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Amy L. Sales and Nicole Samuel

*Photographs courtesy of Ramah Darom - Kaplan Mitchell Retreat Center*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The retreating research, undertaken between June 2018 and May 2019, is a first attempt to draw a map of Jewish retreating that includes both organizers of Jewish retreats and operators of Jewish retreat centers. The research examines how retreating has been adopted by a vast array of organizations, what issues facilitate or impede their efforts, and what current levels of activity portend for the future of Jewish retreating.

The study was multimethod and included (1) surveys of Jewish retreat organizers and retreat facilities operators; (2) interviews with key informants and retreat organizers; and (3) participant observation at three distinctive multiday retreats.

The report aims to assess the opportunities facing organizers and operators and to inspire conversation, action, and support among all those with an interest in Jewish retreating.

DEFINITION

Jewish retreating, with its vast variety of players, is best conceived of as an ecosystem of organizers and a separate, but related, ecosystem of operators.

There is general agreement that retreats are immersive experiences that remove people from their everyday lives and bring them into an intentional community space. The research uses retreat as a generic term to refer to all such experiences, whether called Shabbaton, encampment, festival, overnight, conference, or another name.

Four key roles are necessary to produce a retreat:

Facility operator: site manager or vendor who provides the facilities and services for the event.

Retreat organizer: organization that uses the event to engage its audience and fulfill its mission.

Program designer and/or implementer: event planner or program professional who plans and drives the program.

Talent: teachers, facilitators, clergy, artists, performers, and others who enlighten, inspire, and entertain the group.

Jewish facility operators have their own ecosystem that overlaps with and exists apart from that of the organizers.

Of the 42 operators in our study, 25 are also organizers who develop, market, and run their own retreat programs. The other 17 serve only outside clients and do not have their own retreat programs.
With only four exceptions, all of the retreat centers are also the sites of Jewish overnight camps. As such, retreat operators generally know one another and are connected through their camp movements or their association with the Foundation for Jewish Camp.

**Jewish retreat organizers come from vastly different parts of the Jewish community.** They may be in the religious, spiritual, educational, cultural, social, or social welfare sector; or they may be a federation, foundation, fellowship or leadership development program, or any other sort of Jewish organization. Jewish retreat organizers also differ in terms of purview (local, regional, national, international), organization complexity (from informal grassroots groups to well-established complex organizations), and retreating experience (from first timers to those who have run retreats for decades). There are no formal ties among retreat organizers, no comprehensive directory, no convening umbrella organization, and little common training or shared knowledge base.
GROWTH OF JEWISH RETREATING

Jewish retreating is a large and growing enterprise for both retreat organizers and operators.

Organizer interviewees tell stories of steep growth in the number of retreats offered, total number of participants, addition of new locations and audiences, and new program themes and content. Almost all respondents to the organizer survey are running retreats this year, suggesting that those who are retreating are continuing to do so. The majority of organizers also have ideas for other types of retreats they would like to offer (68%) or other target audiences they would like to reach with their retreats (52%). Respondents are also clear on what is needed to expand or improve their retreats—personnel, talent, marketing and recruitment, facilities, logistics, and program design—leaving no doubt that there is room for capacity building on the organizer side.

Overall, Jewish retreat centers have seen notable growth in numbers between 2015 and 2018, but a decline in Jewish participation. Time series data show an overall 15% increase in the number of retreats hosted and a 4% increase in the number of participants at these retreats. At the same time, the average percentage of Jewish-sponsored retreats and Jewish participants declined by 6% and 11% respectively. The survey of over 200 Jewish retreat organizers shows that they use a variety of settings for their retreats, of which only 40% are held in Jewish spaces.

The organizer survey identified 93 organizations that are currently not retreating. Just over one fourth of these organizations report having both the interest and capacity to run retreats. If this percentage holds more broadly, there are potentially hundreds of organizations ready to join the world of Jewish retreating.

In addition to the efforts of individual organizations, contextual dynamics are also propelling continued growth in Jewish retreating. Dynamics include the emergence of Jewish engagement as an organizing principle for Jewish communities; the professionalization of experiential Jewish education; the prevalence of technology and the universal need to “unplug”; as well as the particular characteristics that make the millennial generation a ready audience for retreating.
THE CASE FOR RETREATING

Retreats add unique value to an organization’s work that could not otherwise be accomplished. In other words, there is no substitute for a retreat.

Retreats uniquely contribute to the work of the organization by providing the time, space, and environment conducive to individual and group development.

As one interviewee noted, being away from home seems to “spark some kind of magic, some alchemy,” not unlike the magic of overnight camp. Specifically:

- Removal from everyday life can lead to personal and professional transformation.
- Relationships and community are built at retreats in ways not possible at school, in the workplace, or in the community back home.
- Retreats can be booster shots that help participants remember and regain a “sense of amazement.”
- Retreats offer special experiences for micro-communities (e.g., LGBTQ gatherings).
- Retreats offer the gift of time.
- Retreats can be a laboratory for testing out new ideas for community.
- Holding retreats over Shabbat gives participants a new experience of Shabbat. It amplifies the notion of unplugging from everyday life, the practice of mindfulness, and the experience of spirituality.

The most common purposes for retreats, as per the organizer survey, are community building, Jewish education, Shabbat or holiday celebrations, and spirituality.

Other purposes are also represented in the study (e.g., leadership or professional development, relationship building, health and wellness, outreach, and simple R&R).

Part of the power of retreating is that one retreat event can serve multiple purposes.

Jewish education at a retreat, for example, can more readily be integrated with the aims of community building and Shabbat observance than it can be in the classroom.

Retreats help fulfill organizational mission by melding with and enhancing the organization’s program year. Organizers integrate retreats in five different ways.

1. **Program scaffolding.** Some organizers hold regular retreats throughout the year as part of a fellowship, internship, or leadership development program. The timing of the retreats is designed to fit in with the flow of the program and provide booster shots at appropriate times in the participants’ development.

2. **Calendar markers.** Some organizers hold regular retreats across the year as part of their program. These retreats do not have the same tight structure as the time-delimited fellowships above, nor are they integrated into a curriculum in the same way.

3. **À la carte menu.** Some national organizers run multiple retreats over the course of a year. These retreats are not organized around a fellowship or program but rather are designed to reach different demographics in different geographic locations.
4. **Single annual retreat.** Some organizers—commonly congregations or certain micro-communities—run only one retreat a year.

5. **Annual retreats with an arc.** Some Jewish day and part-time schools run annual retreats for different age or grade cohorts. Each retreat is distinctive as it is designed for the arc of the students’ education across their school years.

**Retreats have different benefits for local, regional, and national organizers.**

The community created at a local retreat readily redounds to the community back home. Face-to-face time at national retreats enables participants to establish strong ties with peers or colleagues across the country and to develop the capacity to work together. Regional retreats are practical tools for national entities as they help them diversify location, increase the number of people who can be accommodated, and contain participants’ travel costs.

Retreats are a natural tool for micro-communities as they can offer intensive experiences for small groups of individuals with similar interests and needs.

Retreats are particularly well suited to the millennial generation (born 1981-1996). According to one informant, “retreats are by far the best methodological tool for engaging millennials.”
MATCHING OPERATORS AND ORGANIZERS

Jewish facility operators are looking to fill beds and weeks at their retreat centers, and organizers are seeking appropriate venues for their events. Making the match, however, is not as easy as one might assume.

In selecting a venue, cost is the top criterion for the great majority of organizers, often along with quality and location of facilities. Some organizers have considered lowering costs by reducing the size or length of their retreats, seeking grants or other funding to underwrite costs, or finding ways to improve cost efficiency. Other considerations are also important (kosher food, capacity, scenic location, customer service, accommodation for special needs, etc.), but for far fewer organizers. Organizers concerned with kashrut are limited to the 21 Jewish retreat centers (out of 42) with certified kosher facilities.

Most of the organizers interviewed can make do in non-Jewish settings. Indeed, given considerations of location, capacity, comfort, and cost, organizers often have no viable Jewish options. Consider, for example, that only three of the 42 participating facilities are open 12 months a year. Of the 30 facilities with both 2015 and 2018 data, 16 had reduced the number of weeks open per year, and 14 had maintained or increased them.

Some 60% of respondents to the organizer survey say that having an easy way to find appropriate facilities for their retreats would be a significant help to their organizations. Searching for retreat sites can be all consuming and divert time and energy from the other tasks involved in a successful program. Although there are general websites for finding retreat centers, Jewish organizers may need a service more like a matchmaker than a dating app.

Jewish retreat centers have diversified client lists and use their properties for all sorts of events and purposes. While the number of retreats and participants at these facilities has grown between 2015 and 2018, non-Jewish groups and individuals have increased as a percentage of total business. This balance may be a necessary business model, or it may reflect a need for improved services and marketing to Jewish groups.
PRACTICAL CONCERNS

Retreat organizers need assistance with the practical concerns of cost, staffing, and marketing. They also need help developing post-retreat evaluations and activities. Follow-up activities are instrumental to the long-term impact of the short-term immersive experience.

About half of the Jewish organizers run retreats in which fees cover the full cost; the other half do not.
Organizers do not want price to be a barrier to participation. The great majority provide scholarships, discounts, or other support to participants. Many of the organizations have a budget line for retreats. Others depend on general operating funds or donor support, or they figure it out ad hoc.

A few of the larger organizers have significant resources, and cost is not a major consideration. A few of the very small organizations are nimble enough to keep costs low. Other organizations, however, face increasing costs and continuing difficulty finding outside funding sources.
One organization, for example, reported a 10% increase in the cost of its retreat from 2018 to 2019.

Just over 60% of respondents to the organizer survey say they need more personnel dedicated to organizing retreats in order to grow and enhance them.
Most of the organizers (74%) have a designated person responsible for retreats. Some (44%) hire outsiders to plan, organize, or implement all or part of the retreat program.

Interviews reveal that some of these organizers (outside of the largest) are not fully staffed for running retreats.
Issues arise when a single person is charged with both logistics and program. If no one else on staff can assume responsibility for the former, the educator is forced to spend less time on vision and content in order to assure quality control and smooth operations. Some of the fellowship and training programs have developed a model in which participants are tasked with designing and running retreats as part of their training or their alumni experience.

Some 60% of respondents to the organizer survey say that better promotion, marketing, and recruitment would help them improve their retreating activities.
Indeed, 41% do not sell out their retreats. A few organizers have viable participation numbers but reach a relatively small percentage of their potential audience. Like any event in the Jewish community, retreats compete with a host of other activities for participants’ time and attention.

Most respondents to the organizer survey (86%) follow up with participants post retreat. Despite a list of follow up activities—everything from take-home packets, webinars, or Facebook groups to micro-grants for participants to run their own events—efforts in any one organization are generally limited.
According to interviewees, the issues are lack of resources (most notably staff and time) and lack of models for fuller and more engaging follow up.

Most organizers (73%) conduct formal evaluations of their events. According to interviewees, however, these efforts are largely pro forma.
Organizer interviewees admit that their evaluations are not of high quality and that results are not methodically reviewed and applied.
ONWARD

Evidence suggests that support and capacity building could help organizers significantly improve and expand their retreats and help operators secure a larger piece of the Jewish market. As exploratory research, the report does not provide a blueprint for the future, but it does offer data to stimulate conversation and action in four areas: capacity building, structure, investment, and research.

It is not difficult to make the case for Jewish retreating.
Jewish retreats are immersive experiences that touch the total participant—mind, body, and soul. They are the quintessential setting for experiential education that can deepen Jewish learning and practice. They offer Jewish organizations a powerful tool for fulfilling their mission and building community among their participants and leaders. They are a laboratory for new forms of Jewish community and life. Jewish retreating is growing in terms of numbers, reach, and content, and the data suggest that it will continue to do so.

A key question for individual operators is how to build the Jewish part of their work.
Operators need to understand the gap between what they are offering in terms of price, location, accommodations, or services and what Jewish organizers are seeking. And operators need to determine what it will take to close this gap.

A key question for operators writ large is how to address the limited options for Jewish space.
Options are limited by weeks per year in operation, availability of kosher facilities, geographic location, number of beds, and the like. Adding new retreat centers may not be the solution. Most Jewish organizers in the study are not convinced they need Jewish space and have been doing well without it; and current Jewish facilities are not fully booked or are not fully booked with Jewish groups.

Organizers would benefit from better promotion, marketing, and recruitment for their retreats; assistance in finding appropriate sites for their retreat events; stronger follow up, evaluation, and measurement of impact; and help with raising funds to make their retreats more widely affordable.
Such support might take the form of training, coaching, convenings of organizers, resource banks, education, or other such format.

Retreating is probably best thought of as a universal tool with many forms and uses.
It draws on diverse sources (experiential education, hospitality industry, hotel management, group dynamics, community organizing, spiritual counseling, life coaching, etc.) and can be put to use most anywhere. Retreating is the Swiss Army Knife of Jewish life. As such, capacity building efforts should precede or inform the creation of structure.

Jewish retreating needs structures that can promote it as a valuable tool, improve its use, create forums for learning and sharing, and harness the expertise needed to build capacity among organizers and operators.
A structure for organizers needs to accommodate their great diversity and help them see their shared interests. Convenings or networks of subgroups might help organizers raise the level of their work, find the resources they need, generate new ideas, and learn new techniques and best practices. Operators—who know each other through their
camp affiliations—may be ready for a more formal collaborative structure that promotes information and resource sharing. The focus might be on operations, administration, leadership, programs and services, marketing, technology, or other parts of the business that could benefit from shared resources, new ideas, best practices, and benchmarks.

