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Jewish Families Today

Understanding the Aspirations of Jewish Families Today and the Parenting Challenges They Face

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CROWN FAMILY PHILANTHROPIES

Harold Grinspoon FOUNDATION

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Executive Summary

This report explores the experiences, aspirations, and challenges faced by Jewish families with young children in the United States. Amid shifting social, economic, and cultural landscapes, these families navigate diverse identities and circumstances, often striving to balance Jewish values with inclusive practices that reflect their multifaceted lives. Commissioned by Crown Family Philanthropies, the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, and the Jim Joseph Foundation, this study was conducted by Rosov Consulting to provide insights into the needs and aspirations of contemporary Jewish families and the roles Jewish institutions currently play and might play in supporting their Jewish lives.

The study aimed to understand the experiences of Jewish families with diverse backgrounds, identities, and structures, alongside those that align more closely with traditional Jewish family norms. It also prioritized the inclusion of less-engaged Jewish families—those that are not already deeply involved in Jewish communities or Jewish institutions. (This is why Orthodox families were typically not included in the study since they have often made significant, structured commitments to Jewish life.) The findings draw from data generated, first, in 40 focus groups and then in 40 one-on-one interviews with a subsample of focus group participants. All participants were raising children younger than eight years old and providing them with Jewish experiences.

Key Findings

The study reveals that Jewish families today are shaped by several social trends, including increased cultural diversity, economic precarity, geographic mobility, and political polarization. In response, parents articulate several core aspirations for their children: building a strong sense of Jewish identity, cultivating empathy and respect for diverse backgrounds, and fostering positive engagement with the broader world.

We summarize these findings in terms of five features of Jewish families today. Families are:

- **Diverse** – with multiple, overlapping identities in the same families
- **Divided** – in their commitment to multiple, often competing, aspirations for their children
- **Dispersed** – often because of economic challenges that have resulted in migrating from centers of Jewish life
- **DIYers** – with help from the internet, while hungry for guidance
- **Desperate** for community – that is, sites and networks where their children see themselves connected to something larger than themselves or their immediate families

This report organizes these findings within the following major sections:

Parental Priorities and Aspirations

Jewish parents today share several core priorities and aspirations in raising their children. They seek to build strong, inclusive Jewish identities while fostering empathy and

respect for diversity. For most, raising children with a strong sense of self, compassion, and moral responsibility is essential, often expressed through the lens of Jewish values like *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) and *tzedakah* (charity or justice). Parents view community as a critical component in their children's Jewish identity and aim to instill a connection to something larger than the self. The search for community seems, in fact, to be of special importance to parents with young children who often find themselves far removed from extended family networks. Many parents emphasize cultivating homes that are not only culturally rich and Jewishly meaningful but also tolerant and inclusive of multiple heritages, faiths, and ethnicities, reflecting the diversity within their families and communities. In this vein, more of them believe that "exposure"—ensuring their children see or hear things designed to broaden their cultural horizons (including their Jewish horizons)—will help achieve their parenting goals, rather than more structured educational efforts which involve high levels of opportunity cost in terms of time expended.

Bumps, Obstacles, and Difficult Contexts

Many Jewish families face significant barriers that limit their ability to engage fully in Jewish life. Financial costs, such as synagogue memberships and Jewish school tuition, present a substantial burden, particularly amid rising living expenses. Geographic distance from Jewish centers or family networks also hinders participation, especially for those in less urban or rural areas. Political polarization, both within Jewish communities and the broader public, adds another layer of complexity. Families with marginalized identities—whether interfaith, LGBTQ+, or multiracial—often feel sidelined within traditional Jewish institutions, encountering subtle or overt exclusion. As a result, some families choose to disengage from formal Jewish spaces, focusing instead on cultivating Jewish practices and connections at home.

How Families Make It Work

In the face of these challenges, Jewish families exhibit resilience and resourcefulness in fostering Jewish life. Their parenting practices can be characterized as seeking to **repair**, **replicate**, or **innovate** their own childhood Jewish experiences: correct what were recalled as unpleasant experiences, reproduce positive ones, or create new ones if they had not been raised Jewish.

Parents use online resources to support their children's Jewish education and find creative ways to celebrate Jewish traditions at home. Many parents find digital tools essential, particularly those in areas without access to Jewish infrastructure. For some, informal peer networks and small, grassroots, community-led gatherings provide the supportive environment they seek but cannot always find in formal institutions. Parents also tailor Jewish practices to meet their family's unique cultural mix, blending traditions and finding meaning in practices that reinforce both Jewish values and a broad sense of inclusion. This adaptable approach helps families maintain Jewish continuity while embracing diverse backgrounds and identities. In describing their approach to maintaining multiple traditions within their homes, many parents made a distinction between "religion" and "culture." According to this logic, "religion" is the domain of religious institutions only, with their respective dogmas and competing truth claims; "culture," on the other hand, designates more neutral practices (for example, having a Christmas tree in their home, many suggested) that can more readily coexist within the lives of individuals, families, or communities.

Israel: Ever More Complicated

The topic of Israel, particularly following recent global events, has grown more complicated for many Jewish families. While many parents want their children to appreciate Israel's historical and cultural significance, they often feel caught between polarized viewpoints in Jewish and general communities. Parents desire a balanced approach to Israel, allowing for nuance and critical thought, but worry about their children encountering polarized discourse that reduces a complex reality to stark oppositions. The need for spaces that permit questioning and open discussion is strongly felt, as families seek environments where they can explore Israel's role in Jewish identity without feeling pressured into a particular stance. This topic, more than ever, influences where families choose to engage and reflects broader challenges in maintaining community cohesion.

