistent opportunities and force people to meet new people so you didn’t walk in and kind of stand there awkwardly in the corner if you didn’t already have a friend. (Female, 26, Cambridge)

Location, Location, Location

Many of the young adults interviewed say they are far less likely to consider going to programs that are not easily accessible by public transportation from their neighborhood. For some, the concern is the inconvenience of having to change trains, and for others it is the amount of time it will take to get to and from an event in the evening. In practice this means that young adults who live in Cambridge, Somerville, or Jamaica Plain primarily use the Orange and Red Lines and are unlikely to attend events in Brookline or anywhere else that requires them to transfer to the Green Line.

I don’t go to places that are inconvenient. I would say anywhere over like half an hour [away is inconvenient]. I would never go to JP. I don’t go to South Boston. I don’t really go to East Boston. I don’t really go to Coolidge Corner, Brookline. I’m not against those places, but most of the people I know...
Jewish Young Adults in Cambridge, Somerville, and Jamaica Plain

Don’t live there, and then they’re just farther away. (Female, 25, Cambridge)

Well, for me, I’d like to see more things off the Red Line that I needed to get to. (Female, 23, Somerville)

If it was in Somerville or Cambridge, it’d be easier for me to get to and I’d be more willing to go. (Female, 25, Somerville)

I think, either if I’m not close enough, like if it’s something that it’s in Brookline...that can be difficult for me to make or something that isn’t accessible by public transportation. I think that prevents me from getting involved. (Female, 23, Somerville)

I heard about one [Jewish program] in Jamaica Plain. We’ve made plans to go, but instead we usually hang out. We live in Somerville, so it feels like a trek, but I don’t know of anything closer here in Cambridge or Somerville, which I think would be a lot easier to get to and I’d be more likely to go to it. (Female, 25, Somerville)

If it’s something that it’s in Brookline...that can be difficult for me to make or something that isn't accessible by public transportation. I think that prevents me from getting involved. (Female, 23, Jamaica Plain)

‘Ugh,’ I don’t want to go all the way to Back Bay, if it’s $40 and I don’t even know anyone there and it’s probably gonna be awkward. (Female, 25, Somerville)

When I say I’m not gonna go to anything in Brookline, I mean I’m not gonna go to anything in Brookline...There are a lot of people who don’t work in Boston. If there’s something that starts at 6:00 pm downtown, I’m not gonna get there. So, I mean, I’m more than happy to go off one of the subway lines, but crossing the river during the week is not really an option. But if it’s a Friday night and something is in downtown Boston that’s a lot different than on a Tuesday night or whatever. (Female, 24, Cambridge)

Not Focused on Religion

Many young adults are careful to note that they do not want activities or settings organized around the religious aspects of Judaism. Some describe wanting to participate in events related to the Jewish cycle of holidays but often stress that they want these activities to be focused on community and not religion.

Community of secular Jews...I think most of the time when Jews are getting together, it’s usually for a holiday or some sort of religious purpose. And I think it would be nice if there were that sort of resource. I don’t know if that exists really...I don’t see myself going to Shabbat services every single week. (Female, 24, Cambridge)

Not necessarily something religious. I would be very unlikely to show up to a Torah study class, but more likely to show up to something that sounds more extracurricular. (Female, 23, Somerville)

It would be awesome to have a Jewish party that was, yes, a little religious but also just like let’s get together and drink. Or like Sukkot where it’s let’s build the sukk[ah] and have young Jews just come and meet each other, have an outlet for those people who would be interested in celebrating. (Male, 24, Somerville)

I’d say social events attract me, like the Purim Party, or Gin and Jews, things that are culturally relevant, maybe, but not religious. (Female, 25, Cambridge)

I just don’t want to be [religiously] involved with being Jewish. I think that any more ways that we have that we can engage young people, whatever way they want to be involved, I think, is pretty important. (Female, 26, Cambridge)
Not too Formal, Not too Often

The Jewish young adults we spoke with are keenly aware of their limited discretionary time. They are reticent to make long-term commitments outside of work or school. For these young adults, the expected frequency of participation is a critical factor in whether or not they chose to become involved in an activity or group. Their preference is for opportunities that are casual where they can “drop-in” when they have the time but not feel that they are disappointing others when they cannot attend. They also prefer options that do not require a decision far in advance of the event.