**Additional funding for Jewish retreating could make a substantial impact.**

Funding is needed to support capacity building (as described above) and provide scholarships and subsidies that will make Jewish retreating accessible to larger numbers.

**Research can also add to the momentum of Jewish retreating in four ways:**

1. Understanding the impact of different types of retreats on participants and their organizations and communities back home.

2. Establishing best practices for both operators and organizers.

3. Learning more about Jewish retreat facilities and diving deeper into questions about the operators’ Jewish purpose, marketing activities, business model, and vision for Jewish retreating and their role in it.

4. Testing the feasibility of action proposals that emerge from the current research and establishing priorities for action.
INTRODUCTION

In February 2017, 19 individuals interested in Jewish retreating gathered at a hotel in Dallas, Texas. At the table were retreat operators and organizers, representatives of Jewish foundations, federations, Jewish Federations of North America, Association of Independent Jewish Camps, and the Foundation for Jewish Camp. Sensing rising momentum, the group had come together to consider ways to “catch the Jewish retreating wave.” One proposal was to undertake research that could answer fundamental questions about the status of Jewish retreating and how to support its growth and enhancement.\(^1\) Thus was born Advancing Jewish Retreating.

The research, undertaken between June 2018 and May 2019, seeks to map the landscape of Jewish retreating, including both those who organize Jewish retreats and those who operate Jewish retreat centers. It examines how retreating has been adopted by a vast array of organizations, what issues facilitate or impede their efforts, and what current levels of activity portend for the future of Jewish retreating. Its ultimate aim is to assess the opportunities facing organizers and operators and to inspire conversation, action, and funding among those with an interest in Jewish retreating.

METHOD

The study was multimethod and included:

1. Surveys of Jewish retreat organizers and retreat facilities operators.
2. Interviews with key informants and the retreat organizers.
3. Participant observation at three distinctive multiday retreats.

The study is exploratory and descriptive. It presents data from a large sample of operators and organizers but does not tally the total size of the field or the breadth of Jewish retreating activities. It focuses on organizations (retreat centers and organizers) and not on individual participants. As such, the research describes the characteristics of retreats but does not test outcomes or longer term impact.
BASIS FOR THE FINDINGS

• The research team spoke with 29 key informants—retreat operators, retreat organizers, and others involved in retreat-related work (Appendix C).

• We identified 59 active Jewish retreat centers across the United States and sent them the operator survey. Some 42 (71%) responded, providing information on their 2018 retreats (Appendix B).

• We developed a list of 1,200 potential organizers across the country and sent them the organizer survey. Some 378 (31%) responded, a remarkable response rate for such a “fishing expedition.” Respondents who run retreats indicated the number of retreats, content or purpose, target audiences, criteria for choosing facilities, plans for future retreats, and what would be most helpful in growing or enhancing their retreats. Those not running retreats answered questions about what they would need in order to bring retreating to their organizations.

• Although the response rate is high and captures many different types of organizers, the sample includes only a fraction of all organizers. One reason is that our greatest “fishing expedition” was based on lists of organizations in 15 of the 147 Jewish federated communities in North America but did not include some of the largest metropolitan areas (e.g., New York, Chicago). As a result, the richness and volume of retreating activity is likely far greater than what is reported here.

• In total, 134 of the organizers who were running retreats were willing to be interviewed. From these, we selected a diverse set of 22 organizers for hour-long, in-depth conversations about their retreat work (Appendix C).

• Participant observations focused on retreats that serve the same demographic (millennials) but had different intents, locations, facilities, and organizers (Moishe House, GatherDC, and Hillel International). Welcomed into their midst, we spent two days at each attending sessions, speaking with staff and participants, and observing group and community process. We present these observations throughout the report.

OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

The report has six sections. It begins with a definition of retreating and a description of the key characteristics and components of a Jewish retreat.

Section 2, Growth of Jewish Retreating, presents data on the current and potential growth trajectory of Jewish retreating from the perspective of the facility operators and of the retreat organizers.

Section 3, Matching Operators and Organizers, examines retreat facilities with a particular focus on what retreat organizers are looking for and what the operators have to offer.

Section 4, The Case for Retreating, answers the question of “why” organizations choose to run retreats and the unique benefit they gain from doing so.

Section 5, Practical Concerns, discusses the tactical issues of cost, staffing, marketing, evaluation, and post-retreat activities.

The final section, Onward, is intended to open a conversation about the opportunities Jewish retreating faces in the four areas of capacity building, structure, investment, and research. The intent throughout is to inform and to stimulate thoughts and plans for the greater development of Jewish retreating.
DEFINITION

The research on Jewish retreating faced the paradox of describing a field of practice that was not yet defined. In order to proceed, we set minimal—albeit somewhat arbitrary—requirements for inclusion in the study:

1. Organizers needed to be Jewish organizations that had organized at least one retreat in the past two years.

2. At least one of their retreats had to have taken place in the United States and included at least one overnight. Although some would argue that single-day events can be retreats, we followed the model of Jewish camping and separated out residential from day experiences.

Beyond these requirements, we set no limitations on purpose, content, format, location, duration, size, or Jewish practice.

JEWISH RETREATING IS AN ACTIVITY IN SEARCH OF A NAME

There is general agreement that retreats are immersive experiences that remove people from their everyday lives and bring them into an intentional community space. We chose to use retreat as a generic term to refer to all such experiences, whether they were called Shabbaton, encampment, festival, overnight, conference, or another name. Not everyone we spoke with agrees with this decision. Many embrace the language of retreating as it suggests an escape from the demands and restrictions of everyday life. Some, however, do not like the term as it suggests losing a battle.

Regardless of language, the essential idea is that participants can step off the “treadmill of life” and unplug from technology. An event is not a retreat, our informants said, if participants are spending time on their computers and devices, or if they are doing the same work at the retreat that they could well have done in the office back home. They also exclude from their definition conventions, biennials, general assemblies, or conferences of national Jewish organizations, which they judge to be too large and business-oriented to have the quality and impact of a retreat. Interestingly, many of the Jewish retreat facilities that were once named conference centers have rebranded themselves as retreat centers in order to escape the connotation of work-focused, impersonal events that could readily have been held in the workplace.

FOUR KEY ROLES ARE NEEDED TO PRODUCE A RETREAT

1. **Facility Operator**: Site manager or vendor who provides the facilities and services for the event.

2. **Retreat Organizer**: Organization that uses the event to engage its audience and fulfill its mission.

3. **Program Designer or Implementer**: Event planner or program professional who plans and drives the program.

4. **Talent**: Teachers, facilitators, clergy, artists, performers, and others who enlighten, inspire, and entertain the group.
The four roles can be fulfilled by a single entity (e.g., a camp that runs a retreat for its families) or multiple entities (e.g., an organization that rents space from a facility and engages a program professional to create a retreat for its members). The critical roles of program designer and talent can be played by the operator, the organizer, and/or an outside provider. As well, an organization may play different roles on different occasions. Trybal Gatherings, for example, runs its own retreats but also serves as consultant and designer to other organizations for their retreats. Across the organizations in our study, we found various ways that the four roles are divvied up.

**JEWISH RETREATING, WITH ITS VAST VARIETY OF PLAYERS, IS BEST CONCEIVED OF AS AN ECOSYSTEM OF ORGANIZERS AND A SEPARATE, BUT RELATED, ECOSYSTEM OF OPERATORS.**

Jewish operators have their own ecosystem which both overlaps with and exists apart from that of the organizers.

Of the 42 operators in our study, 25 are also organizers who develop, market, and run their own retreat programs. The other 17 serve only outside clients and do not have their own retreat programs.

**Jewish retreat organizers come from vastly different parts of the Jewish community.**

Organizers may be in the religious, spiritual, educational, cultural, social, or social welfare sector; or they may be a federation, foundation, fellowship or leadership development program, or any other sort of Jewish organization. Although each organizer may know of others, there are no formal ties among retreat organizers, no comprehensive directory, no convening umbrella organization, and little common training or shared knowledge base.

**Retreat organizers have different levels of purview: local, regional, national/international.**

The majority of organizers in our sample are local (Figure 1). This reflects both our sampling strategy (see Appendix A) as well as the vastly greater number of local organizations and agencies in the American Jewish community as compared with national or umbrella organizations.

![Organizers' Local, Regional, or National Purview](image)

*Note: n=378 organizers*
Retreat organizers range from informal grassroots organizations to well-established, complex organizations. Many of the organizers in our study represent well-established, complex organizations (e.g., BBYO or PJ Library). There are also organizers who are independent or associated with informal, grassroots organizations. Nice Jewish Boys DC, for example, is a GBT social organization with little structure. The group is not a registered organization. It has no by-laws, term limits, budget, board, or leadership committee. The current leader was voted into office by a group having drinks in a café. Nonetheless, the organization has run a retreat in each of the past five years with about 30 participants annually.

Other organizers are between these two extremes. Most of them run a number of retreats each year with limited staff and often with volunteers doing the work. The Dorot Fellowship, for example, has three regional and one national Shabbatonim. One professional staff person serves as convener, and participants carry out the bulk of the work. As with all of its services and events, Kehilat Hadar runs its singular Shavuot retreat with all of the planning, logistics, and programming handled by volunteers.

Organizers differ in terms of their history with retreating. Organizers like The Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation have been using retreats for decades, and retreating is deep in their organizational DNA and philosophy. Other long timers in our study include Bay Area Jewish Healing Center’s Grief and Growing retreat that has run for 23 years and Kehilat Hadar’s Shavuot retreat now in its 18th year. Organizers who started more recently include Keshet, which had its first convening in 2012, Nice Jewish Boys, which had its first retreat in 2014, and Gather DC, which began its Beyond the Tent program three years ago. The two synagogues interviewed have also just begun retreating in the past two or three years.
GROWTH OF JEWISH RETREATING

Jewish retreating is a large and growing enterprise for retreat operators and organizers. The research suggests that Jewish retreating is and will continue to be on a growth trajectory.

OPERATOR GROWTH

A comparison of current data with data from David Phillip’s 2015 retreat center inventory suggests that Jewish retreat centers, overall, are growing in terms of the number of retreats they are hosting and the number of participants at these retreats.

Results from the 30 operators who participated in both the 2015 and 2018 studies appear in Figure 2.

Total number of retreats held at these facilities increased by about 120 (from approximately 760 to 880) while total number of participants rose by almost 2,500 (from approximately 71,400 to 73,900).

It is worth noting that Camp Newman held 50 retreats in 2015 but, due to a destructive wildfire in 2017, held none in 2018. Of the operators, seven

Operators’ Percent Change in Retreat Business (2015-18)

Figure 2

Note: Number in parentheses is the number of operators answering the particular question(s) on the operator survey.
saw declines in the number of retreats and 19 saw growth. In all cases, numbers are relatively small leading to a high percentage of change. Two facilities, for example, increased from 10 retreats in 2015 to 30 retreats in 2018, a 200% increase.

At the same time, the average percentage of Jewish-sponsored retreats and Jewish participants declined somewhat. Half of the 30 participating facilities saw declines in the percentage of Jewish-sponsored retreats. The other half held steady or increased the percentage of their Jewish business. The greatest increases were at a retreat center that went from 41% to 69% Jewish retreats and a camp that went from 12% to 92% Jewish retreats. (See Figure 2.)

Just as operators have a mixed clientele, Jewish organizers choose a variety of settings for their retreats, most of which are held in non-Jewish space (Figure 3).

Airbnb and websites like Peerspace offer myriad possibilities for smaller groups which, at least for the young adult audience, is one of the growth areas for Jewish retreating.

If each retreat takes place in only one location, then the data in Figure 3 represents 444 different retreats offered by the 215 responding organizers. Some 40% of these retreats took place in designated Jewish space (Jewish camp, Jewish retreat or conference center, Hillel, JCC, shul or synagogue). The other 60% of retreats took place in a variety of non-Jewish settings.

Given limitations of the sample, we cannot make definitive statements about the types of organizations using Jewish or non-Jewish space. We note, however, that about two thirds of participating day schools (65% of 17 schools) and synagogues (69% of 74 congregations) used Jewish space for at least one of their retreats in 2017-18. These figures include institutions across the denominational spectrum.

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**Organizer’s Use of Different Types of Facilities**

*Figure 3*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facility Type</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jewish camp</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish retreat center</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retreat or conference center</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camp</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-site</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoors, wilderness</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airbnb or similar</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: n=215 responding organizers. Respondents were asked to check all that apply.*
ORGANIZER GROWTH

Organizer interviewees tell stories of steep growth in the number of retreats offered, total number of participants, addition of new locations and audiences, and new program themes and content.

In just three years, the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles grew its family camp program from a mere concept to 16 family retreats annually, all of which sell out quickly.

Keshet, whose mission is LGBTQ equality in Jewish life, ran its first retreat in 2012. In succeeding years, Keshet added new retreats and new target audiences, and expanded into new regions. By 2019 it was running six retreats located in the East, West, Southwest, and Midwest.

SVARA’s Queer Talmud Camp started with one retreat in Chicago with 50 participants. The organization then added a second retreat in San Francisco with 80 participants. In 2019, it added a retreat at Isabella Freedman, which readily sold out with 120 applicants. SVARA now organizes three retreats a year, all of which sell out. The organization anticipates adding a fourth retreat in the coming year to have a full annual cycle with four five-day retreats around the country. It is also discussing the possibility of adding a teen retreat.