Conclusion

This study underscores the resilience and creativity of Jewish families as they strive to build meaningful Jewish lives amid diverse identities, economic challenges, and societal pressures. These families are not rejecting Jewish institutions; synagogues and Jewish preschool still have great appeal. Rather, these parents are searching for inclusive, accessible, and welcoming communities that respect their varied experiences. By addressing these barriers and enhancing inclusive programming, Jewish institutions can better meet the needs of today's families, supporting them in cultivating vibrant Jewish lives and fostering strong, interconnected communities.

Recommendations

Informed by these findings, a team of advisors that accompanied this study from design stage to conclusion generated the following recommendations (and more) for funders and practitioners.

Aspirations: Building Community

1. **Practitioners:** Foster a welcoming atmosphere by hosting new-family events and supporting affinity groups (e.g., interfaith, LGBTQ+ families).

2. **Funders:** Facilitate regional connections for diverse families through convenings and organized trips, such as family weekends, to foster lasting relationships and a sense of belonging.

Identity: Supporting Jewish Parenting

3. **Practitioners:** Offer "Jewish Parenting 101" classes modeled on conversion courses, creating accessible, judgment-free spaces for learning.

4. **Funders:** Develop an online platform with step-by-step guides for Jewish rituals and life, ensuring easy access to educational resources.

Overcoming Obstacles

5. **Geography:** Create intergenerational programs pairing Jewish elders with young families and host "pop-up" Jewish spaces in underserved areas.

6. **Cost:** Lower financial barriers by offering advanced planning for high-cost events, accessible financial aid, and subsidized childcare programs.

7. **Digital Access:** Invest in virtual tools and hybrid programming to connect families in remote locations and provide resources for Jewish engagement at home.

Enhancing Inclusivity

8. **Practitioners:** Show diversity through representation, define terms to reduce barriers to participation, and provide childcare during events. Support community culture shifts through adult education on intersectional identities and partnerships with non-Jewish institutions.

Innovation and Best Practices

9. **Funders:** Launch microgrant programs to empower families to create unique Jewish home experiences or to curate resources for them. Explore family-friendly program formats inspired by other sectors, integrating inclusive pricing, design, and marketing strategies.

Introduction

Family has long provided both the context and content for being a Jew. While the structure, composition, and meaning of family has shifted over time in the United States, family remains a crucial source of vitality for contemporary Jewish life. And yet, as Harriet Hartman reported in 2016, "some families, marginalized by the mainstream Jewish community, find it difficult to be engaged Jewishly on a communal level because of their special needs or conditions, such as economic vulnerability, immigrant status, multiracial/cultural diversity, and sexual orientations."[1]

Hartman's observation was based on research analyzing data and literature more than a decade ago. As the social landscape continues to shift, so does the composition of Jewish families. According to the Pew Research Center's "Jewish Americans in 2020,"[2] Jewish families today increasingly include People of Color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and members from multiple religious, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds. Families living outside established Jewish population centers, or those in economically vulnerable situations, struggle to access institutional Jewish life. There is now a pressing need for research that intentionally includes these and other families with marginalized identities or circumstance.[3] To address this need and further their commitment to deepening Jewish life in the United States, Crown Family Philanthropies, the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, and the Jim Joseph Foundation commissioned Rosov Consulting to undertake this study.

In fall 2023, we began a qualitative study to explore the interests, needs, hopes, and desires of Jewish families with young children. We were specifically interested in understanding the experience of Jewish families with diverse backgrounds, identities, and structures, alongside those that align more closely with traditional Jewish family norms (e.g., heterosexual, two-parent, white Ashkenazi families). We also wanted to learn more about less-engaged Jewish families—those that are not already deeply involved in Jewish communities or Jewish institutions. (This is why we did not include Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox families in this study since they have often made significant, structured commitments to Jewish life that distinguish them from the families we sought to examine.)

We centered our inquiries around the following questions:

- What kinds of Jewish lives are families living, and what Jewish lives do they seek to construct?
- From where do they derive their Jewish inspirations, and what kinds of resources do they utilize to give them expression?
- What are their Jewish needs and how are they being met, or not?
- What do Jewish families from diverse backgrounds want Jewish institutions and others to understand about their desires, needs, and realities?

To address these questions, we employed a two-phase qualitative research design. In the first phase, we conducted 40 focus groups with parents who have at least one child aged 0-8 and are raising them with Jewish experiences. In nearly all cases, only one parent per family participated in the groups. The

1 Hartman, "The Jewish Family."

2 Pew Research Center, "Jewish Americans in 2020."

3 As underscored in Belzer, et al, "Beyond the Count: Perspectives and Experiences of Jews of Color."

second phase, initiated after a preliminary analysis of the focus group data, involved 40 one-on-one interviews with select participants from the focus groups.[4]

This report presents what we have learned. We begin by describing our methodology, followed by a discussion of some of the political, economic, social, and cultural features of American society that shape the experiences of these families. Against this backdrop, we introduce a recurrent theme in our findings: the **tensions** that arise both within parents' various aspirations and between families' aspirations and the broader structural context. We then present what parents shared about their **aspirations** for their children and their family lives, both in Jewish and general terms, along with the **barriers** they see as obstructing these aspirations. Next, we explore **what parents do** to foster Jewish life at home, and how they think and feel about the activities and the resources they employ. We also address the increasingly fraught role of **Israel** in these families' Jewish identities and their relationships to Jewish community. Finally, we present the key **takeaways** from our research, as well as additional questions raised along the way.

