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## “DIY” JUDAISM: HOW CONTEMPORARY JEWISH YOUNG ADULTS EXPRESS THEIR JEWISH IDENTITY\*

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### *Abstract*

Contemporary American Jewish young adults, like their non-Jewish peers, are believed to eschew traditional religious and communal institutions. The term “Do-It-Yourself” (DIY) Judaism has emerged to characterize alternative forms of Jewish engagement that bypass the established infrastructure of American Jewish life. Little is known about the extent or prevalence of DIY Judaism. The current study uses data collected from a large sample of applicants to Taglit-Birthright Israel (Taglit), which has engaged tens of thousands of young adults from across the spectrum of American Jewish life, to explore both the character of young adults’ involvement in Jewish life and the factors associated with involvement. Consistent with the individualistic ethos of the Millennial generation, results indicate that home-based or self-organized ritual practice and small, niche initiatives are popular among Jewish young adults. At the same time, Jewish engagement is strongly predicted by respondents’ background and intervening Jewish experiences, such as participation in Taglit. Those with stronger Jewish backgrounds are significantly more likely to celebrate Shabbat and holidays and participate in Jewish-sponsored events. Single young adults with minimal Jewish background remain an especially disconnected segment of the Jewish population, and practices of DIY Judaism have yet to capture this group. It

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remains to be seen whether new programs can facilitate their engagement with Jewish life.

**Keywords:** Judaism, Identity, Young Adults, Religion, Community, Individualism

### *Introduction*

The engagement of young adults in Jewish religious and communal life has become a central concern, and numerous programs have emerged to bolster Jewish identity and engagement among the next generation of adults. These initiatives that exist outside the dominant infrastructure of American Jewish life<sup>1</sup> have been labeled “Do-It-Yourself” (DIY) Judaism. The common thread linking DIY projects is that they empower participants, allowing them to define their own Jewish identities and create their own forms of Jewish expression. Led primarily by young adults, DIY Judaism is consistent with many of the values espoused by the Millennial generation—individualism, meaningfulness, authenticity, and active participation rather than passive consumerism. DIY Judaism exists on a small scale, often serving niche constituencies and relying on the expertise of social and cultural entrepreneurs with high levels of Jewish education and socialization.

Some of the best-known initiatives of DIY Judaism are independent minyanim and other “emergent” Jewish groups that create prayer communities outside of conventional synagogue settings.<sup>2</sup> Cohen and Kelman documented three other initiatives of DIY Judaism: Storahtelling, a company that promotes Jewish cultural literacy through theatrical performances, founded in 1998; the now-defunct JDub Records, a Jewish record label, founded in 2002; and the Salon, a discussion group for young, culturally savvy Jews in Toronto, Canada, founded in 2003.<sup>3</sup> Other programs and activities that fall under the umbrella of DIY Judaism include formal concerts, holiday celebrations, and comic presentations,<sup>4</sup> as well as informal Jewish book clubs, study groups, and Shabbat meal programs.<sup>5</sup>

Scholars have described the contours of DIY Judaism. Wertheimer, for example, distinguishes between the “establishment” sector, which encompasses longstanding American Jewish institutions such as Jewish Federations, synagogues, and JCCs, and the “nonestablishment” sector, which encompasses newer, smaller programs and initiatives, or “start-ups”.<sup>6</sup> This “nonestablishment” sector is analogous to DIY Judaism and encompasses six categories based on programmatic focus: independent minyanim, cultural activities, collectives offering Jewish programming,

social action, Israel-oriented programs, and philanthropic efforts.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Cohen identifies five domains of “new Jewish organizing” that exist outside “the ‘system’” of American Jewish life: spiritual communities, culture, learning, social justice, and new media.<sup>8</sup> Both Wertheimer and Cohen stress the institutional independence of DIY Judaism and the importance of prayer, culture, and social justice as programmatic foci.

Attempts by Jewish young adults to reinvent and reinvigorate their relationship to Judaism are not new developments; for example, as several have noted, DIY Judaism has features of the havurah movement in the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> Currently, DIY Judaism has captured the attention of the Jewish community, in part because it resonates with other efforts to cultivate the allegiance of Jewish young adults. At the institutional level, Jewish organizations such as Reboot, PresentTense Group, and Slingshot have been founded to support the entry of young innovators into organized Jewish life and the development of new ways for young Jews to relate to the community. DIY Judaism is very much a part of communal discourse, although relatively little is known about the extent to which young adults have embraced it. The current study is designed to advance our understanding of DIY Judaism by providing empirical data about the practices and views of young adults. Survey data from a large sample of Jewish young adults are used to explore the character and prevalence of traditional and DIY forms of Jewish engagement in this population.

### *Religious Context*

DIY Judaism exists within the broader context of declining communal affiliation and social cohesion in the United States. Thus, for example, political scientist Robert Putnam argues that over the last third of the twentieth century, American society experienced a marked decline in political, civic, and religious engagement, as well as workplace connections, informal social connections, altruism, volunteering, and philanthropy.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, sociologist Robert Wuthnow argues that community involvement is not declining but merely adopting a looser and more flexible character in response to changing social realities.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in a 1991 survey, 40 percent of American adults claimed to be involved in a small group, often religious or spiritual in nature, that provided support and caring for its participants.<sup>12</sup> These groups focused on individual needs, comfort, and success, rather than shared heritage or collective destiny. As such, they attracted people who were disillusioned with large-scale religious institutions and preferred to create their own alternatives.