Bais Chana Women International has grown by continually identifying groups of women who could benefit from a Bais Chana retreat. The organization began with a generic women’s camp but then started a retreat for married women with children. Over the years, it has added retreats for high school girls, college women, single mothers, and a retreat for women age 55+. At the same time, the organization maintains Jewish study retreats for women of all ages. Bais Chana Women International has diversified locations for its retreats and sees future growth in continuing to do so.

Some organizers are focused not only on numerical growth but also on increased impact.

Institute for Jewish Spirituality and Moishe House, for example, are seeking ways to make their retreats more generative. The idea is to move from the retreat’s impact on participants to the impact participants can have on others in their community.

Institute for Jewish Spirituality (IJS) is developing materials for retreat participants to use back home in providing others with a taste of the work. This effort began with a curriculum on wise aging. Retreat participants trained facilitators to run groups with older adults in their community. They taught the facilitators how to create safe spaces and guide conversations about aging with resilience. IJS is now considering how it might provide participants in these conversation groups with a direct taste of its work.

Moishe House, which has long assumed that the best way to educate young adults is through immersive experiences, started with about 10 retreats a year. Over the past four years, it has expanded this number to over 100. Close to 20 of the retreats are led by Moishe House staff and educators; the rest are peer-led in the mode of experiential learning. Peer-led retreats are eminently scalable and have “grown like wildfire.” To this end, Moishe House developed Retreatology, a retreat on retreat making. The program serves as a model retreat and a training seminar. Participants are fully engaged in the
activities of Retreatology, as they would be on any other retreat, but they are also focused on how they might design a similar experience for their peers. Participants learn how to create a Jewish gathering for their friends and community “from start to finish.” Those who finish the program are eligible for a grant of up to $5,000 to plan and execute their “dream” Jewish learning retreat on a topic of their choice. Retreat content has also expanded as young adults are interested not only in alternative forms of Jewish life but also in mindfulness, food justice, outdoor or wilderness experiences, and myriad other topics. (See From the Field: Moishe House Retreatology, p. 23.)

Organizers who have made retreats a central element of their approach or pedagogy are thinking of ways to further develop, improve, and grow them.

As seen in Figure 4, almost all of the responding organizers will be running retreats in 2019, and many have ideas for diversification and expansion. In addition to these numerical responses, 120 organizers took the time to write about the future of retreating in their organizations. The vast majority wrote about new ideas for retreats. Here is a but a sample of their creativity and potential.

**Additional retreats.**

Organizers are planning or thinking about other retreats they might offer. One organizer is considering “next step” retreats that go deeper into some of the ideas explored in their main retreat. A second organizer plans to add another learning retreat that would be geared toward families. The retreat would include both family and age-based learning groups. A third organizer currently runs retreats by grade level and wants to offer multi-grade retreats with opportunities for students to learn in groups based on interest rather than grade. A fourth organizer will be adding a teen retreat within the context of its community retreat. Beyond that, it may also add other “retreats within a retreat” for older adults or for Jews by choice.

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**Organizers’ Future Intentions**

*Figure 4*

| Have new target audiences would like to reach with retreats (204) | 94% |
| Have ideas for new types of retreats would like to offer (205) | 68% |
| Plan to run retreats in 2019 (208) | 52% |

*Note: Number in parentheses is the number of organizers answering the particular question on the organizer survey.*
FROM THE FIELD

MOISHE HOUSE RETREATOLOGY

A typical Retreatology retreat has 35 attendees, most of whom are connected to Moishe House as residents, program participants, or Moishe House Without Walls hosts. They are self-selecting leaders who are “ready for the next challenge and are pushing themselves to do more.” Retreatology is held twice a year, once on the East Coast and once on the West Coast. We conducted our observations at the November 2018 retreat at Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center (Falls Village, CT).

Retreatology participants were welcomed to the program with candy and a note on their pillows. The note read, “Shabbat shalom, friends” and shared the organizers’ hope that the weekend would be “filled with magic and light, two essential components of any retreat.” This spirit of welcoming, magic, light, and Shabbat celebration was infused throughout the retreat, from Friday afternoon through Havdalah on Saturday night.

Community candle lighting was led by one of the educators, a charismatic rabbinical student. This particular weekend was two weeks after the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh and just days after the mass shooting in Thousand Oaks, California. In addition to lighting Shabbat candles, the group lit yahrzeit candles in memory of the victims. Although Shabbat began on a somber note, the program was “filled with magic and light.”

On Shabbat morning, some of the participants gathered in the retreat center synagogue for a breakout session called “FLOW: Planning a Retreat that Utilizes the Natural Rhythms and Energies of Shabbat.” The late autumn light filtered through the building’s large windows as participants settled in. They sat in a circle on colorful meditation cushions. Participants were encouraged to close their eyes, breathe deeply, and think about a Shabbat ritual they might create at their own retreat and the spirit they would want it to convey. Outside, big snowflakes began to fall—fortuitous “magic” that was not on the retreat schedule.

Shabbat concluded later that day with a festive, song-filled Havdalah. Although scheduled for a half hour, participants sang and danced for more than an hour to the tune of two ukuleles. The lead organizer saw the extended celebration as the kind of spontaneous “magic” they hoped participants would bring to their own retreats.
A fifth organizer is a synagogue that had a successful woman’s retreat and is now considering a congregation-wide retreat and possibly a family retreat for its b’nai mitzvah families. One rabbinical seminary runs an intensive annual five-day retreat for rabbis and is now exploring the possibility of educational retreats for lay people. A campus organization would like to develop smaller Shabbatonim, targeting specific demographics of students (e.g., graduate students) and/or schools (e.g., liberal arts colleges). The list goes on.

**New types of experiences.**
Some of the organizers are thinking about launching new types of experiences. Among others, these include a family camp for skill building, teen wilderness retreats, women’s wellness retreat, singles beach house retreat, holiday retreats.

**Audience.**
Organizers are thinking about more and better ways to engage specific audiences. These include, among others, retreats for young adults, the unaffiliated, intergenerational groups, teens, men, women, young professionals, Jews of color, and empty nesters who no longer feel connected to a synagogue community.

**Alumni networks.**
A number of programs and fellowships recognize the value of their alumni and are seeking ways to build an alumni network, to keep alumni involved in the organization, and to reap the benefits of their alumni talent pool. Retreats are key to this effort.

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Follow up is central to the plan for **Honeymoon Israel**. The organization is working with a foundation to help their alumni self-organize both large- and small-scale reunion Shabbatonim/retreats across the country. Honeymoon Israel is aiming for a minimum of two retreats in each of its 19 cities in the current year.

**The Dorot Fellowship** did not build in alumni programming from the outset. Over time, however, the foundation came to see the value in
engaging alumni. In its 20th year, it started to invest in ongoing engagement with alumni, for which retreats are a critical element.

The Diller Teen Fellowship, now in its 22nd year, has just established an alumni department. The department is considering how alumni might be engaged by retreats as they were when they were fellows. As there are over 4,000 alumni of different ages and in different communities worldwide, the task is complex.

JOIN’s Jewish Organizing Fellowship and Clergy Fellowship have just started to hold alumni reunion retreats. For JOIN, the retreats are an opportunity to build the alumni network and help participants connect around activism and build power for progressive events.

**FACTORS IN GROWTH AND ENHANCEMENT**

The survey asked organizers what would significantly help their organization expand or improve its retreating activities. Results suggest a range of possibilities for capacity building among organizers (Figure 5).

In addition, 17 respondents checked “other.” Most of these comments concern funding that would enable them to offset costs, be more effective, run retreats more often, and provide scholarships that would enable more people to participate.

**Not all organizers want to grow their retreats and not all of them can.**

This position is particularly true among organizers for whom retreating is just one tactic. A few

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**What Organizers Need to Expand or Improve Their Retreats**

**Figure 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Needs</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More personnel dedicated to organizing retreats</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better promotion, marketing, recruitment for retreats</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy way to find appropriate facilities for retreats</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help getting best talent for retreat program</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality support and program staff at retreat</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kosher facilities</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help with logistics and administration</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help designing effective retreat program</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better preparation of participants in advance of retreats</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Number in parentheses is the number of organizers answering the particular question on the organizer survey.
organizers are shifting plans in reaction to declining participation or enthusiasm. “As fewer members opted to spend overnight at last year’s retreat, we are likely to have a day retreat this year,” wrote one. Another wrote, “Feedback from our community has indicated that they do not appreciate retreats due to their expense and time (especially for families). We will probably not offer a family retreat for 2019 but will continue to offer retreats for our b’nai mitzvah families and our 2nd-5th grade students.”

POTENTIAL ORGANIZERS

The organizer survey also identified 141 organizations that are not retreating but potentially could be. All totaled, 93 of these potential organizers took the time to answer questions about their capacity to run retreats. These data suggest that future growth may also come from those who are not yet a part of the Jewish retreating ecosystem.

Just over one fourth of the 93 respondents report having both the interest and capacity to run retreats. (See Table 1.)

If this percentage holds more broadly, then potentially hundreds of organizations are ready to join the world of Jewish retreating.

Sixty-nine of the 93 respondents wrote comments about the possibilities and challenges that retreating poses for their organization.

Many respondents expressed interest in the idea of a retreat.

These professionals wrote about hopes, dreams, or plans for future retreating in their organizations. They understand current obstacles or past disappointments, but they are also driving the introduction or revitalization of retreat activity. Many noted their experience with retreats in prior positions. They appear to have vision and determination. Note the mix of positive and negative in each statement: desire and limitation, possibilities and challenges, benefit and discomfort.

• “Great desire but limited human and financial resources.”
• “Challenges are mostly related to family’s schedules and possibilities are endless! We are particularly interested in a b’nai mitzvah retreat.”
• “I am committed to running retreats, having successfully done so in previous positions that I’ve held in other congregations and at other organizations. Historically, [Synagogue] has not offered retreats, but I am in the process of promoting them and trying to get our lay people more interested in running retreats.”
• “I don’t know if our population would be interested. I’d love to do a family retreat.”

Number of Potential Organizers with Capacity for and Interest in Retreats

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizer has...</th>
<th>Capacity</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• “Most of our teachers do not feel comfortable staffing retreats though our school community could benefit from them.”

• “There have been retreats, at least at the religious school level, in the past, preceding my tenure here. I would like to look at reviving the program.”

• “Two main prohibitors are cost and time to plan the retreat. What an amazing experience it would be to have a retreat just for faculty and families.”

Challenges most frequently mentioned are:
high cost, low interest, scheduling difficulties (conflicts and availability), and insufficient staff and volunteer resources.

Also mentioned were the challenges of accommodating diverse expectations and needs, lack of commitment, and difficulty getting volunteers. One respondent expressed hesitation to use communal resources for an “untested and not organically arising program.”

Several of the comments come from small congregations and schools that do not have the numbers or infrastructure to undertake a retreat. For example, one wrote, “We’re just a very small school.” Another said, “We are a small (31 families) synagogue in a semirural area with a small Jewish population…Many of our members rarely went to synagogue, and we are lucky they attend our services. Also, half are interfaith. I do not think they would take the time to attend a retreat.” The most ironic comment comes from another small synagogue: “We did have a retreat 15 years ago which was a general success, but we decided that it was best as an infrequent event.”

A number of potential organizers wrote about recent or impending retreats.

Often these were a reprisal of past retreats or a new experiment. One school is hoping to have a retreat for next year’s 6th grade families as well as one for the school as a whole. Another recently had its first retreat, which was for teens and focused on Israel education. A day school is holding a pilot retreat in the near future that they hope will become an annual event. A synagogue that had run family retreats for a number of years until interest and participation waned is trying again next year with a retreat geared toward families with young children. Another synagogue with a lapsed annual family Shabbaton is hoping to try again next year with a family Shabbaton and/or a student-only retreat. These are just a few examples of how organizers who did not meet the criteria for our research might—perhaps with some outside support—become part of a growing ecosystem of Jewish retreating.

IMPETUS FOR GROWTH

The impetus for growth in Jewish retreats comes from both internal and external dynamics.

Growth is coming from the organizers who are expanding their retreating work.

As noted above, expansion includes building alumni networks with leadership that plans and implements retreats, establishing retreats as a post-program expectation (e.g., Honeymoon Israel), or training facilitators or volunteer retreat organizers (e.g., Moishe House Retreatology). All of these sprout new retreats from the roots of the organizers’ current ones. Growth may also come from the potential organizers in our study—the 25% of those who are currently not doing retreats but have the capacity and interest to do so in the future.

Contextual dynamics are also propelling the continued growth in Jewish retreating.

These dynamics include the emergence of Jewish engagement as an organizing principle for Jewish communities; the professionalization of experiential Jewish education with notable training programs,
resources, and practitioners; and the dominance of technology in contemporary life. One informant suggested that because technology makes it hard for people to unplug, the escape of retreats is becoming more important and meaningful than ever before.

Demographics may also play a role. Retreats are taking hold in micro-communities. Serving these communities—whether organized by sexual or gender identity, ability, age, race, ethnicity, religion or some combination thereof—is an area of growth in Jewish engagement work. Retreats are one way to create intensive experiences for small groups of individuals with similar interests and needs.