Throughout, we draw attention to the dedication and resourcefulness of Jewish families as they grapple with challenging circumstances and navigate increasing diversity within their families and communities. A series of **participant portraits** representing different family identity profiles is included in Appendix A, and a deeper dive into our methodology and participant recruitment are in Appendix B. Finally, at the conclusion of each major section of findings, we offer a **wider lens** perspective to contextualize these findings, underscoring their broader significance or posing additional questions prompted by the data.

4 There were several adoptive parents and one grandparent who participated. We use the term "parent" throughout this report to refer to all study participants.

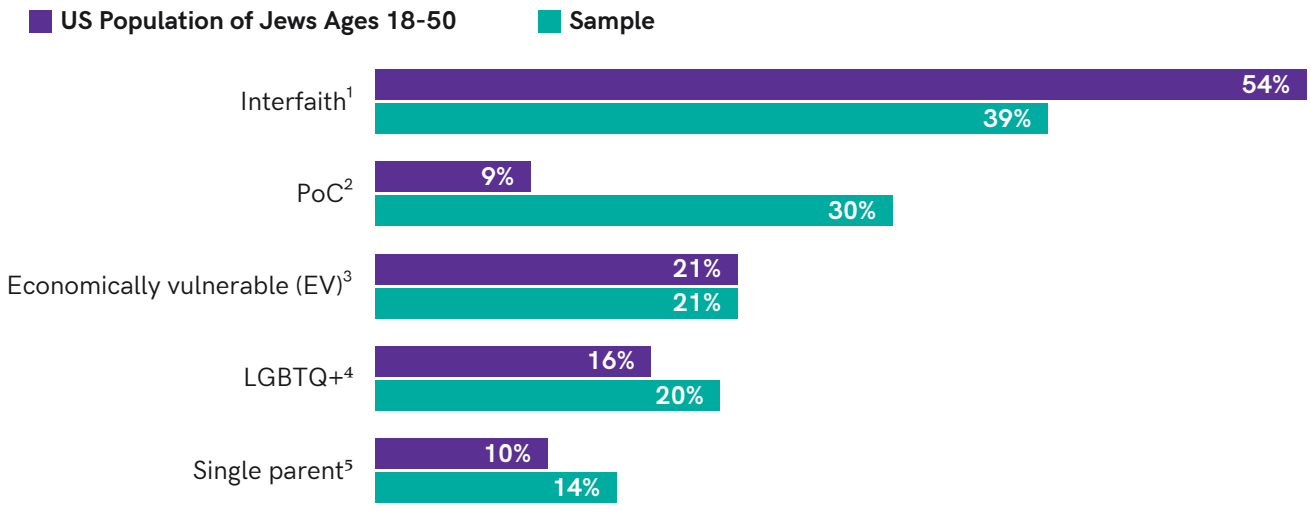
Methodology

To learn as much as we could about a range of families, we designed our participant recruitment strategy to include as many as possible less-engaged families and families with diverse backgrounds. We did this by deploying an online screening survey that gathered information about each family's demographic and structural composition, where they live, and aspects of their Jewish lives—including how they engaged in Jewish terms both inside and outside the home.

To determine the engagement levels presented in Figure 2, we applied a scoring system that quantified various expressions of Jewish engagement, thereby positioning each participant along a spectrum of engagement. Appendix B provides more extensive information about our methodological approach, recruitment strategies, and definition and calculation of engagement, along with our learnings and reflections from these processes. Figure 1 presents the final distribution of family characteristics and demographics, contextualized by the 2020 Pew data. The approximate engagement distribution of participants is shown in Figure 2.

What is not seen in Figure 2 but may be inferred is that the majority of participants in our sample were indeed connected in some fashion to Jewish institutions such as preschools and synagogues. This, we suspect, is an artifact of our sample recruitment: our recruits included parents who were interested enough to participate in a study about how they were raising their children with Jewish experiences of some kind. Thus, our sample skews

Figure 1: Sample Compared to US Jewish Population, Age 18–50 (Total Sample = 187)



[1] Calculated only among married Jews ages 18–50.
[2] For PoC and LGBTQ+, Pew data is calculated by individual, while sample data is by household, meaning that at least one member of the household identifies in this way.
[3] Includes both people who report they cannot pay for basic expenses and those who can just afford basic expenses.
[4] Defined as those who are not married or partnered but have at least one child.

Figure 2: Engagement Levels of Sample (N = 187)

more toward institutionally engaged families than initially intended, which is worth bearing in mind when interpreting our findings. Nonetheless, the sample's demographic and structural diversity (see Figure 1) did allow us to hear about a rich variety of experiences both within and outside of Jewish life, including both affirming and alienating stories.

When we quote participants below, we identify relevant demographic markers associated with each respondent. These markers help contextualize their comments and demonstrate that the views within particular minority groups are far from uniform. We do not distinguish between comments made during focus groups and those made in interviews, since we did not notice a meaningful difference in the substance or tone of these responses.

Demographic Groups Referenced in Quotes

General

Interfaith

EV (Economically vulnerable)

Sparse pop (Sparse Jewish population)

PoC (Person of Color)

LGBTQ+

Single parent

All focus groups and interviews were transcribed and coded using the qualitative analysis program NVivo, blending deductive and inductive approaches. In our discussion, we refrain from precisely quantifying phenomena or patterns since our data come from a qualitative sample. We do note, however, when such phenomena were commonly observed using terms such as "many" or "most".

1 Challenging Times and Compounding Tensions

Before we present major findings from our focus groups and interviews, we think it useful to reference challenging social, economic, and political conditions that currently shape family life in the United States. Our previously published review of relevant research literature explored several of these issues in greater depth.[5] For the parents in this study, these conditions are not abstract concepts; they are palpable influences affecting how they raise their children. Parents referenced these conditions, either directly or indirectly, as they discussed their decisions, aspirations, and concerns regarding their children's Jewish lives.