More recent data indicates that today's young adults eschew formal religious authority and institutions to an even greater degree than their parents. About one quarter of Millennials report having no religious affiliation and consider themselves to be atheists, agnostics, or lacking in a religion. In contrast, only 20 percent of Gen Xers and 13 percent of Baby Boomers were unaffiliated at a comparable point in their lifecycle.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, across all religious groups, young adults are less likely to attend worship services or join religious organizations than were their parents or grandparents at the same age.<sup>14</sup> Although involvement in religious life increases with age, participation levels among current young adults are not expected to mirror participation levels of previous generations.<sup>15</sup>

Today's young adults are also apt to create a unique set of beliefs rather than accept a top-down religious philosophy.<sup>16</sup> For example, a 2005 survey found that three out of four American Catholics were more likely to "follow my own conscience" on a difficult moral issue than follow the "teachings of Pope Benedict".<sup>17</sup> Typified by Bellah et al.'s anecdote about "Sheilaism," the phenomenon of "make-your-own-religion" still seems an apt descriptor of many young American adults.<sup>18</sup> As captured by Arnett, who refers to the twenty-something developmental stage as emerging adulthood, one of his respondents said, "I don't have any really strong [religious] beliefs because I believe that whatever you feel, it's personal...everybody has their own idea of God".<sup>19</sup> A number of religious innovations have emerged to reach the growing population of religiously unaffiliated individuals in their 20s and 30s. One such innovation is the emerging church movement, which attracts young adults, often in urban areas, through the use of modern technology and a focus on "doing" rather than faith.<sup>20</sup>

These broad trends relating to individualism and declining religious affiliation were mirrored in the American Jewish community in the 1980s and 1990s. Data from the 1970 and 1990 National Jewish Population Surveys (NJPS) show that, although private expressions of Jewish identification remained relatively stable during the last third of the twentieth century, public expressions of Jewish identification—such as synagogue membership, Jewish organizational membership, and attachment to Jewish social networks—declined substantially.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the 1997 National Survey of American Jews revealed that levels of religiosity were relatively uniform across the age spectrum, but that younger Jews scored lower than older Jews on almost all measures of Jewish ethnicity, including attachment to and affiliation with Jewish institutions.<sup>22</sup> Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar, using data from NJPS 2000-01

and the American Jewish Identity Survey, found that Jewish “nones” (i.e., participants who have Jewish parents or were brought up in a Jewish home but currently report having “no religion”) increased from 15 percent to 21 percent between 1990 and 2001.<sup>23</sup>

Data from the General Social Survey (GSS) support the claim that younger generations are less likely to identify themselves as Jewish<sup>24</sup> and more likely to identify as no religion.<sup>25</sup> Cohen stated that American Judaism has “drawn into the self”<sup>26</sup> and that, on an institutional level, “[b]ars and coffee houses are more inviting to this demographic than synagogues or Jewish community Federation board rooms”.<sup>27</sup> Farber and Waxman connected the decline in public expressions of Jewish identification to the adoption of the value structure of postmodern America, which promotes religious individualism and self-autonomy over the interests of the community.<sup>28</sup>

One of the questions driving the present study is whether or not these trends still characterize today’s young adults.<sup>29</sup> DIY Judaism seems to run counter to a trend of Jewish disengagement, but some observers have claimed that DIY Judaism is an elite phenomenon, largely attracting Jewish young adults with high levels of Jewish education and childhood Jewish socialization.<sup>30</sup> The present study attempts to capture the current state of Jewish engagement among young adults, including the localized, heterogeneous phenomenon of DIY Judaism, in a large-scale survey. It explores the extent to which Jewish young adults are engaging in Jewish life and, more specifically, the extent to which DIY Judaism manifests itself in their Jewish lives.

### *Methods*

The sample for the current study was drawn from the population of North American applicants to Taglit-Birthright Israel, a program that provides free, ten-day educational trips to Israel for Diaspora Jewish young adults, ages 18 to 26.<sup>31</sup> Taglit applicants represent the diversity of American young adults and include those with virtually no Jewish education to those with day school backgrounds. Prior research on Taglit has demonstrated the program’s impact on connection to Israel, family formation, and engagement with the Jewish community, both in the short term and years after the trip.<sup>32</sup> The present analysis does not focus directly on the impact of Taglit. Nevertheless, because it is expected that participation in Taglit will be associated with significantly higher levels of engagement in a variety of forms of Jewish life, analyses designed to understand the factors associated with Jewish engagement will include Taglit participation.