Retreats are particularly well suited to the millennial generation (born 1981-1996). According to one informant, “retreats are by far the best methodological tool for engaging millennials.” The most racially diverse generation in US history, millennials are noted for building personal identities from a mashup of various sexual, gender, ethnic, racial, and religious designations. As such, they embody the notion of micro-community. Millennials are seeking communities and experiences that reflect their personal values but do not require membership dues or long-term commitment. They value self-fulfillment more highly than any other generation and are interested in wellness and work-life balance. Millennials need time away from their daily lives, concerns, and their phones. “The opportunity to get away allows for an emotional connection, which is what they really want,” explained an organizer for this generation. Not surprisingly, national and local organizations are embracing retreating as a way to build community, engage young adults in Jewish life, and provide opportunities for personal and professional development. (A glimpse at how organizers accomplish these goals is seen in the three examples from Moishe House, Hillel International, and GatherDC.)
Beyond the Tent targets young adults searching for “something between traditional synagogue life and big happy hours” in the seemingly vast array of Jewish options in Washington, DC. The immediate purpose of the retreat is to help participants figure out and take ownership of their Jewish identities. Its ultimate goal is to help participants “advance their Jewish journey, go further and deeper.” The retreat’s sessions explore five potential paths into Jewish life: spirituality, wisdom, ethics, community, and culture. Rabbi Aaron Potek, founder of Beyond the Tent, compares the five paths to strings on a guitar: “You pluck one, hold it up, and see what resonates.”

Beyond the Tent is part of GatherDC’s larger effort to engage unaffiliated Jewish adults in their 20s and 30s. GatherDC believes in Jewish engagement through building relationships. The organization advertises the retreat through its weekly email newsletter and at its programs, but peer-to-peer recruitment is the most powerful. The retreat observed at Pearlstone Retreat Center (Reisterstown, MD) in February 2019 was the sixth Beyond the Tent.

Beyond the Tent intentionally does not include traditional Shabbat prayer services. Potek believes that the target audience is not interested in Jewish prayer or ritual and would be less likely to attend if Friday night services were on the schedule, even if optional. Instead, Friday night of the retreat began with a traditional Shabbat dinner with optional candle lighting, Kiddush, and HaMotzi. As participants assembled around dinner tables, Potek asked for a volunteer to make the blessing over the wine. When no one spoke up, he made Kiddush for the community. When he asked for a volunteer for the blessing over the bread, one participant led the group in singing a familiar camp version of HaMotzi.

After dinner, Potek introduced the participants to a Hasidic spiritual practice called Hitbodedut, an informal, secluded prayer or conversation with God. The purpose was to give participants a way to experiment with Jewish spirituality, the first of the five pillars introduced earlier. Participants were told that they do not need to believe in God or to speak aloud to participate in Hitbodedut. Rather, they are to find their own space in which to consider or to try out their spiritual practices. In contrast to the other learning sessions at the retreat, spirituality is approached directly through practice.

It was a cold, crisp February night and the Pearlstone grounds were mostly dark. Participants sought their own space for Hitbodedut using the bright moonlight or the flashlight app on their smartphones. You could hear the sound of their footsteps crunching on the frozen ground as some ventured away from the main building and others walked toward the nearby woods. Aside from the leaves rustling in the wind and the occasional cry of Pearlstone’s goats, silence continued through the 10 minutes of Hitbodedut. Frigid temperatures did not deter the participants from experiencing Jewish spirituality in the moonlight.
THE CASE FOR RETREATING

Retreats add unique value to an organization’s work that could not otherwise be accomplished. In other words, there is no substitute for a retreat. The case for retreating is seen in both how and why organizers use retreats.

HOW ORGANIZERS USE RETREATS

The most common purposes for retreats, as per the organizer survey, are community building, Jewish education, Shabbat or holiday celebrations, and spirituality. (See Figure 6.) The “other” category includes healing from grief, addiction recovery, collegial support network, food justice and service learning, social justice, musical retreats, new camper weekends, b’nai mitzvah experience, art and culture development, Israel education, Jewish holiday and ritual.

Organizers’ Purposes for Their Retreats

Figure 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community building</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish education</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shabbat or holiday celebration</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality, mindfulness</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership development</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R&amp;R</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team building</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill building</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and wellness</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiruv or Jewish outreach</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n=210 organizers. Respondents were asked to check all that apply.
training, Jewish and gender identity, relationship building, and women’s empowerment.

Part of the power of retreating is that one retreat event can serve multiple purposes. Jewish education at a retreat, for example, can more readily be integrated with the aims of community building and Shabbat observance than it can be in the classroom.

The majority of respondents to this question (69%) checked three to six purposes out of the list of 12. The three most cited—community building, Jewish education, and Shabbat/holidays—often provide the framework for other purposes such as spirituality and/or leadership development.

Retreats have different benefits for local, regional, and national organizers.

Local organizers. Congregations, day schools, social groups and other local organizers see the benefit of engaging members of their organization or community in a retreat setting. One leader noted that when the retreat ends, the participants “are all going back to the same place.” As such, the community created in the retreat environment readily redounds to the community back home, and retreat follow up can be done in person.

National organizers. National youth groups, fellowships, and training programs spoke of the benefit of convening participants from across the country. In many of these programs, participants gather virtually during the months of their fellowship. Face-to-face time at periodic retreats enables them to establish strong ties to their peers or colleagues, engage in deep and extended conversation, and develop the capacity to work together in the program and beyond. Amplifier, for example, runs a training program on starting and sustaining giving circles inspired by Jewish values. Last year the retreat component of the program was discontinued, but it was resumed this year in order to regain the benefits of in-person learning and the unique capacity to build community.

Regional retreats. Some retreats are organized by regional entities (e.g., BBYO regional conventions). More commonly in our data, national entities use regional retreats to diversify location, increase the number of people who can be accommodated, and/or to contain participants’ travel costs.
Retreats help fulfill organizational mission by melding with and enhancing the organization’s program year.

Organizers integrate retreats in five different ways:

### PROGRAM SCAFFOLDING

Some organizers hold regular retreats throughout the year as part of a fellowship, internship, or leadership development program. The timing of the retreats is designed to sync with the flow of the program and provide booster shots at appropriate times in the participants’ development. These retreats are highly intentional events that play into the arc of the total experience and add momentum to the program. There is typically a retreat at the beginning and end of the program, and often a retreat midway.

**The Diller Teen Fellowship** is an immersive leadership program for a select group of Jewish 10th and 11th graders from 32 communities around the world, including North America, South Africa, Australia, and Israel. During the 12-month program, participants have educational workshops every other week in their home communities. They also have three Shabbatonim that are scheduled strategically throughout the year as anchors for the educational process. The theme of the first Shabbaton is Jewish identity. The teens are introduced to group dynamics, different types and aspects of Jewish identity, and a variety of Shabbat experiences. The second Shabbaton, which provides hands on leadership practice, is organized and run by the fellows. The fellows determine its theme, content, and logistics and they run the various activities. The third Shabbaton takes place when teens from the group’s Israel partner city come to the local community. At this retreat, the two groups bond, re-explore Jewish identities in this new context, and share a Shabbat experience.

### CALENDAR MARKERS

Some organizers hold regular retreats across the year as part of their programming. These retreats do not have the same tight structure as the time-delimited fellowships above, nor are their retreats integrated into the curriculum in the same way.

**Berkeley-Oakland Midrasha** in California is a community-based, pluralistic supplementary school with multiple campuses that is sponsored by various congregations and the local Jewish federation. The organization runs three Shabbatonim across the year (fall, winter, and spring) which bring together teens from the different campuses in the East Bay to meet each other, to celebrate Shabbat together, and to deepen their relationships with each other and with their teachers.
Some organizers run only one retreat a year. The single annual retreat is common among congregations (e.g., synagogues, minyanim) and certain micro-communities (e.g., men’s groups, sisterhoods, queer groups).

**Kehilat Hadar** is a volunteer-run independent minyan in New York City. For the past 18 years, the minyan has hosted a Shavuot retreat at a Jewish summer camp. Although the retreat is a signature event for the minyan, it is not their core product, which is regular programs and prayer services throughout the year.

Some Jewish day and part-time schools run annual retreats for different age or grade cohorts. Each retreat is distinctive as it is designed for the arc of the students’ education across their school years.

**Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School** in Rockville, Maryland runs an off-site annual retreat (Shabbaton) for each grade from 8th through 12th. The retreat gives students an opportunity to see new places and to bond with classmates and teachers in ways not possible during the school day. Each retreat contributes toward the evolution of the grade cohort. The theme or focus is particular to the grade. For example, 9th grade is a year when some students leave the school and others come in. Its retreat focuses on group dynamics and grade bonding. In 11th grade, when students are older and anticipating the end of their high school careers, the annual retreat focuses on the students’ Jewish future—who they are in the community and how they anticipate being involved or connected in the future.

National organizers also run multiple retreats over the course of a year. These retreats are not organized around a fellowship or program but rather are designed to reach different demographics in different geographic locations.

**Keshet** is a national Jewish LGBTQ organization. In 2019, it will host six LGBTQ and Ally Teen Shabbatonim. These programs are scheduled across the year from March through November and take place in various locations on the East Coast, West Coast, and in the Midwest. Two of these events are open to all; one is designated for participants in grades 8-12 who identify as women and girls; one is a trans Shabbaton open to participants in grades 8-12 who identify as trans, non-binary, and/or genderqueer; one is open to LGBTQ and ally young adults ages 18-24; and one is a leadership Shabbaton.
WHY ORGANIZERS USE RETREATS

Retreats uniquely contribute to the work of the organization by providing the time, space, and environment conducive to individual and group development.

As one interviewee noted, being away from home seems to “spark some kind of magic, some alchemy,” not unlike the magic of overnight camp. The interviews probed the “why” question by focusing on the unique value of a retreat. Given the multiple ways to accomplish its goals, why did the organizer select retreats? What did the retreat uniquely contribute to the work of the organization? We summarize the answers in seven categories. Interwoven across categories is the notion of the retreat as relief from everyday life.

1. **Removal from everyday life can lead to personal and professional transformation.**

   Removal is both physical (traveling the distance to a retreat center, turning off technology) and psychological (ingredients in the retreat program that induce new thoughts, feelings, or behaviors).

   In personal transformation retreats, physically getting away is instrumental in helping participants open up to a new understanding of life and purpose. As one practitioner noted, being in the retreat setting helps participants “shed their exterior armor and expectations, down to the soul.” Leadership training retreats are based on the premise that that removing participants from their daily lives will get them into a mindset where they can learn in a different way and think more creatively and strategically about their work. The idea is to get participants out of their comfort zone and into a space where they can be open and vulnerable and where they can develop trust with their colleagues. The potential for transformation emerges from this state of “productive discomfort.” “A bit of discomfort is good,” said one organizer. “It’s when you grow.”

2. **Relationships and community are built at retreats in ways not possible at home, in school, in the workplace, or in the community back home.**

   According to one organizer, there is something about unstructured time and a beautiful, comforting space that allows participants to expand their boundaries, deepen relationships, make new friends, and feel more deeply engaged in the community. The organizer of Hillel’s workshop SHABBAT explains the phenomenon this way: “Day-to-day distractions are minimized. You can’t run back to your office to check email. You’re not running into someone in the hallway who steals you from the group dynamic. When you go away, there is an understanding that you’re there to do the work—it feels different.”

Retreats also offer extended time that enables participants to have a series of conversations with each other, pursuing topics over the course of several days. Organizers say that the best thing at a retreat is when there is sufficient time for “the conversation that needs to happen” to surface. For this to occur, there has to be time for people to get to know each other, enough structured downtime to interact with each other, and then space for the conversation to happen. These conversations cannot happen by telephone or webinar. “It’s only at a retreat where you have intense connection and the space to do something with it.”

Organizers recognize that there is something powerful—even “magical”—in having dinner and breakfast with the same people, of going...
to sleep and then waking up the next morning with the same people. The shared experience and living together makes participants feel safe, in community, with “a purpose beyond themselves.” There is also something special about retreat rituals held in the darkness of night, the late night card games, the jokes between meals—social glue that is difficult to create at a workshop back home. This phenomenon is particularly noted in congregational gatherings that cut across ages and stages of life and across the various subgroups in the congregation. At home, you are looking for your “buddies.” At the retreat, you are in community.

Training programs or fellowships that build online networks need in-person interactions. As one organizer explained, there is an essential quality to in-person interactions that is lacking in virtual ones. In-person time, sharing meals, talking in hallways between sessions—all are crucial trust-building ingredients. Once trust is built, participants feel freer to share thoughts, challenge each other, and consider new opportunities together. As another organizer noted, “There’s nothing like actually spending time with people.”

Rabbis in the JOIN Clergy Fellowship are fully employed providing spiritual nourishment to their congregants. As such, they can become isolated from colleagues who are doing community organizing or movement building work. They may not have the time or support they need to move their congregation
on social issues. The clergy retreat brings together rabbis who can inspire each other, remind each other of the possibilities of their influence, share resources and ideas, and support each other in doing the work of social justice.

Evaluation of the Jewish Women’s Archive Rising Voices repeatedly shows that the main value from the program is the opportunity for participants to build connections with other young Jewish feminists around the country. When the girls gather and talk about their identities as young Jewish feminists and their passion for social justice, they are engaging in a powerful and deeply feminist act. “Tech can take us just so far” in this regard, the organizer explained.

3. **Retreats**—particularly those that serve as calendar markers—work as boosters that help participants remember and regain a “sense of amazement.”

For Mishkan, a spiritual community in Chicago, the retreat is a reminder of what it feels like to be in a true community and to live Mishkan’s values. The retreats remind participants of why Judaism and the congregation are important in their lives. Although it may be desirable for people to feel amazement, connection, and inspiration through Mishkan’s regular programs, “nothing quite does it like going away.”