- **Political polarization,** at a high in American public life, strains relationships within families and communities, including within Jewish communities.[6]
- **Antisemitism** is increasing from both the political Right and Left.
- Overuse of **digital media** and screen time is a top concern for contemporary parents. At the same time, the internet provides essential resources for families raising young children.
- **Lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic** continue to ripple through learning delays, social disruption, and widely felt social isolation.
- **Jewish migration** rates within the US are higher than those of the general population and have been rising since the start of the pandemic. Such mobility affects family and friendship and disrupts institutional engagement.[7]
- **Inflation and high costs of living** shape decisions about where families live and where they educate their children, often at the expense of their Jewish ambitions. Economic vulnerability among Jews in the United States is rising, which directly impacts parental stress and wellbeing and, in turn, that of their children).[8]
- **Unrealistic cultural expectations** place responsibility on parents—especially those who identify as women—to satisfy all of their children's social, emotional, and educational needs. Combined with the factors above, many parents are suffering burnout.[9]

These conditions constrain parents' choices and give rise to multiple tensions as they navigate Jewish life and parenting more broadly. Three tensions are especially evident:

- **Tensions between parents' own aspirations or commitments.** Parents often feel torn between wanting to expose or immerse their children in diverse environments while also fostering a Jewish environment that supports a strong Jewish identity. Similarly, they desire to foster a positive Jewish identity in their children while feeling reluctant to "force" anything on them.
- **Tensions between parents' aspirations and the structural and cultural contexts they inhabit.** Some parents' visions for their children are borne of their own childhood experiences, formed in

5 Rosov Consulting, "Jewish Families Today: Insights from Literature and Advisors."

6 Ariela Keysar, "The Hollow Middle."

7 Michael Weil, "Jews on the Move."

8 Alan Cooperman and Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz, "Advancing Research on Jewish Poverty: A More Unified Approach to Measuring Economic Deprivation and Vulnerability."; Kotler-Berkowitz, "Chapter 2.9 The Vulnerable Among Us."

9 Kate Gawlik and Bernadette Mazurek Melnyk, "The Power of Positive Parenting: Evidence to Help Parents and Their Children Thrive."

a different historical context. Others want to be part of a strong Jewish community but are thwarted by the economic realities, such as the need to move for better job opportunities or more affordable housing.

- **Tensions between what families seek from institutions and what institutions are equipped or willing to provide.** Many families seek clear commitments to inclusivity that some institutions have been hesitant to extend. Families may seek inclusion of diverse religious identities or specific stances on Israel, which can be straightforward for individuals but complex at the communal level.

Altogether, large-scale societal pressures create a disorienting reality for many families. Societal norms and expectations are being challenged by alternative sets of values in ways that have not yet been resolved collectively and that exist outside the realm of individual influence. In this context, people are strongly drawn to ideas and institutions that can provide meaning and a sense of orientation to their present challenges. At the same time, they frequently find themselves caught between conflicting frameworks of meaning. We find this explanatory framework helpful for understanding the aspirations that parents in our study articulated for their children, their descriptions of the challenges to those aspirations, and the strategies they employ to overcome those challenges.

2 Parental Priorities and Aspirations

When parents talked about aspirations and priorities in their children's upbringing, three concerns loomed large: (i) The importance of embedding children in community; (ii) Cultivating a positive sense of self and identity in their children; and (iii) Building tolerant and inclusive homes through multicultural exposure and understanding. A smaller number of parents also explicitly discussed the importance of instilling specifically Jewish values in their children and connecting the choices they make as parents with those values.

2.1 Finding and Building Community

Pervasively, parents expressed a strong desire to find or build community for themselves and especially for their children. We asked parents specifically about this aspiration and about if and where they find Jewish and other forms of community. The importance—and often the elusiveness—of community surfaced repeatedly, whether in discussions about barriers to Jewish life, reflections on their own childhoods, or the broader challenges of raising children today. For parents, "community" had various meanings, encompassing institutional, school, and online communities. Nevertheless, they commonly expressed a wish for spaces where their children (a) would be supported and valued, (b) would see themselves connected to something larger than themselves or their immediate families, and (c) could form trusted relationships outside the household with peers and other adults who reinforce shared values.

> *I want him to feel, beyond the extended family, really held by community. I grew up in a really wonderful Jewish community here, and I know that's not the only way in, but it's my reference point. And so, I want him to have other adults that he's not related to that he feels close to.*
>
> Interfaith EV

> *For us, a lot of it is about having that community available. We don't have a ton of family who live nearby, and so we want him to know that there are multiple groups of people that he can be a part of. … For me growing up, being Jewish was being part of a community and that community is large and geographically diverse. Wherever he goes, I want that community to be available to him.*
>
> General

While some parents see online communities as a substitute, most associate "community" with a local, "real life" network of supportive relationships with people who share their values. These people live close enough to join in celebrating holidays; planning activities; attending schools, synagogues, and community events; and simply doing things together. For some parents, extended family provides this kind of community. Others look to friends, institutions such as synagogues and schools, or even neighborhoods to fulfill this purpose.

> *Finding that local Jewish community has always been sort of a nice refuge from my [military unit], from whatever it was, having that sort of safe place and space. … For me, it's wanting that for my kids, wanting them to have that anywhere in the world. And even if you don't speak the language, if you find that community, you can at least pray together and feel that sense of belonging somewhere that you otherwise have no sense of belonging. … It's giving my kids that connection to this greater community that I've been blessed to be part of.*
>
> Interfaith

A lot of people will have their family come visit for the holiday, so we'll have whosever parents are visiting for that holiday … and then a couple of other families will come and join. That's kind of what ends up happening. My family, we all live very far away from each other, so I guess for me, our extended family is not as present, so we've really kind of had to build our own Jewish family here.