A random sample of 2,870 individuals was drawn from the applicant pool of US and Canadian applicants to Taglit, including both those who participated in the program and those who did not. The survey was conducted in 2010 (January to May) and collected data from a sample of applicants from four trip cohorts (the summer 2007, winter 2007-08, summer 2008, and winter 2008-09 trips). Because the goal of the study was to understand post-college Jewish engagement, only applicants who were 22 or older at the time of the survey are included. The sample was stratified by trip cohort, participant status, and geographic location (with an oversample of the New York metro area). Respondents were offered incentives to complete the survey. The overall response rate was 48.3 percent (AAPOR RR2) with response rates of 55.7 percent for Taglit participants and 41.9 percent for nonparticipants. Design weights were applied to correct for differential probability of selection.<sup>33</sup>

*Survey instrument.* In addition to basic demographic characteristics, respondents were asked about their experience with Taglit; their religious/Jewish life growing up, including their movement affiliation (e.g., Reform, Conservative), whether and for how many years they attended Jewish day or supplementary school, and their home ritual practices during high school; their attitudes toward Judaism and the Jewish people; and Jewish activities/events in which they had participated over the past year.

Cohen has pointed out the necessity of finding empirical measures “attuned to novelty, innovation, and diversity of Jewish expression”.<sup>34</sup> Recognizing that many young adults may be connecting to their Jewish communities in ways that might be difficult to capture in a survey, the current study used open-ended questions designed to capture informal and novel forms of Jewish practice. Respondents were asked a number of open-ended questions, including queries about the most recent Jewish-sponsored event attended and who sponsored it, what they did last Friday night, and whether and with whom they celebrated Hanukkah, Passover, or Purim. Questions about a Jewish-sponsored event were designed to elicit a diverse range of activities that were not familiar to researchers *a priori*. Responses to open-ended questions were coded into categories developed based on the participant-generated responses (see Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 4).

## *Results*

Results are presented in two sections. First, the demographic characteristics and Jewish backgrounds of respondents are summarized, and the creation of a single Jewish background index is also described.

The respondent profile is fairly typical of the current generation of Jewish young adults. Second, the current Jewish engagement of respondents is presented: participation in synagogue and religious services, Jewish events and activities, holiday celebrations, and Shabbat observances. Respondents’ overall rates of engagement are low, particularly among those who have weaker Jewish backgrounds and those who are unmarried and childless.

### *Respondents’ Demographic and Jewish Characteristics*

*Demographic characteristics.* The vast majority of respondents lived in the United States, just over six percent lived in Canada, and a very small number lived in other countries. There were an approximately equal number of males and females. Respondents ranged in age from 22 to 29 years old, with a mean age of 25 years. Thirty-nine percent were students: 27 percent were graduate students and 12 percent were undergraduates. Eighty percent of the non-students were working full-time, about 10 percent were working part-time, and the rest were not working. Ninety-three percent of respondents were unmarried and childless. Six percent of respondents were married without children; only one percent of respondents were either married with children or were single parents.

*Jewish characteristics.* The respondents reflected the diversity within the Jewish community. About one-third of respondents were raised secular/culturally Jewish or “just Jewish” (32 percent), and an additional third were raised Reform (37 percent). The rest were raised Conservative (21 percent), with a small minority raised Orthodox (3 percent), Reconstructionist (1 percent), or “other” (6 percent). One-quarter of the respondents came from intermarried households.

In terms of ritual practices in the household during their high school years, some respondents reported celebrating Hanukkah (94 percent), attending a Passover seder (85 percent), lighting Shabbat candles regularly (33 percent), and keeping kosher (17 percent). These measures of ritual observance were ordered according to level of intensity, from least to greatest: (0) no ritual observance, (1) celebrating Hanukkah only, (2) holding or attending a Passover seder, (3) lighting Shabbat candles regularly, and (4) keeping kosher at home. Respondents were then grouped by the most intense ritual observed by their family. Overall, four percent of families observed no rituals; 10 percent celebrated Hanukkah only, 50 percent attended a Passover seder (and celebrated Hannukkah), 19 percent regularly lit Shabbat candles (as well as celebrating Hanukkah and Passover); and 17 percent kept kosher at home (as well as lighting Shabbat candles and celebrating Hanukkah and Passover).

The majority of respondents (55 percent) received between 100 and 1,000 hours of formal Jewish education in grades 1 through 12,<sup>35</sup> which represents attending supplementary school for one to ten years. Twenty-two percent of respondents received no formal Jewish education in grades 1 through 12, and 23 percent received 1,100 hours or more, which represents attending a Jewish day school for multiple years. Just over 40 percent of respondents attended an overnight Jewish camp or a Jewish educational program.

*Jewish background index.* A Jewish background scale was created to reflect the intensity of a respondent's Jewish upbringing.<sup>36</sup> The scale included four items: hours of formal Jewish education received in grades 1-12, high school ritual practice, being raised by unmarried parents, and being raised Orthodox.<sup>37</sup> Based on their scale score, respondents were divided into three categories of Jewish background: low, medium, and high. Overall, 30 percent of respondents had low levels of Jewish background, 60 percent had medium levels, and 10 percent had high levels.

*Taglit participation.* Seventy-two percent of respondents had participated in a Taglit trip between summer 2007 and winter 2008-09.