4. **Retreats offer special experiences, especially noted in micro-communities.**

Keshet’s retreats draw LGBTQ teens from all over the country. Many of these teens come from isolated or small towns where they are “outliers.” At the retreat, they can be one of 70 or more people having the conversations. The Nice Jewish Boys’ retreat offers young adult gay men a camp experience they did not have growing up during the years when Jewish camps were not accommodating to queer youth.

5. **Retreats offer the gift of time.**

Although much can be made of “quality time,” one organizer argues that quality time is earned through quantity time. “You can’t just force fit quality into the end of the day,” he explained. “You need to have a critical mass of time that removes the pressure to optimize every minute with participants.”

In a fellowship or training program, days together mean that participants can engage with one another and staff holistically; that is, with intimacy, vulnerability, and richly textured relationships. Having time enables the practitioner to use retreat hours in a more dynamic or flexible way to match the needs of the group.

Bay Area Jewish Healing Center’s Grief and Growing retreat gives participants much needed time. At home—whether in therapy, a coffee date with a friend, or a grief counseling group session—individuals get to a certain point in the conversation and then have to say goodbye. Because grief is attached to time and space (e.g., I miss driving my child to school in the morning), healing requires working through the cycle of the day. The Grief and Growing retreat gives those in grief the time, space, and structure to move ahead.

6. **Holding retreats over Shabbat adds significant power to the experience.**

Understandably, there are practical reasons
for scheduling over a weekend. For some participants, weekends are the only time they can get away. For young adults seeking micro grants from Moishe House or Honeymoon Israel, Shabbat meets the Jewish content requirement for funding.

Beyond the practical reasons is the unique or quintessentially Jewish contribution of Shabbat to retreats. Organizers describe retreating over Shabbat as “really powerful.” It is an opportunity to educate participants about Shabbat and to give them a new experience of it. Shabbat takes on additional meaning in pluralist settings where celebrating Shabbat together is a chance to understand and appreciate diversity in the Jewish world.

Retreating over Shabbat amplifies the notion of unplugging from everyday life. One organizer of teen retreats seeks a facility with no cellphone service so that participants can “be here and now” for the Shabbaton. A weekend healing retreat over Shabbat gives participants a useful Jewish practice they can continue at home to strengthen their resilience. A Jewish yoga retreat held over Shabbat gives participants an experience of “embodied Jewishness.” Participants spend the full weekend engaged in spiritual practices, all contextualized in Shabbat and infused with Jewish teaching. They come away from the retreat recognizing that Jewish wisdom or tradition has something important to teach them about their wellness journey.

7. **Retreats can promote a larger vision.**

Some organizers see retreats as a laboratory for testing out new ideas for community. For the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, the aim of the work is to gain greater awareness in order to create a better world. Deep experiences at the retreat are not simply for the retreat experience but are tested out in the world, as participants consider what these experiences mean for their work and their lives back home.

Such organizers hope that the retreat will not be a onetime experience but will expand over time through different connection points or takeaways from the retreat. For example, the ultimate goal of a BBYO retreat is for teens to feel connected to the Jewish community. The retreat is not the be-all-and-end-all but rather is one piece of the connection. Outreach organizations that run retreats are less interested in the experience of the moment than they are in the individual’s greater engagement.

One organizer envisions impact as concentric circles. Some participants on the outer ring will come once and not return. Others, however, will return and become increasingly involved in the work, eventually entering the inner circles and becoming event trainers and co-creators. In this view, retreats help participants grow; participants, in turn, help spread the organization’s impact.
workshopSHABBAT is a two-year program that seeks to revitalize Shabbat on college campuses. The retreat was created to make Shabbat as “accessible, relevant, and as powerful as possible for college students,” recognizing that Shabbat is “a lifelong Jewish practice that often starts during college.” The program includes two retreats during which professionals from 10 campuses redesign or workshop the possibilities for Shabbat at their local Hillel. The retreat is held in a “neutral” space away from any of the participating campuses so that no one participant has the home advantage.

workshopSHABBAT’s retreats are designed for participants to connect to each other, to have a personal experience of Shabbat, and to foster collaboration and connections. Unlike other holiday events that happen only once a year, “Shabbat provides the opportunity for experimentation because it happens every week, and it’s 25 hours long.”

The March 2019 retreat was held at Leichtag Commons (Encinitas, CA) with overnight accommodations at a nearby hotel. workshopSHABBAT was intentionally held during the week in order to give participants the opportunity to workshop different elements of Shabbat. Moreover, it is easier for Hillel professionals to come together during the week because typically they are working on their campuses on Shabbat facilitating Shabbat experiences for students. In the words of the organizer: “It’s powerful for the cohort. They need to be together as a group, they need the time to experiment and workshop. There is only so much you can do via webinars and emails. Hillel campus staff are so busy. They are working nonstop, even on Shabbat. When we pull them out of that and bring them on a retreat, they get to do deeper spiritual work they don’t have time for otherwise.”

“Friday” of the retreat (held on Tuesday) was preparation for Shabbat. For “Kabbalat Shabbat,” participants were asked to change into white clothing and sparkles. The evening included a tisch, a traditional Hasidic celebration with speeches, song, dessert, and wine. “Saturday” (held on Wednesday) gave participants and faculty the opportunity to workshop what they had accomplished the day before. It closed with Havdallah on a nearby beach complete with traditional blessings, candle, wine, and spices.

workshopSHABBAT is a mixture of experience and back home application. The first day, Shira Kline, a ritual artist, led the group in rethinking the meaning of blessings used
on Shabbat evening. Faculty from The Gefilteria focused on food preparation for Friday night dinner. Rabbi Jess Minnen from OneTable led text study and guided participants through the seven elements of Shabbat that are the core of the retreat: preparation, welcoming, food, just being, community, spirituality, and celebration. Participants were divided into three groups that rotated through each of these sessions. Each group was also assigned particular responsibilities to help create “Shabbat” for the retreat community.

The group we observed began “Friday” with food preparation with the Gefilteria team. The kitchen at Leichtag Commons is located in an old farmhouse. The group gathered around the large kitchen island to prepare the first course for Shabbat dinner—appetizers and spreads such as cucumber tzatziki and beet hummus. Participants were given copies of the recipes as they divided into pairs to begin assembling the various components. One team grated cucumbers for the tzatziki while another searched among the kitchen utensils for a vegetable peeler. All recipes were kosher, used local produce, and easily could be reproduced in a Hillel kitchen or college apartment—no fancy appliances required.

The atmosphere in the kitchen was relaxed and convivial. Music played in the background as participants washed and chopped vegetables and chatted with each other. Once the spreads were prepared, participants braided challah from dough made earlier in the day and shared ideas about braiding techniques and different toppings they use at home or in their local Hillel.

The meal was to be a progressive dinner and there was discussion about how each course would be presented in different locations across Leichtag Commons. Faculty encouraged participants to consider how to welcome guests into their assigned space. The group we observed toured the space for the first course and were asked to consider the atmosphere they wanted to create and how they would incorporate Shabbat rituals (candle lighting, Kiddush, HaMotzi). The group was also tasked with beautifying the space in the spirit of Shabbat. Participants again divided up the tasks: One pair worked on gathering wildflowers for the tables. Another pair thought about how participants should enter the room: What is the easiest way to enter? How do we convey welcoming through signage or other elements at the entrance? A third pair focused on space design: Would there be several tables or one large table? What kind of lighting should we use? What mood or ambiance do we want to create? Every aspect of the experience of space was considered before setting up the room and then moving on to the next rotation.
MATCHING OPERATORS AND ORGANIZERS

Jewish facility operators are looking to fill beds and weeks at their retreat centers, and organizers are seeking appropriate venues for their events. Making the match, however, is not as easy as one might assume.

WHAT OPERATORS HAVE TO OFFER

Four of the operators in the Jewish retreating ecosystem run facilities singularly dedicated to retreating. All of the others are dual-enterprises that incorporate both retreats and Jewish summer camp (Figure 7). For these operators, retreating is one aspect of the business—one revenue stream—and it has varying degrees of centrality to the overall enterprise.

Capital Camps and URJ Camp Newman are exemplars of how retreat centers relate to their associated camps. Capital Camps originally operated exclusively as a summer camp. When Capital Camps developed its new master plan in 2002, it incorporated Capital Retreat Center as a key element. When Newman recently restructured, it placed its retreat center at the heart of its work. This shift eliminated the silos that had separated camp from year-round immersive experiences and expanded opportunities for immersive experiences well beyond the camp population. Both summer and

Operators with Retreat, Camp, and Conference Facilities
Figure 7

Note: n=42 operators
year-round work are now mission aligned at both organizations.

Jewish retreat centers have diversified client lists and use their properties for all sorts of events and purposes.

Across the board, Jewish retreats are a subset of the operators’ total retreat or rental business. They offer retreat facilities for Jewish and non-Jewish nonprofit organizations as well as rentals for family events and other purposes. Some retreat centers also do a small amount of business with corporations and other for-profit groups. Overall, for-profit clients account for about 9% of the business.

As noted above, non-Jewish groups and individuals have increased as a percentage of total business at Jewish retreat centers.

This balance may be a necessary business model. In the social welfare sector, for example, it is understood that the Jewish social service agencies must serve the broader population in order to be able to serve Jews in a cost-efficient manner. Or this balance may reflect a need for improved services and marketing to Jewish groups.

Operators provide different types and levels of retreat services. (See Figure 8.)

Only 12 of the 42 operators in the study offer rental and full service. Full service is defined as access to sports facilities, program design and planning, staff for activities, song leaders, educators, and the like.

WHAT ORGANIZERS ARE SEEKING

Some 60% of respondents to the organizer survey say that having an easy way to find appropriate facilities for their retreats would be a significant help to their organization.

Searching for retreat sites can be all consuming, and divert time and energy from the other tasks involved in a successful program.

Survey responses make clear why finding the right facility is so difficult. Respondents were asked to check up to four criteria (from a list of 13) that are most important to them in choosing a facility for their organization’s retreats. As seen in Figure 9, every criterion is “most important” to at least some organizers. Moreover, there are likely few if any retreat centers that can meet all four of an organization’s top criteria.
The three criteria at the top of Figure 9 are by far the most important, as 96% of all responding organizers checked one of more of these three factors (Table 2). Interviews with organizers add nuance to the criteria above.

### Number of Organizers Checking Cost, Physical Facilities, and/or Distance from Organization as Top Criteria for Choosing Facilities

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories checked</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost, physical facilities</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost, distance from organizations</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost, physical facilities, distance from organization</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical facilities</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical facilities, distance from organization</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance from organization</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the three</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>191</strong></td>
<td><strong>99%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Total does not equal 100% due to rounding.*
Cost.
There only a few things that the organizers themselves can do to lower cost. They can reduce the size or length of a retreat, seek grants or other funding to underwrite their retreats, or otherwise look for ways to achieve cost efficiency. One organizer in the study is planning to cut days off their retreat in order to bring the cost under control. Another is considering eliminating comps for the rabbi and other faculty. If retreating is like other areas (e.g., teen and young adult Israel experiences), then—providing a minimal threshold is met—there may be little consequence to reducing the number of overnights. In fact, fewer nights away may be more appealing to certain audiences.

Scenic location.
Some organizers prefer non-urban settings to avoid participants’ being drawn into other meetings in the city and to remove them from their routines so they can enjoy the benefits of being “away from it all”—“the retreatness of retreats” as one put it.

Flexibility.
Some organizers seek flexibility. If they use various room setups for their program, they want to be certain the facility can make changes as needed. If they are concerned with the confidentiality of participants’ conversations, they seek a facility they can take over exclusively or one that has space for private meetings and meals.

Quality of food.
Food is a constant refrain and many of the organizers recognize that dealing with people's food preferences, needs and complaints can be a time sink. “Everything follows from the quality of the food” explained one organizer. In several instances, we heard that quality of the food trumps the Jewish credentials of the site.

Availability of kosher food.
The issue of kashrut adds to the challenge of finding viable places that are either kosher or willing to accommodate for kashrut. Note that half of the Jewish retreat centers are certified kosher; the others are not (Figure 10).

Interviewees also explained the reasons why, at some point, they switched locations. Issues included scheduling, types and capacity of accommodations, preparedness of the facility and its staff, and upkeep of the facility. Several larger organizers (e.g., BBYO International, PJ Library) have moved their
gatherings from Jewish camps and retreat centers to hotels.

Over time, it appears that participants fully adjust to the hotel. BBYO teens in one region love the Crown Plaza Hotel where their conventions are now held and call it their “home away from home.” At the summer convention, the region uses a Jewish day camp on Shabbat. They spend the day at the camp, run leadership activities, have an evening barbeque, and then return to an air-conditioned hotel, and “everyone is happy.”

Sometimes trying out a new site works well, and other times it does not. One organizer, for example, wondered if she could do an urban retreat. She experimented in Brooklyn, and the answer was “yes, you totally can” (thanks to Airbnb rentals that created positive homey experiences). Another organizer tried an urban retreat and concluded that it was possible but not as desirable as remote retreats (thanks to the sounds of traffic that could be heard throughout).

Organizers seem to accept that there is no ideal site and that they need to work within the constraints of the particular facility. Some argue that a talented, experienced educator can run an amazing retreat anywhere and that “any educator should be prepared to educate, lead, and facilitate in a place that may not be ideal.”
Most of the organizers interviewed can make do in non-Jewish settings.

According to one organizer, it does not matter if the space is a Jewish retreat center or a state park. “A Jewish retreat center is wherever you can gather Jews. A space becomes Jewish when we arrive with Jews.” Another argued that using another religion’s space (e.g., YMCA retreat center) can be a positive. It sends an important message about sharing space and about the consideration of the Christian hosts who accommodate Jewish needs. Although Jewish space would be easier, she concludes, one choice is not necessarily better than the other.