General

Parents in sparsely populated Jewish areas particularly stressed wanting their children to connect to a Judaism that extends beyond their own household. They see this as essential to building and reinforcing Jewish identity and values, and to helping their children see Judaism in a positive light.

Community is important to us, and our values are important to us. And what we love about being part of the Jewish community is that it is a package, a way to have both community and values and instilling those values through the community. So, when we show up at Shabbat, we know that our kids are going to be taught whatever things that we value, and they're going to be around the people that they feel safe around.

General

Many parents are also interested in their children belonging to other kinds of communities in addition to Jewish ones.

We're really intentional about being part of the Girl Scouts program and then looking ahead to Cub Scouts, because we think that giving back isn't just a thing you do alone, even though that's good too.

Interfaith LGBTQ+

There are so many layers of our existence to feel belonging and connection to. Judaism does a good job of storytelling over a long period of time, so seeing where we are in the context of our ancestors; the way Judaism does it through storytelling is great. But I also feel strongly that [our children] know other stories of existence and creation, so we have friends of other groups and backgrounds, and that's really important to me. And connection to the earth, natural systems we're a part of, native plants and how indigenous folks have taken care of our land and learned from it. We're part of a community of indigenous farmers, and that's a really important piece of our lives, that solidarity.

PoC LGBTQ+ Single parent

A Wider Lens: Parents' Hunger for Jewish Community The deep hunger for community expressed by study participants may be because community is more elusive today than in previous generations, specifically when today's parents were children themselves, and/or because community has special importance for the parents of young children. The busyness and isolation of parents with young families, making their homes in areas without Jewish infrastructure because of soaring housing prices, has made Jewish community increasingly precarious and elusive. It is striking how different this appetite for community is from the views reported in the Pew study of Jewish Americans where only 33% of respondents agreed that being part of a Jewish community was "an essential part of what being Jewish means to them."[10] This discrepancy may suggest that community is of particular importance to parents with young children or that community in a broader sense (not specifically Jewish community) is what matters most.

10 Pew Research Center, "Jewish Americans in 2020," 64.

2.2 Cultivating Positive Identities

Parents value Jewish community for its role in shaping children's values and identities positively. When discussing the kinds of people they hoped their children will become, parents didn't only discuss Jewish identity, of course; many referenced the personal traits and universal values they hoped their children would embody. These traits included how one treats others—with empathy, kindness, compassion, and respect—as well as traits that refer to how one views oneself—including confidence, self-esteem, and a rooted sense of Jewish identity that is still open and sensitive to others. These traits are important to all parents, but the parents raising children with multiple or marginalized identities spoke more explicitly about how they were cultivating them.

> *I'd say kindness for others, awareness of differences, of all sorts of differences, as a point of richness, but also to be a part of Jewish life, I'd say these are big priorities.*
>
> Interfaith LGBTQ+ Sparse pop

> *We talk a lot with our kids about what it means to be different and what it means to be neurodiverse, to have a name that people read as different, to be Jewish in a context where that's read as different. We talk a lot about close family friends who are themselves different. A friend of my son's has two moms, another friend is mixed race, and so we talk a lot about difference and everybody being different and being unique. We read a lot of books about diversity because I think, right now, where we are, the primary orienting thing that we have to do is get him to a place where he starts to affirm that it's okay to be different, that it's okay not to quite conform to his peers and his classmates. I think that very much connects our Jewish priorities for [our children] to our other priorities. We want them to understand that the world is made up of enormous and incredible diversity and to see themselves as part of this very multicultural cognitive, neurological world and to have that orienting framework. To us that makes sense of both their Jewishness as well as all the unique ways that they're human in the world.*
>
> EV

Many parents specifically articulated the importance of helping their children build an awareness of and appreciation for their Jewish identity as an end in itself. When asked specifically about their Jewish priorities for their children, almost all expressed a deep hope that their children would develop a positive Jewish identity. Positive Jewish identity (aka "Jewish pride") is a construct that resonates in the wider culture, especially given the attention paid to multiculturalism and the celebration of diverse identities in some sectors.

> *I have a feeling she's probably going to be one of the only Jewish kids in her class if not the only one. So, I want to instill a sense of pride and confidence in her. I don't want her to be afraid to talk about what she believes or the different holidays that she celebrates. I want her to feel that sense of self-confidence and self-worth and just be really proud of her identity and what it means to be Jewish.*
>
> General

> *I know from studies and from my own experience just how important Jewish sleepaway camp can be in forming a Jewish identity. In my head I just built it up that this was either going to make it or break it. Nothing else I can do can lead to him wanting to be Jewish. Luckily, he loved it and can't wait to go back next summer. I just had this huge sense of relief when he came home and I was like, okay, we're good. At least he has some positive association with being Jewish and we'll have this group of Jewish friends. He has one place in his life where he gets to be in the majority, and it felt really good.*
>
> General

Many parents described navigating simultaneous priorities of helping their children develop awareness and respect for difference at the same time as they develop security and pride in their own Jewish identity.

It boils down to exposure, not necessarily outlining that this is the way, but teaching our daughter about our culture, labeling it as our culture. But then also expanding and explaining that there are other cultures and there are other belief systems and there are other ways to set up your own morality and how you understand the world and how you understand your peers.