### *Jewish Engagement*

*Synagogue and religious services.* Respondents were asked (1) whether they were currently members of a synagogue, temple, minyan, havurah, or other Jewish congregation and (2) how frequently they attended religious services in the past month. These questions capture involvement in both DIY Judaism prayer communities and in more traditional synagogue settings. Overall, only 29 percent of respondents said they were members of a Jewish congregation, and 72 percent said they had not attended services in the past month. A large majority of the sample is therefore uninvolved in either conventional or DIY prayer communities.

Binary logistic regressions were run to understand the factors that contributed to synagogue membership and attendance at Jewish religious services (Table 1). The strongest predictor for both was having a higher Jewish background, such that those with the highest levels of Jewish background were the most likely to belong to a Jewish congregation and to attend religious services. Respondents with children were also more likely than other respondents to belong to a Jewish congregation and to attend religious services, and married respondents without children were more likely to attend religious services. Finally, younger respondents were more likely to report belonging to a Jewish congregation. It is possible that younger respondents still considered themselves members of their



parents’ congregations, as they were no more likely than older respondents to attend religious services.

**Table 1. Binary Logistic Regression (Odds Ratios) of Belonging to a Jewish Congregation and Religious Service Attendance in the Past Month.**

	Belonging to a Jewish congregation	Religious service attendance
Age in years	0.84***	0.95
Female	0.9	0.96
Undergraduate <sup>1</sup>	1.24	1.09
Graduate student <sup>1</sup>	1.04	1.15
Medium Jewish background <sup>2</sup>	1.72**	1.25
High Jewish background <sup>2</sup>	6.04***	6.13***
Taglit participant	1.24	1.31
Married, no children <sup>3</sup>	1.1	1.95*
Has children <sup>3</sup>	5.63*	7.33***
n	1,231	1,237
	F(9, 1,207) = 8.53***	F(9, 1213) = 9.14***

\* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\* p<0.001

<sup>1</sup> Reference category: Not student

<sup>2</sup> Reference category: Low Jewish background

<sup>3</sup> Reference category: Unmarried, no children

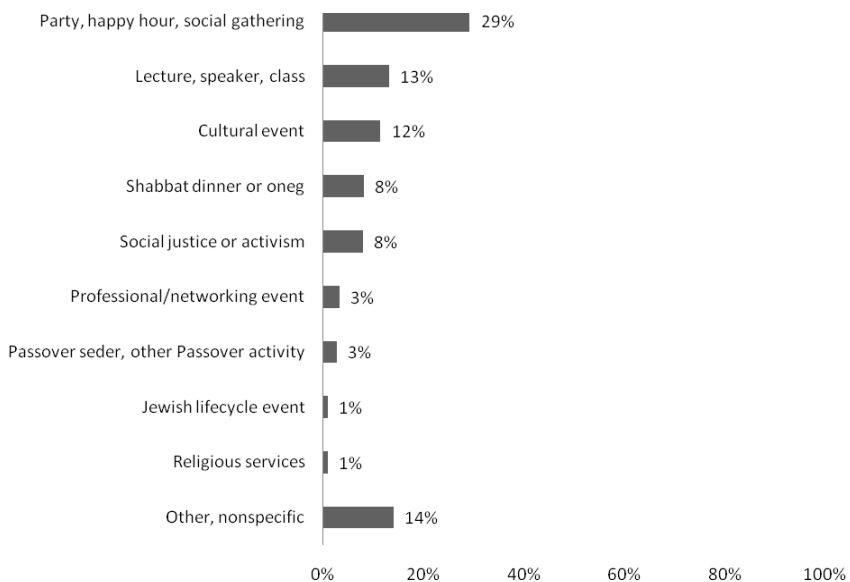
**Table 2. Frequency of Attendance at Events Sponsored by a Jewish Organization in the Past Year (n=1,328).**

Never	58%
Once	14%
More than once	28%

*Jewish events and activities.* The survey asked how often in the past year respondents had gone to any event(s) sponsored by a Jewish organization (other than religious services)—never, once, or more than once. Respondents who had been to one or more events were then asked two open-ended questions: “What was the most recent Jewish-sponsored event you attended (other than religious services)?” and “Who sponsored that event?” The majority of respondents did not attend any events sponsored by a Jewish organization in the past year. Thirteen percent of respondents attended one event, and 28 percent of respondents attended multiple events (see Table 2).

The types of events that respondents reported attending varied widely (Figure 1). The largest percentage were social gatherings such as dances, mixers, or parties (often at bars or other social settings); but lectures and classes, cultural events, such as concerts or plays, and social justice activities, such as charity events or volunteering, were also popular. A small portion of respondents listed Jewish religious services as the event they most recently attended, even though they were instructed to exclude religious services. A substantial percentage of respondents listed activities that could not be easily categorized, either because they were not specific (e.g., “College event”) or because they did not fit into another category (e.g., “Yom Ha’atzmaut BBQ Planning Committee”).