Only three of the organizers we interviewed saw Jewish space as value added. One said that “all things being equal,” she would choose a Jewish space for the art, eruv, knowledge of kashrut and availability of a kosher kitchen, and for the opportunity to support the Jewish community and bring participants into a Jewish site. Note that generally all things are not equal. In the particular case, the food at the Jewish site was so bad that, after a few years, the program moved to a non-Jewish location where they could kasher the kitchen.

Often there are simply no viable Jewish options.

The main factors under consideration often preclude Jewish choices: location, size, comfort, and cost. One organizer, for example, reported that none of the Jewish camps in her area were winterized so there were no Jewish options for a January retreat. She found a YMCA camp which, nine years later, is still the program’s facility of choice.

Table 3 summarizes the location of Jewish retreat facilities by region along with average number of weeks per year in operation and average overnight capacity. Finding a convenient Jewish location is particularly difficult for organizations in regions with few Jewish facilities or limited capacity. Note that only three of the 42 facilities participating in the operators survey are open 12 months a year. Among the 30 for whom we have both 2015 and 2018 data, 16 have reduced their weeks per year. Ten have increased the number of weeks they are in operation and the other four have maintained their previous level.

### Jewish Retreat Facilities by Weeks Available and Overnight Capacity in 2018

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Number of retreat facilities</th>
<th>Average number of weeks available</th>
<th>Average overnight capacity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New England (CT, MA, NH)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tri-state (NY, PA)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast (GA, MD, NC)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest (IN, TN, WI)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West (AZ, CA, CO)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada (ON, QC)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OVERALL</strong></td>
<td><strong>42</strong></td>
<td><strong>24</strong></td>
<td><strong>352</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: n=42 retreat centers*
PRACTICAL CONCERNS

Retreat organizers need assistance with the practical concerns of cost, staffing, and marketing. They also need help developing post-retreat evaluations and activities. Follow-up activities are instrumental to the long-term impact of the short-term immersive experience.

COST

About half of the Jewish organizers charge participants the full cost of the retreat (accommodations, meals, program). The other half do not.

Many retreat organizers strive to be inclusive and do not want money to be the gating factor to participation. They want to assure that the retreat is open and accessible to all. They want to keep the price as low as they can so that as many people as possible can come. The great majority of organizers (87%) provide scholarships, discounts, or other support to participants. Often financial support includes travel costs.

Many organizers (75%) have a budget line for retreats. In addition, just over half (53%) report that their organization raises money in the form of gifts or grants for their retreat activities.

In other instances, the organizers’ costs are covered under general operating expenses or are handled on an ad hoc basis. Interviewees justify the expense saying that the results of the retreat will have a value far greater than the cost of the program.

Mishkan Chicago works to be inclusive and accessible, so it generally offers its programs for free or at a nominal cost. Retreats are an exception. The community knows it will lose money on its retreats, and the only question is how much it is willing to lose. The differential between fees and cost is covered by general operations, other program income, and additional funds they might get from Moishe House or from other grants.

Costs are rising.

A few of the larger organizers have significant resources, and cost is not a major consideration. A few of the very small organizations are nimble enough to keep costs low. The others, however, face increasing costs and continuing difficulty finding outside funding sources. As organizers are looking for ways to reduce the cost of their retreats, operators are pricing around their breakeven point. For one organization, for example, this led to a 10% increase in the cost of its retreat from 2018 to 2019.

A constructive counterexample is the family camp program sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles. Like other organizers, federation wants the experience to be accessible and affordable to families. They have found that the price point for family camp retreats needs to be significantly lower than the retreat centers’ normal pricing schedule. As the operators came to appreciate family camp as a recruitment program for their camp, they agreed to absorb the difference.
STAFFING

Most of the organizers in our survey (74% of 207 respondents) have a designated person responsible for retreats.

Nonetheless, interviews reveal that some of these organizers (outside of the largest) are not fully staffed for running retreats. Issues arise when a single person is charged with both logistics and program. If there is no one else on staff to assume responsibility for the former, the educator is often forced to spend less time on vision and content in order to assure quality control and smooth operations.

Some organizers compensate for insufficient staff by hiring outsiders or engaging volunteer help.

Some 44% (of 205 respondents) hire outsiders to plan, organize, or implement all or part of their retreat program. Some of the fellowship and training programs have developed a model in which participants are tasked with designing and running retreats as part of their training or as part of their alumni experience. Keshet and Dorot are two examples.

Keshet, a national Jewish LGBTQ organization, is running a growing number of retreats each year with only two staff members. The capacity to do so resides in paid contract workers for specific programs and a group of volunteers, staff, and teens who create programming. The leadership structure includes Shabbaton fellows. Fellows are young adult alumni of the program with an interest in Jewish education, community building, and communal work. They work with a staff member on mentoring teens and running activities. They empower teens to do the programming and provide them with the necessary tools. The staff member handles logistics to assure the programs work. The aim is to create quality programs and provide leadership development at the same time. The added value for LGBTQ teens is the chance to meet and be mentored by the Shabbaton fellows who were once where they are today.

Dorot Fellowship alumni retreats are run by the fellows and constitute an important piece of their relationship to the organization. The fellows do the vast amount of work. All that is needed at this point is “a light touch” from the staff member who convenes the planning team and makes certain the work stays on track. Groups of fellows take charge of different aspects of the retreat (e.g., davening, learning, childcare). Both veterans and newcomers are included in the planning groups, thus assuring continuity in future years. Before Dorot had this “well-oiled machine,” the retreats were very time consuming for staff. Now they are part of the culture.

Just over 60% of respondents to the organizer survey say they need more personnel dedicated to organizing retreats in order to grow and enhance them.

MARKETING

Some 60% of respondents to the organizer survey said that better promotion, marketing and recruitment would help them improve their retreating activities.

Many organizers (41% of 203 respondents) do not sell out their retreats.

The data includes examples of events that did not take place due to insufficient registration or lack of readiness on the part of the organization. Synagogue schools, in particular, have discontinued retreats as part-time school enrollments have declined to the
point where some grades have insufficient students to warrant the cost of an offsite retreat.

**On the positive side, 30% of the organizers report having wait lists.**

Some retreats sell out the day they are posted, and many applicants who would like to attend are turned away (e.g., Los Angeles family camps).

Retreats, like any event in the Jewish community, compete with a host of other activities for participants’ time and attention. “People are inundated with so many things,” said one organizer, “it’s hard to get them to slow down and go into a retreat, a transformational space. In a marketplace of ideas and choice—not just Jewish—they are flooded with amazing things.” An organizer of teen retreats noted that anything else that teens choose to do is a challenge for the organization. “Television, another group at school—it’s all competition. We need to be more compelling than the others.” Other organizers echoed this sentiment. Even in the day school setting, retreats are in tension with academic classes, homework, and exams.

**A few organizers have viable participation numbers but reach a relatively small percentage of their potential audience.**

One congregation, which values the power of retreats, is questioning whether it can continue to offer small niche retreats, or whether it needs to create a larger community-wide experience. In another congregation, the question arose of whether the retreat was serving nonmembers more than the “regulars.” After a congregation-wide survey confirmed a universally high level of interest in the retreat, retreating activity continued apace. A third congregation is concerned that doing the retreat year after year with the same people will have diminishing returns. The question in this congregation is how to keep the experience fresh.
POST-RETREAT CONCERNS

Most respondents to the organizer survey (86%) follow up with participants post retreat.

Follow-up efforts described by interviewees include a take-home packet, on-line classes, and a webinar series. Some organizers give participants ongoing accessibility to organization staff. They invite participants to other programs. They let participants know when someone from the organization is going to be in their town. They recommend events that participants may want to attend and invite them to the annual retreat. The participants of a personal development retreat use WhatsApp to create mutual support groups post retreat. Others offer Facebook groups, listservs, photo sharing, and micro-grants for participants to run their own events.

Despite this list of follow-up activities, efforts in any one organization are generally limited. According to interviewees, the issues are lack of resources (most notably staff time) and lack of models for fuller and more engaging follow up. For example, asked about their retreat follow up, one organizer reported that they communicate with retreat alumni to solicit for the organization’s annual campaign—a limited approach at best.

Interviewees also demonstrated new thinking. One organizer asks participants for their stories about what happened at the retreat. This technique serves as an opportunity for the participant to reflect on the experience and for the organizer to gather narratives for donors. Another organizer is considering expanding the pre-retreat experience in order to extend the amount of time and touchpoints that the organization has with retreat participants.

The head of a fellowship program sees their retreats as ends in themselves and as a means to other ends. As such, the organizer sees post-retreat momentum as critical and the part where staff “earn their keep.” In this case, follow up is individual. It is often related to personal or professional issues and is generally initiated by the participant (and not staff).

Most organizers (73%) conduct formal evaluations of their events.

Evaluation is most commonly a post-retreat survey that asks participants for their assessment of the retreat experience and the difference it made to them. Organizers admit that their evaluations are not of high quality, and they are not methodical about reviewing and applying the results. One said that they had done “just enough evaluation to make a sound investment, but it’s not rigorous.”

Bay Area Jewish Healing Center is trying to break this mold. The organization redid its evaluation into a simple format based on grief and growing, the theme of their retreat. In the new design, participants answer three questions about grief when they arrive: (1) When I left my home, I felt… (2) One thing I wanted to learn is… (3) Now that I am here, one thing I want to learn is… At the end of the retreat, they answer a parallel set of questions on growing: (1) Something I learned this weekend is… (2) One hope for myself is… (3) As I reflect on the community, what comes to mind is… Over the long term, this format should give the organizer more information than would simple ratings of the food, activities, or other aspects of the retreat.
Making the case for Jewish retreating is easy.
Jewish retreats are immersive experiences that touch the total participant—mind, body, and soul. They are a quintessential setting for experiential education that can deepen Jewish learning and practice. They offer Jewish organizations a powerful tool for fulfilling their mission and building community among their participants and leaders. Jewish retreating appears to be growing in terms of numbers, reach, and content. Evidence suggests that this growth will continue.

Retreating looks more like a laboratory than a factory production line.
Retreats are highly creative and mutable. They invite change and innovation. Each year, for example, Moishe House generates scores of peer-led retreats. Although all have the same intent and serve a relatively similar audience, each creates a unique event in terms of location, leadership, theme, and activities. The event lasts two or three days and then is over. Ideas from the experience may be shared with others who want to run retreats and follow up may take place with participants, but that exact retreat will not be replicated. Each retreat is an experiment in Jewish community building, relationship building, Jewish learning and practices, and immersive Jewish experiences themselves.

Importantly, Jewish retreating is not a coherent field of practice.
Retreating is not linked to a discipline. Retreating has no canon of knowledge, no set boundaries, and relatively few fulltime professionals. You cannot get a degree in Jewish retreating, and most people running retreats do not see themselves as retreat professionals per se. Rather, retreating draws from many sources: experiential education, hospitality industry, hotel management, group dynamics, community organizing, spiritual counseling, and life coaching to name just a few.

We would propose that retreating is a universal tool with many forms and uses. As seen in this initial study, retreating can be applied anywhere and everywhere. Virtually any type of organization should be able to gain benefit from the use of retreating. It is the Swiss Army Knife of Jewish life.

The notion of retreating as a universal tool—rather than a field of practice—has implications for future action in the realms of capacity building, structure, investment, and research.

CAPACITY BUILDING

Capacity building could help organizers significantly improve and expand their retreats and help operators secure a larger piece of the Jewish market.

As exploratory research, this report does not provide a blueprint for the future, but it does offer data to stimulate conversation about possibilities. Each of the questions below could be the theme for a convening or the start of a conversation to move from data to action.

CAPACITY BUILDING FOR OPERATORS

Operators need to see retreating from the organizers’ perspective and to earn their piece of the Jewish retreating market. Key questions for
individual operators concern how to build the Jewish part of their work.

- To what extent do Jewish purposes drive their work? How does that appear in their mission and vision statements?

- Do they care about how Jewish they are or in what way they are Jewish? For example, is building Jewish capacity in their strategic plans? What are their targets for the Jewish side of their business?

- What kind of messages are they sending to the Jewish world?

- What could they learn from Jewish organizers that might help them increase their share of the Jewish retreating market?

- How do the operators understand the gap between what they are offering in terms of price, location, accommodations, or services and what Jewish organizers are seeking? What would it take for them to close this gap? For example, cost is the number one consideration for operators in selecting facilities. What kind of support or structures could help retreat operators control their costs, raise the quality of their facilities and services, and increase their value to their Jewish clients?

- How much effort have the Jewish retreat centers made to attract Jewish business? For example, how many of them are listed as Jewish options on the retreat search websites? How do operators communicate with the many Jewish organizers in their region (congregations, day schools, JCCs, independent groups etc.)? How are the operators positioning themselves as Jewish venues for immersive experiences?

A key question for the operator ecosystem writ large is how to deal with the limited options for Jewish space.

According to our data, capacity is challenged by the number of weeks per year not in operation, absence of supervised kosher facilities, inconvenient locations, limited number of beds, and other constraints. Some informants suggested expanding the number of Jewish retreat centers by adding retreat facilities to more summer camps or by seeding new Jewish retreat centers. Adding new sites may not be a winning proposition given two important data points: Most Jewish organizers in the study are not convinced they need Jewish space and have been doing well without it; and current Jewish facilities are not fully booked or are not fully booked with Jewish groups. A member of the research advisory committee wondered whether funders should be helping non-Jewish spaces become easier for Jews to use (e.g., helping non-Jewish operators secure a Torah scroll or teaching them the laws of kashrut).