General

Relatively few parents expressed a desire that their children develop strong Jewish literacy (for example, familiarity with Jewish texts, ritual, and liturgy). Instead, more of them believed that "exposure"—ensuring that their children see or hear things designed to broaden their cultural horizons (including their Jewish horizons)—will help achieve their parenting goals, rather than more structured educational efforts which involve high levels of opportunity cost in terms of time expended. Conceiving identity development as "exposure," rather than as something more intensive that might come at the expense of other kinds of learning, seems for many parents to be a way to resolve the tensions created by competing identity-forming priorities.[11]

2.3 Inclusive Homes

Exposing children to multiple cultures, faiths, races, ethnicities, abilities, perspectives, and ideas—and generating both tolerance and respect for all these differences—was an important priority for many of the parents. Simultaneously respecting both self and other was particularly important for families with diverse identities in their own household. These families are raising children who themselves have multiple identities, and parents are especially aware that prejudice exists toward some, all, or simply the combination of these identities on the part of others, including in Jewish spaces. Thus, respect for difference is an important pathway to promoting their children's self-respect in a world where respect by others is not guaranteed.

Identity is very important. And I think with [our son], because he's Korean and Jewish, I think we really want him to embrace his identity and not feel like he's kind of the other. … And I think without there being a deliberate effort to give your child the ability to explore his identity and become confident in who he is and really gain that sense of self, I think it's easy to internalize a message of like, oh yeah, you are not part of the mainstream, you're not part of America.

PoC LGBTQ+

Our priority in raising our daughter is that she feels really comfortable in all of her different identity spaces. Our family is also a multicultural family, multiracial family, a multifaith family, and it feels important to us that, even if other people don't make her feel welcome, she feels very centered and welcome in herself; that she can show up to a space and say, yeah, I belong here even if you don't think I belong here because of the way I look or whatever. … That's a big priority of mine.

Interfaith PoC LGBTQ+

In these same households, valuing diversity had a particular and immediate upshot; it was integral to getting along with extended families and fostering homes in which all members' traditions, identities, and desires are honored. As is the case for those who live in communities with few other Jews, this involves cultivating Jewish identity while carving out space within, and maintaining connections to, different groups.

We've also really tried to make sure that my Christian family feels comfortable celebrating their traditions around us. Like I said, half my family is Catholic, so when we visit my grandmother around Christmas, we go to church with her and we say, this is part of our larger family's religious tradition. It's just not our immediate family's religious tradition. I also do a lot of work in Muslim countries. …

11 Research on cultural socialization challenges the assumptions behind the concept of exposure. Successful cultural socialization requires children to first comprehend and appreciate their own culture in a deep manner, then a different culture, and finally explore similarities and differences. The idea of superficial exposure does not seem to be an effective strategy. See Ibram X. Kendi, "How to Raise an Antiracist," 8–10.

My wife and I spent a lot of our dating period living in Muslim countries, and my son has now spent time with us in countries that are predominantly Muslim. So, we kind of knew that he would be raised in a religious mélange no matter what religion we raised him. Openness and asking questions and understanding other people's faith as well as your own is something that was important to us.

Interfaith

2.4 Nurturing Jewish Values

While building community, fostering a positive Jewish identity, and cultivating respect for difference are priorities for most parents, a smaller but notable group explicitly emphasized Jewish values as a way to connect Judaism meaningfully to everyday life. Interestingly, a much higher proportion of respondents with LGBTQ+ members in their household reported discussing Jewish values explicitly with their children for these reasons. The values most often named included *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) and *tzedakah* (justice/charity) because of their resonance with more universalist social justice causes such as racial, gender, disability, and LGBTQ+ equity, volunteerism, and environmental stewardship.

Definitely Jewish values really inform a lot of how I want my kids to think of themselves as they move through their world. I mean, certainly we talk about tikkun olam all the time, and I think I want them to specifically know that because we're Jewish, we have a history of being oppressed, which means that we also have a history of working for justice and we have the ability to connect to other oppressed groups because that's part of our value and our values. And so, when I say I want them to make the world a better place and be a force for good in the world, that is sort of how I want them to live their Jewishness and to make those connections.

Interfaith PoC LGBTQ+

What we're trying to do is incorporate something that really feels substantial. It's not just, "Hey, we made a decision" or even a consumer decision, and that's how we connect within our society. It's like, "oh no, we're actually, there's a value system" and things like that. So ... in the process of bringing our child to the community, I think for us, what we really are seeking, especially from the Reform community, is a sense of social justice, that moral foundation, and we will continue to prioritize that.

PoC LGBTQ+

A Wider Lens: When Personal Choices Have Public Consequences When parents talked about their aspirations for their families, their priorities were focused, not surprisingly, on their children and on the features of their immediate family contexts. Their family members' diverse identities provide fertile soil for a commitment to nurture in their children an understanding and celebration of diversity. Some families, as we have seen, reframe the honoring of multiple identities as a distinctive Jewish value, rather than as something that must be made to somehow fit with Jewish tradition. These commitments make for more harmonious families, and—at the same time—they contribute to a broader multiculturalist political project that, in some parts of America, is distinctly countercultural.[12] As Jewish families move further into areas in which Jews have not lived in large numbers, the urgency of promoting multiculturalism becomes more pressing as a guarantor of Jewish rights even as it is fraught with its own inherent tensions, with parents wondering how they teach their children to respect and tolerate the views of those different from them when some of those views may marginalize or vilify their own family or community. As our interviewees make clear, parents' choices, and the work of parenting, while intensely personal, are also loaded with public consequence.