**Figure 1. Most Recent Jewish-Sponsored Event Attended (n=519).**



Logistic regression analyses were used to understand the factors that contributed to participation in at least one Jewish-sponsored event in the past year. Holding other factors constant, higher Jewish background and participation in Taglit were both significant, positive predictors of attending events sponsored by Jewish organizations, as was having children (Table 3). Comparing the model of participation in a Jewish-sponsored event to the model of attending religious services, Jewish background and having a family are important predictors of both types of engagement. Taglit participation, however, is only a significant, positive predictor in the model of participation in a Jewish-sponsored event. This

suggests that young adults who are motivated to find a forum for Jewish engagement seek out non-religious venues.

**Table 3. Logistic Regression (Odds Ratios) of Participating in a Jewish Activity in the Past Year.**

Age in years	0.96
Female	1.03
Undergraduate <sup>1</sup>	1.21
Graduate student <sup>1</sup>	1.01
Medium Jewish background <sup>2</sup>	1.62**
High Jewish background <sup>2</sup>	2.79***
Taglit participant	1.63***
Married, no children <sup>3</sup>	1.18
Has children <sup>3</sup>	2.98*
n	1,210
	F(9,1,186) = 4.36***

\* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\* p<0.001

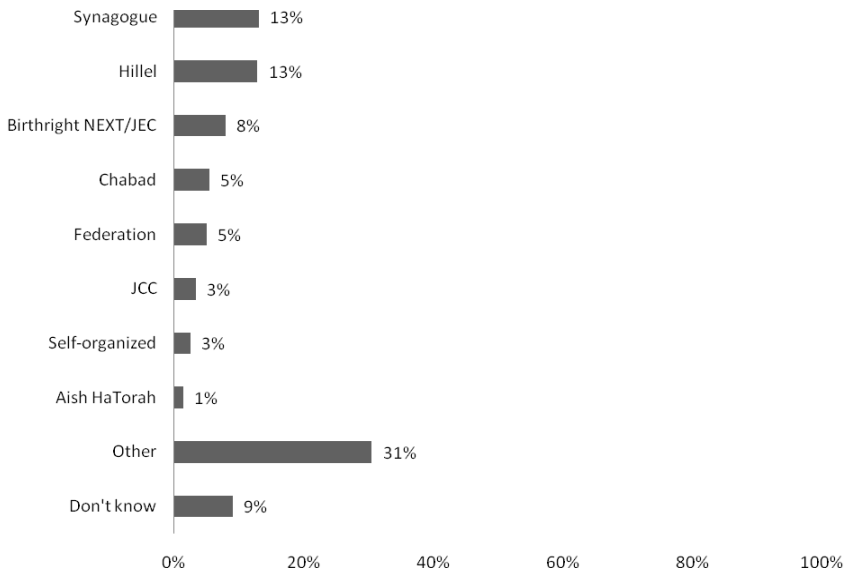
<sup>1</sup> Reference category: Not student

<sup>2</sup> Reference category: Low Jewish background

<sup>3</sup> Reference category: Unmarried, no children

The variety of sponsoring organizations was even more diverse than the types of activities mentioned (Figure 2). Respondents mentioned a large number and variety of Jewish organizations, from traditional ones such as synagogues, Hillel, and Jewish federations, to Orthodox outreach organizations such as Chabad and Aish HaTorah. No single organization was mentioned by more than 13 percent of respondents, and a plurality of respondents had attended an event sponsored by a Jewish organization that was mentioned by few or no other respondents. Some examples of the “other” organizations mentioned are *Heeb* magazine, the Jewish Law Students Association, AEPi, (a Jewish fraternity) 3G (grandchildren of holocaust survivors) and Hazon, the Jewish environmental organization.

**Figure 2. Sponsor of Most Recent Jewish-Sponsored Event Attended (n=519).**



*Holidays.* Holiday celebrations may be a particularly attractive avenue for DIY Judaism because of the diversity of these traditions and the emphasis placed on home celebrations. Respondents were asked open-ended questions about the ways in which they celebrate various holidays, allowing for the capture of any non-traditional holiday observances.

Respondents were asked whether they had done anything to celebrate Hanukkah or Purim and whether they had hosted or attended a Passover seder during the past year. Eighty percent of respondents reported celebrating Hanukkah and 74 percent reported hosting or attending a Passover seder, while only 21 percent reported celebrating Purim. Those who celebrated Hanukkah and Purim were asked in an open-ended question what they did to celebrate the holiday. The most common ways of celebrating Hanukkah were lighting candles (67 percent of celebrants), attending a party, special meal, or get-together (48 percent), exchanging gifts (20 percent), and eating traditional Hanukkah foods like latkes or jelly donuts (13 percent). The most common ways to celebrate Purim were attending parties, carnivals, or Purim spiels (42 percent of celebrants), attending services or hearing a megillah reading (31 percent), eating hamentashen (16 percent), and having a special meal (12 percent). Of

those who attended a Passover seder, 86 percent said they read from a haggadah.