**CAPACITY BUILDING FOR ORGANIZERS**

Organizers report that they could benefit from better promotion, marketing, and recruitment for their retreats; assistance in finding appropriate sites for their retreat events; and help raising funds to make their retreats more widely affordable.

Such support might take the form of training, coaching, convenings of organizers, resource banks, education, or other such format.

Searching for sites can be all consuming and divert time and energy from the other tasks involved in a successful retreat (marketing, identifying talent, designing the program, etc.). The great effort some organizers have to put into finding sites suggests that the existing websites designed for this purpose
are insufficient for them. It is possible that the Jewish retreat organizers need something more like a personal matchmaker and less like a dating app that churns out algorithm-based matches without peer ratings.

Findings also make clear that organizers could benefit from sharing ideas about evaluation, follow-up activities, and measurement of impact.

Evaluation and follow up are important steps for any immersive program. They are conduits for information and feedback that the organizer can use to enhance current experiences or to plan for new offerings. They maintain contact with participants. They extend the spirit and learning of the event over time and into the participants’ lives back home. Follow up may also help participants find other opportunities to continue the learning and development begun at the retreat. Post-retreat activities are instrumental in the longer-term impact of the short-term immersive experience.

Some organizers in our study view the retreat as an “inoculation” and provide regular “booster shots” in the time that follows. In some cases, small groups, with the support of organizers, continue independently post retreat. Most organizers could benefit from fresh thinking and support in developing follow up that builds productively from the retreat experience. Enhanced follow up might also be appealing to funders who are interested in outcomes. As one informant asked, “How do you weave together the retreat experience and everything else?” The answer to that question is directly related to impact.

Organizers may welcome assistance in raising the quality of their retreat programs.

Although few seek retreat centers that offer help with program design or program delivery (2% and 7% respectively), over half (55%) believe they could expand or improve their retreats if they had help getting the best talent for them. Talent includes speakers, educators, artists, musicians, and the like. These findings may suggest that organizers want a certain degree of control over their program but also recognize that they cannot do it all on their own.

Planning for capacity building might begin with a forum in which these ideas are tested with organizers and operators.

• What should the priorities be?
• What would be the best starting point?
• What seems most urgent? Most doable?
• What other ideas do the organizers and operators have?

STRUCTURING THE FIELD

Promoting a tool is different from promoting a field.

Promoting a tool requires building relationships with and among the vast array of organizations that might benefit from this tool or use it to greater effect than they currently do. It requires the creation of forums for learning and sharing and the harnessing of expertise to build capacity among organizers and operators.

Decisions around structure (as described below) depend on organizers’ and operators’ interest in capacity building and on their preferences for outside support.

A collaborative structure cannot be imposed but rather has to emerge from the interests and needs of those it intends to serve.
ORGANIZING THE ORGANIZERS

A structure for organizers needs to accommodate their great diversity and help them see their shared interests.

The research shows Jewish retreating to be a vast, varied, and dynamic ecosystem filled with talent, creativity, and energy. Organizers are a talent pool of professionals and volunteers who understand the power of retreating and are committed to its place in their organization. Yet they tend to operate in the bubble of their own organization or community. There is no formal structure that enables them to learn from one another and to work together effectively in addressing issues and seizing opportunity.

A collective structure could capitalize on the advantages of the diversity within the realm of Jewish retreating.

Planning for improvement, raising the quality of retreat programs, imagining innovations, and solving problems all benefit from having people with different experiences and perspectives at the table. Organizers with greater experience in developing retreats can coach those recently arrived on the landscape. Organizers who focus on spirituality and those who focus on education can explore together the intersection of the two and its implications for their work. Organizers who use retreating as a tactic can learn from the others what it means to move retreating to a more central place in the organization’s life. At the same time, diversity can be a hindrance to collaboration. Large organizations, for example, often complain that there is little they can learn from small organizations and vise-versa. They are simply too different.

One model that accommodates both diversity and shared interests comes from professional associations that organize around special interest groups. These associations allow individual participants or affiliated organizations to share in the power and resources of the full collective at the same time they enjoy the support and understanding of similar others. Another model would be to help existing umbrella organizations better serve the retreat organizers in their sector (e.g., day schools, synagogues, Jewish community centers, etc.). In this model, the overarching structure might be a consulting team that works directly with the umbrella organizations. There are advantages to this model. Umbrella organizations speak the language of their member institutions, have knowledge of their context, and seek ways to serve them better. Umbrella organizations are also in a position to propagate retreating throughout their membership.

As noted in the report, many of the Jewish retreat organizers are forward-thinking leaders who are considering new ideas for retreating in their organizations, new audiences they might attract, and new ways they might engage them. Organizers joined the research at an unexpectedly high rate. They responded to a cold call survey, agreed to be interviewed, and then gave generously of their time, experience, and wisdom. We also know that they have mainly been working in isolation from others doing similar work. In some sense, they are linked together in common efforts and hopes but without knowing that they are.

These realities suggest that organizers might be amenable to a structure for further building their retreating capacity.

STRUCTURE FOR OPERATORS

Jewish retreat operators may be ready for a formal collaborative structure that supports information and resource sharing.

Despite working in a competitive environment, these operators evidence camaraderie with other operators. Almost all run retreat facilities that
coexist with an overnight camp and thus know each other through Foundation for Jewish Camp, religious or Zionist movements, or other camp affiliations and convenings.

The literature describes at least eight different models for inter-organizational collaboration. The most common form, and one that might suit Jewish retreat centers, is a collaborative with a dense web of information and resource sharing across constituent organizations. For Jewish retreat centers, information sharing might be in the realms of operations, administration, leadership, programs and services, marketing, technology, or other parts of the business that could benefit from shared resources, new ideas, best practices, and benchmarks.

Such collaborative structures are particularly apt when there are problems that cannot be solved or opportunities that cannot be grasped by any one organization on its own. For Jewish retreat centers, this might include enhancing the quality of their facilities and services, stimulating activity in the Jewish retreating space, promoting retreating as a normative experience in the Jewish community, and leveraging dollars for initiatives and grants to support growth and improvement in retreating.

The literature notes that organizations can be hesitant to join a collaborative when they fear loss of autonomy or are loath to share knowledge and resources with their competitors. The literature also documents cases where organizations simultaneously collaborate and compete with one another, a likely scenario among Jewish retreat centers. It is also worth noting that funders of the Jewish community often value collaboration. Those who seek systems change understand that moving one organization ahead does not accomplish their greater vision for the field or the community. Notably, the overnight camp initiatives funded by the philanthropists in the 2000s were open to all camps or served groups or cohorts of camps.

The literature cites four conditions needed for a successful collaboration: trust, complementary goals or shared vision, interpersonal relationships among leaders, and the sense that the collaborative is worth the effort. To some extent, the first of these already exist among the Jewish retreat operators. The question now is how to make the collaborative worth the effort.

**INVESTMENT**

New funding can help make capacity building and structure a reality. At the same time, efforts to build capacity and to develop collaborative models for organizers or operators might attract new funding to Jewish retreating.

New funding might also be used to support scholarships and subsidies that could make Jewish retreating accessible to larger numbers, perhaps akin to how One Happy Camper helped bring more children to Jewish overnight camp. The key task ahead is to make the case in a way that attracts funders and convinces the Jewish community writ large of the high value of Jewish retreating experiences.

**FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA**

Research can add to the momentum of Jewish retreating.

Four types of research are suggested: impact studies, best practices, deeper dive into facilities, and feasibility studies. The value of such research is that it helps move planning and decision making from personal belief and anecdote to data-informed knowledge about what is possible and what is needed. Data can also be persuasive in making the case.
**Impact studies.**

Staff involved with Jewish retreating are true believers in its power. Yet little is known about what participants take away from a retreat experience or how to extend the impact of a retreat over time. The organizers’ post-retreat evaluations are generally not helpful in this regard as they are administered at a single point in time after the retreat and are focused on food, logistics, and program and not on individual growth or behavioral change back home.

Research is needed to explore the impact of retreats on participants. Impact data would not only help build the case for Jewish retreating but also help organizers learn about the effects of their retreats on participants. Armed with such data, organizers can become more intentional about retreat design and follow up.

**Best practices.**

Although our interviews and observations revealed designs, activities, and practices that may represent excellence, no best practice research has yet been done.

- What would it take to create standards for best practices both on the operator and organizer side of Jewish retreating?
- Would operators be willing to share data about their business, their participant evaluations, or their impact studies so that facilities could benchmark themselves against one other or against those deemed to be best in class?

**Deeper dive into the facilities.**

Operators could benefit from more in-depth information about the 42 Jewish facilities that comprise the operator ecosystem and from an annual effort to build out longitudinal data on key metrics.

For example, an examination of the operators’ marketing, communications, and positioning in the Jewish community would be helpful in addressing their percentage of Jewish business.

- How important is it to them to build their Jewish business?
- What are their targets for the Jewish side of their operations?
- To what extent do Jewish purposes drive their work? How does that appear in their mission and vision statements?
- How are they communicating with the many Jewish organizers in their region (congregations, day schools, JCCs, independent groups etc.)?
- What kind of messages are they sending out to the Jewish world?
- How are they positioning themselves as Jewish venues for immersive experiences?

**Feasibility studies.**

The many ideas for moving retreating onward through capacity building, structure, investment, and research need to be tested with the organizers and operators. Feasibility studies may not be a set of measurements, but rather they may be working groups that grapple with possibilities and seek the way forward.

- What is needed? What is feasible?
- What can reasonably be done in the coming year or the year after that?
- What are the pros and cons of the various possibilities?
- What are the contingencies for success, and how can these be managed?
IN SUM

Retreating is an extraordinary tool that can be applied throughout the Jewish community. It is a growing activity and every sign indicates that it will continue to be so. There is an old saying of using “the right tool for the right job.” The research supports the notion that retreating is, indeed, the right tool for realizing many of the aspirations for Jewish life today. Tools, however, are only as good as their design and their application. The current study is but a first step in understanding what constitutes excellence in design and how far and wide this tool might be applied. Most importantly, it indicates that retreating’s potential can be advanced through actions that support the proliferation of Jewish retreats, increase the number of Jewish organizers and participants, and help raise the quality of these experiences.
This report is a milestone in our work, independently and as partners, on Jewish camping and retreating—David, as executive director of Capital Camps and Retreat Center (CCRC) from 2001 to 2012 and founder of Immersive1 Consulting and Josh, as founding chair of Pearlstone Retreat Center and chair of CCRC and Camp Shoresh. Our belief in the importance of retreating was confirmed by David’s 2014 inventory of Jewish retreat centers. Forty-seven of the 60 plus centers identified provided information regarding services, capacity, and participants. Results made clear that these facilities were attracting well over 100,000 people to their retreats annually and that most of these participants were Jewish.7

This work led us to convene the group of retreat operators and organizers, representatives of Jewish foundations, federations, JFNA, Association of Independent Jewish Camps, and the Foundation for Jewish Camp that met in Dallas in 2017. As noted in the Introduction to this report, the group considered ways to “catch the Jewish retreating wave.” One proposal was to undertake research that could answer fundamental questions about the status of Jewish retreating and how to support its growth and enhancement.8 The current study is the result of that proposal.

The study of Jewish retreating draws on knowledge of two related types of immersive Jewish experiences—overnight camps and JOFEE (Jewish outdoor, food, farming, and environmental education). The three types of experiences use a distinct break from the everyday and from traditional institutional environments to create intentional communities, to foster experiential learning, and to form or deepen relationships among participants. They offer a creative atmosphere that invites experimentation and personal risk taking. They use unique activities (e.g., challenge course or farm work) to engage participants and encourage personal growth.

At one time or another, each of the three types of immersive experiences has been regarded as an emerging field of interest for the Jewish community, and each has used research to propel itself forward at a liminal point in its evolution. In all three cases, it was hoped that research would generate information to support and grow the field and inform future investment in it.

When Brandeis University’s Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS) began the first systematic camp research in 2000, the issues at hand were not so different from those of Jewish retreating today. Children had been attending Jewish summer camp for a century, and yet there were none of the trappings of a field of practice. There was no comprehensive list of camps, no data on the size and shape of the field, no systematic understanding of camp programs or Jewish practices. There was little sense that camping was a business, that counselors were Jewish professionals, and that camp work could be a career. In terms of structure, the then-named Foundation for Jewish Camping was a roundtable of some two dozen camp leaders. It had a single visionary funder (Rob and Elisa Bildner), no formal connection to the camps, little structure, and no vision for a greater future. In terms of Jewish purpose, The AVI CHAI Foundation, whose investments to date had been...
largely focused on Jewish day schools, wanted to know if camps had the potential to be effective vehicles for Jewish socialization and education, or what today we would call Jewish engagement.

The first publication of findings, *Limud by the Lake*, included several recommendations that clustered into four categories: expansion, enhancement of Jewish education and life, staff development, and research. Eight years later, when CMJS replicated the initial study, the research team found a noticeably changed situation. Camp, which for decades had been ignored as an area for study or investment, had become a hot topic.

In 2014, *Seeds of Opportunity: A National Study of Immersive Jewish Outdoor, Food, and Environmental Education* (the JOFEE report) recognized a field at a similar crossroads. In the previous decade, Jewish outdoor, food, farming, and environmental education programs had proliferated. The research described the various programs, how they grew, who their participants and professionals were, and what impact and future opportunities they had. Although not a study of Jewish retreating per se, the content of the report dealt with some of the same questions now being asked of Jewish retreating.