12 See: Saffyre Falkenberg, "All Are Welcome: Picture Books and Liberal Multiculturalism Post-Trump."

3 Bumps, Obstacles, and Difficult Contexts

When asked about the barriers they face in realizing their (Jewish) aspirations for their children and families, parents identified several obstructions, including geographic distance from Jewish organizations and the cost of Jewish life. Families living in smaller Jewish communities also contend with broader Christian-centric cultural norms and political polarization within both Jewish and local non-Jewish communities. Finally, families with marginalized identities or circumstances can also encounter a lack of welcome in some Jewish institutions.

3.1 Geography

For many parents in our sample, physical distance from extended family, Jewish population centers, and Jewish institutions poses a major obstacle. This is not surprising. Given high levels of geographic mobility among Jews and rising housing costs, young families are often pushed to the outskirts of metropolitan areas. Even relatively short distances can become prohibitive. Many parents are unwilling to drive more than 20 minutes regularly for Jewish events or services, leaving those who live outside of the Jewish "urban core" as bereft of institutional Jewish life as those who live further removed.

> *So, you think San Diego, and you're like, oh, that's a big city. We live 40 minutes from the nearest synagogue. There are so many Jewish people [in the area we live in], but there's nothing. If we want to do Jewish and we want to be part of a Jewish community, we either make it ourselves or we go somewhere else [outside of our local community].*
>
> Interfaith

The lack of Jewish infrastructure is even more difficult to overcome in small towns or rural areas.

> *We have a small synagogue of about 20 people where my children are the only children. So, if we want to go to a larger one, we have to make a six-hour round trip to a larger synagogue and it's just not always possible.*
>
> PoC Sparse pop

> *I live rurally, between two cities, where there's a synagogue in each [city], an hour away each. There's really no place I can go to be with other families with children. So, we've developed a real home with the rabbi and the students at the [local] college. … I was hoping for something more, a community with other children being raised with some of the same values and all that. Visiting my folks, we got to go to a "Tot b'Shabbat" and it was so wonderful, I wish there were more opportunities to be with other Jewish families with small children.*
>
> Interfaith LGBTQ+ Sparse pop

When there is a nearby synagogue, parents often find few other families with young children. Chabad was frequently mentioned as "the only game in town." Most appreciated Chabad's openness, warmth, and child-friendly offerings; however, some did not feel they aligned with the organization's vision and values. Such ambivalence was particularly acute for families that included marginalized identity categories.

> *[Chabad is] very open. When you do connect with them, they're really excited that you're there. And they do cater to a younger age group, which fits our family. They're always putting together little shindigs or events. … It draws people in. When you want to connect, they're there, but then there's also the little bit of extremism that kind of comes along with it, where it's all good and then something might turn you off a little bit.*
>
> EV Sparse pop

In sum, those who live in towns or suburbs with sparse Jewish populations are often faced with yet another difficult choice: either participate in locally available groups that are not a good fit either for their age, life stage, and values; create Jewish life outside of institutions in some fashion; or forgo their Jewish aspirations altogether. No study participants took the last route entirely, likely because such people were unlikely to have opted in to the study. Some had largely given up on finding a physical community; others invested effort in building Jewish life outside of one but did not succeed as they would have liked. In the words of one participant:

> *Not that we're going to stop being Jewish or anything by any means, but it makes it almost seem like, okay, well then we don't need to do this right now, or we'll just do it next year and putting it off and putting it off. And then eventually our kids are going to be grown and that identity will be lost.*
>
> Sparse pop PoC

The efforts of those attempting to build Jewish life outside of institutions are explored more deeply below.

3.2 Economic Vulnerability and the Costs of Jewish Life

The cost of Jewish life emerged as a recurring barrier, especially for families experiencing economic vulnerability. This finding is neither new nor surprising, but it bears repeating given the pervasiveness of this issue in today's high-cost-of-living climate. Economic constraints often drive young families to settle far from Jewish institutions.

> *We actually decided not to be members of a synagogue this year, and it's just because we can't afford it. And we were thinking once our son is old enough to do Sunday school, that costs a lot of money, a lot of money, which makes sense. It's just that we're going to have to figure out, how does that fit in the family budget? I do want him to have that kind of connection to his peers and also learn things through that, but it's so expensive and we also want him to have other extracurriculars other than that, and that all adds up. It's a pretty penny, and so you have to figure out where you want your resources to go, and maybe not this year, but maybe next year, yeah, it's a big cost.*
>
> Interfaith LGBTQ+ Sparse pop

A few parents who reported economic vulnerability also described feeling socially out of place in Jewish spaces where financial affluence often shapes the community culture.

> *I was doing a commute so that we could live in an Orthodox community. … Every time the dads [from the synagogue] got together, it would be at the golf club. The talk over kiddush would be people kvetching about their cleaners or whatever. We just looked at each other and we were like, these are not our people. They're living a completely different life to us. So we decided to move. Now we're trying to figure out what it means to be Jewish at a time when we feel like … being Jewish isn't just a religious identity, it's an economic identity that we can't afford to be part of. Now, living as only one of a handful of Jews in this small town, Judaism is mostly something we do at home.*
>
> EV Sparse pop

For more information about this family, please see Appendix A: Portrait 4, "Struggling in a Small Town."

Our data do not shed new light on the extent to which families are challenged by the costs of Jewish life; recent research has confirmed the pervasiveness of this problem even among middle-class professionals.[13] What our findings do highlight is the tension parents feel between visions of a Jewish life based on their own childhood and what is feasible in today's economic landscape. This tension is often sharpened by making their homes in neighborhoods or cities unmoored from Jewish institutions because they cannot afford to live any closer to such resources.