Logistic regression models help explain which factors were associated with celebrating Hanukkah, Purim, and Passover (Table 4). Those with high Jewish backgrounds had a significantly higher likelihood of celebrating each of the holidays when compared to those with low Jewish backgrounds. Those with medium Jewish backgrounds were not significantly different than those with low Jewish backgrounds in regards to celebrating Purim and Hanukkah, but they were more likely to celebrate Passover. Taglit participants were more likely than nonparticipants to celebrate all three holidays. Women were more likely to attend a Passover seder and celebrate Hanukkah. Graduate students were less likely to attend a Passover seder compared to non-students.

**Table 4. Logistic Regressions (Odds Ratios) of Celebrating Holidays.**

	Hanukkah	Purim	Passover
Age in years	0.96	0.95	0.94
Female	1.54**	1.04	1.49*
Undergraduate <sup>1</sup>	1.06	1.19	0.64
Graduate student <sup>1</sup>	0.71	1.26	0.61**
Medium Jewish background <sup>2</sup>	1.29	1.16	3.24***
High Jewish background <sup>2</sup>	3.12**	6.31***	9.32***
Taglit participant	1.5**	1.59**	1.67***
Married, no children <sup>3</sup>	1.73	1.28	0.54
Has children <sup>3</sup>	0.77	4.3**	1.34
n	1,234	1,229	1,234
	F(9,1,210) = 3.36***	F(9,1,205) = 8.96***	F(9,1,210) = 10.73***

\* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\* p<0.001

<sup>1</sup> Reference category: Not student

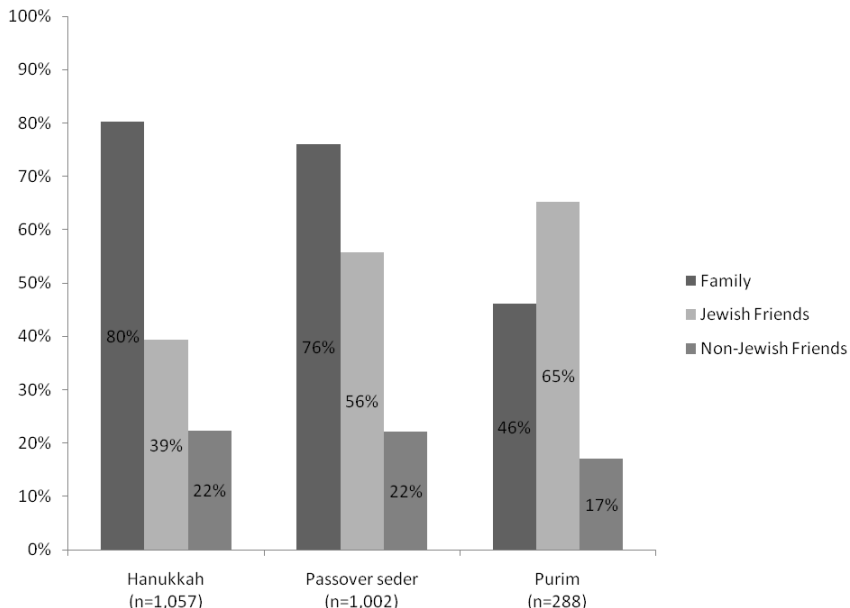
<sup>2</sup> Reference category: Low Jewish background

<sup>3</sup> Reference category: Unmarried, no children

Respondents were also asked with whom they celebrated the holidays: were they alone, with family, with Jewish friends, with non-Jewish friends, or with someone else? Responses to this question varied by holiday (Figure 3). For Hanukkah and Passover, most respondents reported being with family (80 percent of all Hanukkah celebrants and 76 percent of all Passover celebrants). Among young adults—a largely unmarried and childless population—“family” likely means the family of origin, pointing to the continuing influence of parents on Jewish young

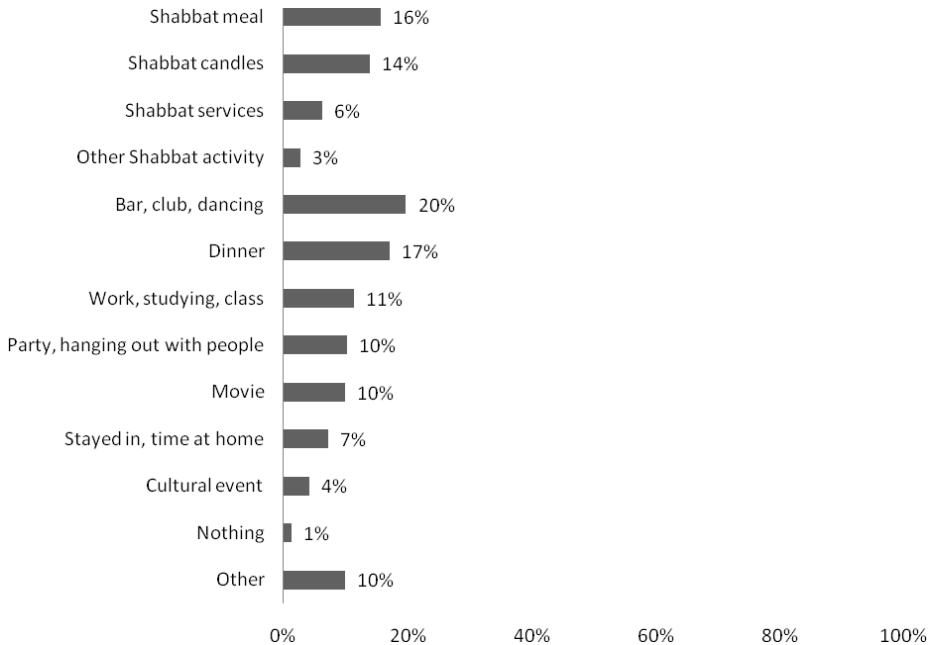
adults' ritual observance well into their twenties. For Purim, Jewish friends were the most common co-celebrants (65 percent of all Purim celebrants).