Importantly, each of the three studies arrived at a different understanding of its realm of activity. Overnight camp, which was particularly amenable to capacity building and the development of structures, came to see itself as a business and a field of practice. Initiatives were undertaken for professionalization, capital investment, and program development. A body of knowledge was created through ongoing research, and an umbrella organization (FJC) was developed that set a vision for the field and drove it forward.

The JOFEE report, in contrast, concluded with the suggestion that JOFEE was a theme and not a field in its own right. As such, it could be applied in various ways in a multitude of settings. The recommended strategy for JOFEE was to develop relationships with an array of Jewish organizations and to consider how outdoors, food, farming, and environmental education could be adapted as a theme or approach to each organization’s purposes and audience.

Retreating presents not as a field of practice nor as a theme. It has none of the trappings of a field, nor is it connected to any particular type of content. Indeed, retreats run the gamut from yoga to Talmud study to professional development. As this report concludes, retreating is best conceived of as a tool. The challenge and vision going forward is to make retreating an excellent, strong, durable, and practical tool that finds many uses and continues to have a positive impact on Jewish individuals, organizations, and communities.

*Josh Fidler  
David Phillips  
*January 2020
NOTES


4 A devastating wildfire destroyed the Newman retreat center and camp in October 2017. Full implementation of the new model is on hold during the time of rebuilding.


APPENDIX A: METHOD

The research took place between June 2018 and May 2019. It entailed several sets of interviews and surveys of professionals involved in Jewish retreat work. It also included multiday participant-observation at three Jewish retreats. These efforts yielded the qualitative and quantitative data that appear in this report.

SURVEYS

The research entailed two surveys: one of Jewish facilities operators and the other of Jewish retreat organizers.

Operator survey
The questionnaire for facilities operators asked for basic information about their retreat centers: location, affiliation, description, capacity, and retreats in 2018.

The survey was sent to every known Jewish retreat facility in the United States as well as two retreat centers in Canada. The original list of facility operators came from David Phillips’ 2014-15 study. We added new or previously missing facilities to the list, eliminated those that are not functioning as retreat facilities at this time, and updated contact information. The result was a list of 61 Jewish retreat facilities. Of these, four responded that they were not currently doing retreats, and one refused to answer.

Of the remaining 59 operators, 42 answered the survey (71% response rate). The data from these operators are presented in this report along with time series data from the 30 facilities that were in our sample and also had responded to the 2014-15 survey. (See Appendix B for the list of participating operators.)

Organizer survey
The survey began with four questions designed to identify organizations that run retreats: (1) Does your organization run retreats? (2) Are any of these retreats in North America? (3) Do any of these retreats involve an overnight? (4) Did your organization run at least one retreat in 2017 or 2018? Those that answered “yes” to all four questions received the full bank of questions about their retreats. Questions covered number of retreats each

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year; content, aim or purpose; target audiences; criteria for choosing facilities; plans for future retreats; and what would be most helpful in growing or enhancing their retreats. Those that answered “no” to any of the screener questions were asked about their interest in having retreats, their capacity to do so, and any plans they might already have for future retreats.

The list of potential retreat organizers was built over several months using five approaches.

1. An online nomination form was built and distributed to all Jewish retreat operators, advisory committee members, and others in our network.

2. Interviews were held with individuals deemed to be connectors to retreat organizers. In the process of these conversations, we also learned about their work as organizers. (See Appendix B for list.)

3. Web searches were conducted to identify Jewish-sponsored retreats.

4. Building from extant databases, a list was created of Jewish organizations within selected communities that reasonably could offer retreats to their members, clients, professionals, lay leaders, or others in the community.

5. Organizations included synagogues and minyanim, day schools, part-time schools, central agencies, Jewish community centers, Hillels, youth movements, and camps. The 15 communities selected for the study were as follows:

1. Atlanta
2. Baltimore
3. Boston
4. Cleveland
5. Dallas
6. Denver
7. Los Angeles
8. Memphis
9. Milwaukee
10. Minneapolis
11. Nashville
12. San Francisco
13. St. Paul
14. Seattle
15. Washington

All totaled, organizer surveys were sent to 1,203 potential organizers. Responses were received from 378 organizers (31% response rate). Of these, 237 screened in. Organizers had to have run at least one overnight retreat in North American in the preceding two years to be eligible to receive the full survey. The other 141 screened out. These organizers did not meet the minimum criteria and received the short version of the survey. (See Table A1 for breakout by source.)

As seen in the table, most of the names came from lists of community organizations that we assembled from our existing databases. As we had anticipated, the highest screen outs came from this list as it was intentionally being used to fish for organizers.

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<td>Community list</td>
<td>931</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OVERALL</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,203</strong></td>
<td><strong>237</strong></td>
<td><strong>141</strong></td>
<td><strong>378</strong></td>
<td><strong>31%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTERVIEWS

In-depth interviews were conducted with key informants and with a select sample of retreat organizers drawn from the organizer survey. (See Appendix B for lists.)

Key informant interviews.
As a first step in designing our study of Jewish retreats, we interviewed 16 key informants. Interviewees included both facilities operators and retreat organizers. Interviewees were asked about definition, characteristics, nomenclature, purpose, quality, challenges, and the future of Jewish retreats.

We also spoke with nine professionals involved in retreat-related work as part of our search for organizers to survey. In addition to helping us identify Jewish retreat organizers, these professionals spoke with us about their work and shared their views on Jewish retreating.

Organizer interviews.
Interviews were conducted with a sample of 22 Jewish retreat organizers selected from the 134 respondents to the organizer survey who indicated they would be willing to speak with us. The selection sought a diverse sample by level (local, regional, and national), location, type of organization, and type of retreats.

PARTICIPANT-OBSERVATION

A member of the research team attended three retreats to observe how retreats achieve their purpose and to experience their content, process, and operations (Table A2).

We intentionally selected retreats that served the same demographic (millennials) but were in different locations and had different intents. Millennials are of particular interest for retreating. Engaging millennials is a priority in many communities; a number of upstart organizations and programs are targeted to millennials; and retreats by and for millennials are prominent on the landscape of Jewish retreating.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Organizer</th>
<th>Retreat</th>
<th>Audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>November 2018</td>
<td>Isabella Freedman (Falls Village, CT)</td>
<td>Moishe House (national)</td>
<td>Retreatology</td>
<td>Millennials preparing to run their own retreats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2019</td>
<td>Pearlstone (Reisterstown, MD)</td>
<td>GatherDC</td>
<td>Beyond the Tent</td>
<td>Millennials in the DC area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2019</td>
<td>Leichtag Commons (Encinitas, CA)</td>
<td>Hillel International</td>
<td>workshopSHABBAT</td>
<td>Hillel professionals (largely millennials)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Young adults in the millennial generation were born between 1981 and 1996. See https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/
# APPENDIX B: PARTICIPATING FACILITIES

The following camps and retreat centers provided information for this report:

1. Brandeis-Bardin Campus (AJU)  
2. Camp Mountain Chai  
3. Camp Ramah in California  
4. Camp Ramah in Wisconsin  
5. Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center  
6. Moshava Alevy  
7. Ramah Darom  
8. Shalom Institute Camp & Conference Center  
9. JCC Ranch Camp  
10. Berkshire Hills Eisenberg Camp  
11. Beber Camp  
12. Perlman Camp  
13. Camp Daisy and Harry Stein  
14. Camp Dora Golding  
15. Camp Havaya  
16. Camp Judaea  
17. Camp Kinder Ring  
18. Camp Kinneret-Biluim  
19. Camp Laurelwood  
20. Camp Moshava Indian Orchard  
21. Camp Ramah Day Camp in Nyack  
22. Camp Ramah in New England  
23. Camp Ramah in the Berkshires  
24. Camp Ramah in the Rockies  
25. Camp Tawonga  
26. Camp Young Judaea Texas  
27. Camps Airy & Louise  
28. Capital Camps & Retreat Center  
29. Golden Slipper Camp  
30. Habonim Dror Camp Galil  
31. Perlstein Retreat Center  
32. Pearlstone Retreat Center  
33. Pinemere Camp  
34. URJ Camp Coleman  
35. URJ Camp George  
36. URJ Camp Harlam  
37. URJ Camp Newman  
38. URJ Eisner Camp  
39. URJ Goldman Union Camp Institute (GUCI)  
40. URJ Jacobs Camp  
41. Camp Zeke  
42. Camp Yavneh
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEWS

KEY INFORMANTS

Key informants include facility operators and retreat organizers who were interviewed in the first stage of the research. These informants helped us understand the language of retreats and the core issues operators and organizers face in their work. Key informants also include those who helped identify organizers for the organizer survey.

### Key Informants: Initial Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ruben Arquilevich</td>
<td>Executive director</td>
<td>URJ Camp Newman Retreat &amp; Conference Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navah Becker</td>
<td>Director of programming</td>
<td>AJU/Brandeis Bardin Conference Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drew Fidler</td>
<td>Director of community education and outreach</td>
<td>Baltimore Child Abuse Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie Finkelstein</td>
<td>Director of leadership development</td>
<td>Foundation for Jewish Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabbi Zelig Golden</td>
<td>Founding director</td>
<td>Wilderness Torah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabbi Lisa Goldstein</td>
<td>Executive director</td>
<td>Institute for Jewish Spirituality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabbi Yitz Greenberg</td>
<td>Rabbi</td>
<td>Temple Beth Am (Los Angeles)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabbi Brad Greenstein</td>
<td>Senior director of Jewish learning</td>
<td>Moishe House</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt Grossman</td>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>BBYO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim Heeger</td>
<td>Board member</td>
<td>Newman/Foundation for Jewish Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabbi Yechiel Hoffman</td>
<td>Director of youth learning and engagement</td>
<td>Temple Beth Am (Los Angeles)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robyn Judelsohn</td>
<td>VP of immersive experiences</td>
<td>BBYO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen Radkowsky</td>
<td>Founding lay leader</td>
<td>Limmud NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaynie Schultz</td>
<td>Founder</td>
<td>Retreat Central</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stefan Teodosic</td>
<td>Executive director</td>
<td>Perlman Retreat Center at Beber Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carine Warsawski</td>
<td>Founder</td>
<td>Trybal Gatherings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Key Informants: Connectors to Organizers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jeremy Fingerman</td>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Foundation for Jewish Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda Gerard</td>
<td>Chief program &amp; innovation officer</td>
<td>Upstart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rishe Groner</td>
<td>Founder</td>
<td>The Gene-sis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca Kahn</td>
<td>Director of field expansion</td>
<td>Foundation for Jewish Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shuki Taylor</td>
<td>Founder and CEO</td>
<td>M2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judith Schiller</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Retreat Institute (JECC of Cleveland)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoshi Silverstein</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>JOFEE Fellowship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah Spinrad</td>
<td>Director of community engagement</td>
<td>Honeymoon Israel (Atlanta)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel Zieleniec</td>
<td>VP marketing and communications</td>
<td>Honeymoon Israel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ORGANIZERS

Retreat organizers who completed the organizer survey indicated at the end of the survey whether or not they would be willing to be interviewed. The following 22 organizations were selected from among the 134 who agreed to the interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizer</th>
<th>Type of Retreat</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allied Jewish Federation of Colorado</td>
<td>Young adult retreat</td>
<td>Denver</td>
<td>CO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amplifier</td>
<td>Training for giving circles</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bais Chana Women International</td>
<td>Women's retreats</td>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bay Area Jewish Healing Center</td>
<td>Recovery (Grief &amp; Grow retreat)</td>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBYO CT Valley Region</td>
<td>Teen conventions</td>
<td>Woodbridge</td>
<td>CT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berkeley-Oakland Midrasha</td>
<td>Part-time school Shabbatonim</td>
<td>Berkeley</td>
<td>CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth Jacob Congregation</td>
<td>Synagogue annual retreat</td>
<td>Hollywood</td>
<td>CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School</td>
<td>Retreats for 8th-12th graders</td>
<td>Rockville</td>
<td>MD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregation Shearith Israel</td>
<td>Congregational Shabbaton</td>
<td>Atlanta</td>
<td>GA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diller Teen Fellowship</td>
<td>Teen leadership retreats</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorot Fellowship</td>
<td>Leadership development retreats</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federation of Greater Los Angeles</td>
<td>Family camps</td>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rising Voices Fellowship, Jewish Women's Archive</td>
<td>Teen leadership retreats</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOIN for Justice</td>
<td>Professional development for community organizing</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kehillat Hadar</td>
<td>Independent minyan Shavuot retreat</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keshet</td>
<td>LGBTQ Shabbatoni</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mishkan Chicago</td>
<td>Congregational retreats</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>IL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nice Jewish Boys DC</td>
<td>GBT annual retreat</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peninsula JCC</td>
<td>JCC yoga retreat</td>
<td>Foster City</td>
<td>CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PJ Library, Harold Grinspoon Foundation</td>
<td>Professional development conferences</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schusterman Fellowship</td>
<td>Leadership development retreats</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SVARA's Queer Talmud Camp</td>
<td>Jewish learning retreats</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also interviewed were organizers at the three retreats attended by the research team as participant-observers. Organizers also served in facilitator and trainer roles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizer</th>
<th>Type of Retreat</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moishe House</td>
<td>Skills building (Retreatology)</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillel International</td>
<td>Skills building (workshopSHABBAT)</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GatherDC</td>
<td>Young adult retreat (Beyond the Tent)</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>DC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>