I don’t think I’d be able to commit to something too frequently, but I would definitely...see myself participating in something...once every couple months or so. (Male, 25, Cambridge)

I think that everything that I’ve seen, at least, has been very formal and very like ‘RSVP by this date and it costs this much money.’ I think just the formality of everything—I want sort of a different way of doing it. (Female, 24, Cambridge)

Just an opportunity to like meet more Jewish young people in the area. Yes, like in a context that was relaxed, and just more social. (Female, 23, Somerville)

Part of the problem is you have to commit a lot and it’s kind of hard to do that. Whenever it’s a book club or something, you can go, I don’t know, once a month and if you can’t do it that month, you don’t have to do it that month. That would be kind of cool for me. (Female, 25, Somerville)

If there were some kind of informal setting like that, where you could just talk about Jewish philosophy. If there was something like that in Boston, I would definitely be interested. (Male, 22, Cambridge)

You Need to Know to Go

The 2015 study data suggests that the most common ways for millennials to get their information about Jewish programs and activities are through the internet or social and family networks (Figure 8). They are unlikely to find out through synagogue newsletters, the Jewish media, or local communal leaders.

Many of the young adults we interviewed know little to nothing of the Jewish opportunities available to them. Only a very small number of interviewees mention the JewishBoston website as a source of information about local opportunities. The reliance of most young adults on word-of-mouth and social media means that unless members of their friendship circle are plugged into this information, they are unlikely to ever hear about an activity. They are also unlikely to select an activity that has not been vetted by their social network.

I haven’t really seen anything advertised anywhere or heard much about it. Actually there is a lot going on but it’s just not in my circle really. (Female, 24, Somerville)

Obviously there are places in Boston that are places for the Jewish community, but I’m not really aware of them. (Male, 28, Cambridge)

I really just see things on Facebook. A couple of the people from my [Birthright] trip will RSVP to events and stuff, so I just see it through Facebook. (Female, 23, JP)

Just in an email or Facebook. (Female, 25, Somerville)

So this may already exist, but if there were a Facebook group or something where different events across Boston were sort of reposted or re-publicized for a way for people to find out about it. (Female, 32, Somerville)
Figure 8: Sources of Information about Local Jewish Activities

Do you get your information about local Jewish activities, news, and events from any of the following?

- Internet or social media (including JewishBoston.com)
- Family and friends
- Synagogue newsletter or organization newsletter
- Rabbi or other Jewish community leader
- Local Jewish media

Young adults

36+

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%
Our exploration of Jewish young adult life in Cambridge, Somerville, and Jamaica Plain has yielded a complex, rich, and nuanced portrait. The Jewish millennials we met are fully engaged in building adult lives of meaningful work and study, enriching extra-curricular pursuits, and strong networks of friends. Although they are proud of their Jewish identity and heritage, it is not a priority. They try out Jewish programs and groups, but don’t settle in anywhere. For these young adults, Jewish community and life is rooted in and largely bounded by their circle of friends. They express interest in programming and settings related to Jewish content, social justice, and building their Jewish community of friends. However, they frankly admit that they are unlikely to participate if they don’t have a friend to accompany them, if they have to travel outside of the range of their preferred “T” line, if the focus veers too much into religious practice and ritual, or if they have to make too formal or extensive a commitment of time or resources. The challenge for the Jewish community is to respect the perceptions and proclivities of young adults but, at the same time, enlist their collaboration in creating new avenues for Jewish engagement that are generationally and developmentally relevant.

The findings of this study represent a starting point rather than a set of directions for achieving CJP’s goals with Boston-area Jewish young adults. We conclude this report not with a list of specific suggestions but with a discussion of how the evolving idea of Jewish community might be used as a frame for conceptualizing CJP’s continued work in this arena.