**Figure 3. Holiday Co-Celebrants**



*Friday night.* Shabbat provides multiple opportunities for the enactment of DIY Judaism. Understanding how Jewish young adults choose to spend Shabbat may help paint a picture of their broad social environment and where Judaism fits into their lives as a whole. Respondents were asked what sorts of activities they had participated in the Friday night prior to being interviewed. Respondents were asked if they had participated in any of a number of Shabbat-oriented activities (lighting candles, having a special meal, or going to services) and then simply asked if they did anything else. Twenty percent of respondents reported participating in at least one Shabbat-oriented activity; overall, Shabbat meals were one of the most popular activities (Figure 4). Other activities were going out to a bar or club (20 percent) and dinner (17 percent). Some respondents (11 percent) were occupied with their jobs, classes, or schoolwork.

**Figure 4. Last Friday Night’s Activities (n=1,387).**



**Table 5. Logistic Regression (Odds Ratios) of Participating in a Shabbat Activity Last Friday Night.**

Age in years	0.93
Female	1.12
Undergraduate <sup>1</sup>	1.19
Graduate student <sup>1</sup>	1.32
Medium Jewish background <sup>2</sup>	2.04**
High Jewish background <sup>2</sup>	14.84***
Taglit participant	1.25
Married, no children <sup>3</sup>	1.18
Has children <sup>3</sup>	15.9***
n	1,244
	F(9,1,220) = 12.53***

\* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\* p<0.001

<sup>1</sup> Reference category: Not student

<sup>2</sup> Reference category: Low Jewish background

<sup>3</sup> Reference category: Unmarried, no children

Respondents were also asked who they were with last Friday night: were they alone, with family, with Jewish friends, with non-Jewish friends, or with someone else? Multiple responses were accepted. Most of the respondents (65 percent) reported spending Friday night with friends. Of respondents who reported being with friends, 28 percent reported being with only Jewish friends, 41 percent reported being with non-Jewish friends and 31 percent reported being with both Jewish and non-Jewish friends (Table 6).

**Table 6. Religion of Friends with Whom Spent Last Friday Night (n=885).**

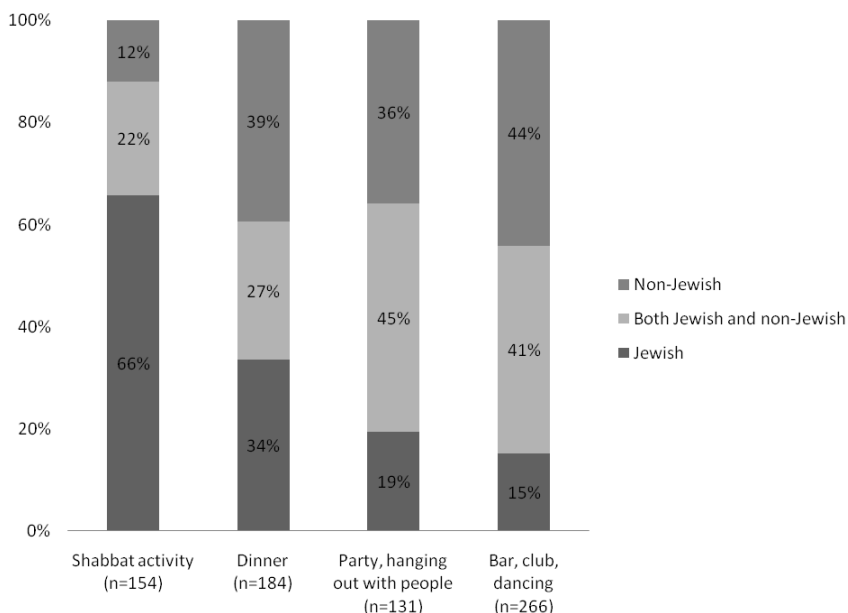
Jewish	28%
Non-Jewish	41%
Both Jewish and non-Jewish	31%

Note: Includes only those respondents (65 percent) who spent last Friday night with friends.

There was a strong correlation between the type of activity in which a respondent participated and the religion of the friends with whom the respondent spent the evening. Not surprisingly, Shabbat-oriented activities drew a more exclusively Jewish group of friends. Sixty-six percent of those who had a Shabbat meal, lit candles, went to services, or did another Shabbat activity with friends were with Jewish friends only. In contrast, only 15 percent of those who went to a bar or club with friends were with Jewish friends only. Interestingly, 12 percent of those who did a Shabbat activity did so with non-Jewish friends only (Figure 5). Not surprisingly, there is a high correlation between participants' overall proportion of Jewish friends and the religion of the friends with whom they spent last Friday night.<sup>38</sup>



**Figure 5. Religion of Friends with Whom Spent Last Friday Night: Selected Activities**



Note: Includes only those respondents (65 percent) who spent last Friday night with friends.