A portrait of the traditional Boston community appears in writings such as those of Herbert Gans (1962), an ethnographer who focused on the West End neighborhood. Community for Jewish West End residents included a strong sense of connection and identity with local spaces. The street and surrounding neighborhood were seen as extensions of the home. Just walking out one’s front door was enough to be immersed in a network of Jewish connections and exchanges. By the time of the 1965 Boston Jewish community study (Axelrod et al., 1965), Jews were dispersing into the suburbs and notions of community were being re-examined. Suburban Jews looked beyond their stoop to local Jewish institutions accessed by car. For the Boomer generation raised in these suburbs, Jewish community was found through the synagogue or the Jewish Community Center. Weber coined the phrase “community without propinquity” to describe just this situation in which community is not bound to the neighborhood (Weber, 1963).

The definition of Jewish community is undergoing change once again. For millennials, community is highly personal, largely divorced from geography, institutions or religious practice, and synonymous with their friendship circles. With continuous access to social media, Jewish young adults “carry” their communities with them. However, it would be erroneous to assume that Jewish young adults are complacent or satisfied with their Jewish communities. They speak of their yearning for an authentic sense of belonging to a community based on peoplehood, shared purpose, and meaning. Many desire a Jewish community where they can share the difficulties and joys of their young adult lives. How to establish and maintain this type of community, given the realities of their transient lives and without reliance on traditional religious institutional forms, is their current challenge.
How do these young adults find other young Jews living in their neighborhood, especially when they move to a new part of Boston? What resources will empower young adults to become agents in creating their own Jewish life and in germinating new settings and groups? The successful strategy is likely to be one that focuses on relationship and community building rather than the development of a menu of programs. As one participant said, “It always comes down to people” (Male, 22, Cambridge).

Young adults want to explore Jewishness on their own terms and in ways that feel authentic and meaningful to them. An empowerment strategy might start with the placement of dynamic community organizers in neighborhoods like those we studied.

Organizers can leverage and link existing but currently disconnected groups and networks of Jewish young adults. Simply enabling young adults to meet the Jewish peers in their neighborhood can be a powerful intervention. As they recognize common interests, concerns, and preferences, organizers can help further shared goals and interests. In some cases this might mean tying Jewish identity to existing interests and hobbies. In other cases, connections to peers who share a desire for options for Jewish life that they cannot find or access in the larger Boston Jewish community may need to be pursued. Any strategy must recognize the expressed need for community or communities based on secular values, interests, and commitments in addition to shared Jewish identity.
References


Appendix: Interview Guides

Individual Interview Protocol

I’d like to start by hearing a bit about when you were growing up

1. Where did you spend most of your growing up years?
2. When you were growing up, what was your religious/ethnic identity?
   - Tell me about the experience of being Jewish in your family.
   - What did you do that felt religious or related to your ethnic heritage?
   - What about religious observance or education?
   - Did you identify with or experience any other religious traditions in addition to Judaism growing up?
3. Tell me about your friend groups growing up.
   - How did you meet them?
   - What connected you as friends?
4. Did you go to college? If so, where did you go and what did you study?
   - What motivated you to choose that school?
   - What were your friends like? (Were you a type?)
   - Were you very involved in any extracurricular activities?
5. What else is important for me to know about your growing up years?