### *Discussion*

The present study describes how Jewish young adults engage with Jewish life. The results document the practices of Jewish engagement, and both their frequency and variety, among a large sample of American Jewish young adults. Consistent with trends in the Jewish community and in American society at large, the results of the present study demonstrate the lack of engagement of Jewish young adults in traditional religious institutions, with only a small number belonging to religious congregations or attending religious services. At the same time, despite disengagement with traditional religious institutions, some young adults may be engaging in Jewish life in alternative ways.

Some indicators point to the presence of DIY Judaism, or at least the pervasiveness of the individualist ethos of DIY Judaism, among Jewish young adults. Our respondents reported attending a wide variety of Jewish events, including events with social, educational, and cultural content. Furthermore, they reported attending events sponsored by a wide variety of organizations, including many small, niche organizations. The fact that most young adults participated in self-organized observances of Hanukkah

and Passover—attending a seder, lighting Hanukkah candles, going to a Hannukkah party—also points to how self-organized and home-based Jewish activities appeal to this generation. The ability to disentangle what is DIY Judaism done at home and what is merely a home-based ritual is beyond the scope of the current paper, but is an important question for future research on DIY Judaism.

Other indicators, however, suggest that DIY Judaism is not very prevalent. Overall rates of engagement for the current sample were low. For example, fewer than half of the Jewish young adults surveyed attended even one event sponsored by a Jewish organization in the past year, and only 28 percent attended more than one event. Only 20 percent did anything to observe Shabbat on the previous Friday night. In addition, many of the holiday celebrations occurred in the company of family members, which may reflect a mere continuation of parental engagement rather than new engagement of young adults. In addition, the open-ended coding used in the analysis was an attempt to document activities not previously known to the researchers. However, there is little data to support the idea that young adults are engaging in innovative or unique opportunities. Rather, many of the activities of Jewish engagement appeared rather standard, a party or social gathering or a Shabbat dinner.

As expected, current levels of engagement in Jewish life are strongly linked to respondents' childhood Jewish backgrounds and intervening positive Jewish experience (in this case, Taglit). Those with stronger Jewish backgrounds were significantly more likely to celebrate Shabbat and holidays and participate in Jewish-sponsored events. Similarly, a positive experience with Judaism as an adult, such as participation in Taglit, can have a large impact on Jewish engagement. The influence of Jewish background on current Jewish engagement was, however, far stronger than the influence of an adult Jewish experience. At the same time, being a parent rivaled Jewish background as a strong predictor of Jewish engagement.

Disengagement is also prevalent, particularly among single, childless young adults with weak Jewish backgrounds. The current trend of delayed marriage and child-rearing highlights the importance of efforts to engage this sub-population. However, disengagement by young adults is not only a problem for the Jewish community. For example, Wuthnow attributes the current decline in church attendance in the United States almost entirely to the increase in median age at first marriage and at the birth of a first child.<sup>39</sup> Married individuals and those with children attend church at higher rates than unmarried people and people without children; therefore, church attendance among young people has dropped as increasing numbers remain unmarried and childless. Similarly, Jewish organizations

are often geared toward individuals who are married with children,<sup>40</sup> leading single Jewish adults to feel “demographically disenfranchised”.<sup>41</sup>

Young adults with limited Jewish knowledge and small numbers of Jewish friends are particularly unengaged and, perhaps, underserved by the organized Jewish community.<sup>42</sup> In the present study, those with weaker Jewish backgrounds and without spouses and children were relatively unlikely to engage in Jewish life. This finding indicates that DIY Judaism has not substantially altered the lives of the majority of Jewish young adults.

It is clear, nevertheless, that intensive Jewish educational experiences, such as Taglit – targeted at those with weaker Jewish backgrounds – have the potential for broad impact on this generation of Jewish young adults. A host of new programs are being developed and funders are increasingly interested in helping young adults cultivate and sustain their engagement in Jewish life. As these programs continue to grow and develop they have the potential to shape the way young adults engage with their Judaism. Research has only begun to understand the extent and impact of such programs for Jewish young adults.

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MICHELLE SHAIN, SHIRA FISHMAN, GRAHAM WRIGHT, SHAHAR  
HECHT, AND LEONARD SAXE

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<sup>34</sup> Steven M. Cohen, The Demise of the “Good Jew”: Marshall Sklare Award Lecture. *Contemporary Jewry* (2012) 32, pp 85–93.

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<sup>37</sup> Because the variables included in the index have different scales of measurement, the scale was the sum of each variable’s “z-score”, which standardizes the mean of each variable at zero and recodes the values of that variable to reflect the standard deviation away from that mean. Loevinger H scalability coefficients were used to determine the optimal scale composition (Loevinger H coefficient=0.64).

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