Now let’s talk about your life today

6. How old are you?
7. Tell me about your current situation regarding work and school.
8. When you are not in school or at work, how do you spend your time?
   - What are your interests, passions and involvements?
   - In what, if any, types of creative activities do you participate?
9. With whom do you spend your time?
10. Are you in a relationship?
    - If so: how did you meet? How long have you been together?
    - If not: Do you want to be in a relationship? What’s your ideal partner like?
11. Tell me about your living situation.
    - Do you live with anyone?
    - How did you choose your housemates?
    - How did you choose your neighborhood?
12. How would you describe your current social network?
    - Where did you meet your close friends?
    - Any recent or upcoming changes in that network?
13. If you had to make a list of the important things someone would have to know about you to know who you are, what would that be?
   - How do you express/act on those elements of your sense of yourself?
   - What were the most salient experiences in your background that contributed to those elements?
14. How would you describe your religious/ethnic identity today?
   - Where, if anything, does your Jewish identity or background figure into your current sense of who you are?
   - In what ways, if at all, do you express that identity?
   - What do you think about the Jewish organizations/programs available to you?
     - Feelings about “membership”
   - What activities do you engage in that feel connected to your Jewish identity?
   - How did you become involved in those activities?
   - What prevents/limits your expression of your Jewish identity at this point in your life?
   - Do you have immediate family members or close friends who aren’t Jewish? If so, how do you think that has influenced how you feel about being Jewish?
   - How or where might the Jewish community help you express/act on that part of your identity?
15. What do you care most about at this point in your life?
   - How do you express/act on those priorities in your life?
   - What do you worry about?
16. What parts of your identity do you wish you had more opportunities to express or explore?
   - What prevents/limits your expression of those parts of your identity at this point in your life?
   - What resources/options do you wish were available?
17. Thinking about yourself at this point in your life, how would you describe your spiritual needs or your needs to find/create meaning for yourself?
   - How do you go about filling those needs?
   - What resources do you wish you had to fill those needs?
18. Again, right now in your life, how would you describe your needs for connection and community?
   - How do you fill those needs?
   - What communities do you feel part of?
   - How did you become involved?
   - What has limited your ability to find places to feel a sense of community?
   - Are there communities you no longer feel part of? What caused you to feel less connection?
   - What resources do you wish were available to fill those needs?
19. What kind of programming would you be interested in participating in in your area?
   - What kind of programming could the Jewish community provide that might appeal to you?
20. What about your life are you particularly happy about/proud of?
21. What about your life do you wish were different?
22. Is there anything else I should know that I haven’t asked?

Focus Group Protocol

1. To start, tell us your name and a movie, TV show, or book that has had a significant impact on your sense of self.
2. If you had to make a list of the important things someone would have to know about you to know who you are, what would be on your list? [Traits or roles, parts of your identity]
   • How do you express/act on those elements of your sense of yourself?
3. What parts of your identity do you wish you had more opportunities to express or explore?
   • What prevents/limits your expression of those parts of your identity at this point in your life?
   • What resources/options do you wish were available?
4. Where do you go to find out what’s going on around town?
   • What draws you into an activity or event or organization?
   • What makes you not want to participate in an activity/event/organization?
5. Where, if anything, does your Jewish identity or background figure into your current sense of who you are?
   • In what ways, if at all, do you express that identity?
   • Connections/affiliations?
   • What activities do you engage in that feel connected to your Jewish identity?
   • How did you become involved in those activities?
   • What prevents/limits your expression of your Jewish identity at this point in your life?
6. Thinking about yourself at this point in your life, how would you describe your spiritual needs
   • How do you go about filling those needs?
   • What resources do you wish you had to fill those needs?
7. Again, right now in your life, how would you describe your needs for connection and community?
   • How do you fill those needs?
   • What communities do you feel part of?
   • How did you become involved?
   • What has limited your ability to find places to feel a sense of community?
   • Are there communities you no longer feel part of? What caused you to feel less connection?
   • What resources do you wish were available to fill those needs?
8. What kind of programming or resources could the Jewish community provide that might appeal to you?
Demographic Questionnaire

Date: ______________

Age: ______________

Gender: ______________ Preferred pronoun(s): ______________

City/town of residence: _________________________________________

Do your parent(s)/guardian(s) identify with any religious tradition(s)?

Parent/Guardian 1: ________________________________________________

Parent/Guardian 2: ________________________________________________

Additional parent(s)/guardian(s): ____________________________________

Are you currently:

Single ○ In a relationship ○ Married/Partnered ○

If you’re in a relationship or married, did your partner grow up identifying with any religious tradition(s)? How do they identify now?

Growing up _______________________________

Now ________________________________

During grades 1-12 did you ever attend the following, and for how many years?

Supplementary Jewish school (i.e., Hebrew or Sunday school)

Yes ○ No ○

If yes, number of years? ____

Full-time Jewish day school?

Yes ○ No ○

If yes, number of years? _____

Overnight camp with Jewish programming?

Yes ○ No ○

If yes, number of years? _____
The Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University is a multi-disciplinary research institute dedicated to the study of American Jewry and issues related to contemporary Jewish life.

The Steinhardt Social Research Institute (SSRI), hosted at CMJS, uses innovative research methods to collect and analyze socio-demographic data on the Jewish community.