13 Tulane University and Rosov Consulting, *On The Edge: Voices of Economic Struggle in U.S. Jewish Communities.*

3.3 Christian-Centric Public Cultures

Parents in areas with smaller Jewish populations often expressed anxiety about nurturing positive Jewish identities in places with pervasive Christian public cultures and widespread ignorance about Jews and Judaism. Such environments can amplify parents' anxieties, as public schools and local events often reflect Christian traditions while overlooking or misunderstanding Jewish perspectives.

> *Here in my community, they do so much Christmas in the school. It's not like they don't acknowledge any holidays, it's all very Christmas-centric, and there's no interest in showing another experience or another viewpoint. So that's discouraging to me. And I work here in the school district, I was so surprised when I was hired and I reported to the new teacher orientation breakfast and, sure enough, the head of human resources gathered everyone and said, "Okay, we're going to pray before we eat. We all bow our heads and in Jesus's name we pray." And my head almost spun around. I thought, this is the head of human resources of a large public school district. So, it's disappointing.*
>
> Sparse pop

> *That's a hard one for me … that the world kind of stops and starts for Christmas and there's a lot of lights and colors and sounds and to try and raise a child, a young child who just wants to play and have fun to [say] no we don't do that. It sucks. It's hard. And that's been a major challenge, especially with daycare being public basically. [My child] is one of the few if only kids there that are Jewish.*
>
> Sparse pop Single parent

The pressure to "compete with Christmas" was articulated by many families. They felt obliged to ensure that Judaism was something fun that their children would enjoy and someday choose for themselves, as we discuss further below. The task is invariably more daunting for those without access to supportive Jewish communities and institutions.

3.4 Political Polarization

The current degree of political polarization in the United States affects families' ability to engage comfortably with both Jewish and local non-Jewish communities. For some parents, local norms and political views are at odds with the values they want to instill in their children.

> *I see things in the middle school and high school and hear about parents on the school board trying to censor material. It makes me feel like we can't stay in this town long term. I'm afraid of who my son will go to school with, the values he might pick up from friends, especially when it comes to people thinking some are better than others, and gun culture, etc.*
>
> Interfaith LGBTQ+ Sparse pop

Jewish spaces are not immune to these broader influences. Parents shared feeling uncomfortable about the normalizing of divisive political positions.

> *I'm in Texas. Yesterday I went to the Israel solidarity event and [Governor] Greg Abbott spoke, who does not support LGBTQ+ anything, and it was just like, this is weird. Why did he speak? … I think being in Austin we're lucky in that I feel a little bit more protected in that way [the city is relatively liberal], but it's still in Texas. I'm always sort of looking over my shoulder.*
>
> LGBTQ+

Most who were uncomfortable with the culture of political conservatism in Jewish communities connected their discomfort to expectations of monolithic support for Israel, a phenomenon that will be discussed further below. By contrast, one interviewee—neatly demonstrating that the members of minority groups are by no means uniform in their views—described distaste for the liberal activism promoted at her synagogue:

> *You don't really go [to synagogue] to hear about the rabbi's political philosophy. You're there for the faith stuff and the spirituality and even the culture. But you don't go there to hear*

somebody talk about, okay, well this is what the president is doing. … That's not why I am there. I just found that very off-putting. I remember we were at a high holiday service with my family a while ago, and the rabbi started talking about political stuff, left-wing stuff, and we were just getting so angry.

Interfaith

These examples highlight how the current polarized American climate shapes parents' comfort in Jewish and other communities, in turn influencing their family's participation.

3.5 Marginalization in Jewish Spaces

While several parents described difficulties finding Jewish institutions that were a good fit, families with marginalized identities or circumstances reported particularly painful experiences of exclusion. Their accounts indicate that it is especially alienating to have one's legitimacy as a Jew called into question because of normative views of what Jewish people and Jewish families "should" look like.

For us, the only times we've had any sort of tension with our reality of being a mixed-race couple, and a biracial child, is generally the consequences of antisemitism and racism in the respective communities. We've had a situation where we were interested in joining a synagogue, we'd heard such great things about it, and the ex-Mossad Israeli security guard at the gate wouldn't let my husband into the synagogue. It was a horrible experience. We didn't get the feedback from the rabbi we thought we should have. There are very entrenched beliefs on both sides of our cultural traditions, there are a lot of very strongly held racist beliefs in the Jewish community.

Interfaith PoC

I've tried six different synagogues. I've walked into a synagogue as a single mom, and they see me with short hair and they're like, who are you? What do you think you're doing here? I've been, I don't want to say excommunicated, but I felt very unwelcome. It's what's also made our journey coming back to our communities and roots very difficult.

PoC EV Sparse pop Single parent

Many such families seek evidence of true welcome and inclusion beyond slogans and signs. Without it, they may choose not to participate.

It's okay if you're not welcoming, but you don't need to say you are and then not be. That's totally fine. If you're not, that's okay. But if you're going to say you're welcoming, what work are you doing to actually welcome us? And what work are you doing actually to understand racism in your synagogue or undo prejudice against queer families in your synagogue? Because it's an action for me, not just a label.

Interfaith PoC LGBTQ

The reasons that going to the Unitarian Church was so easy was because my wife was raised there and her parents go there … whereas it's not as easy to find a synagogue. If you go on the webpage of a lot of the temples and the synagogues locally, there's not any kind of message like, "Hey, have you ever been to synagogue? Are you this kind of [interfaith] family? Have you never been to synagogue as a family together? This is who you should write to, or this is what you should expect." Because like I said, I was pretty young when I went regularly, so it's different going in as an adult with children.

Interfaith LGBTQ+ Sparse pop

As can be seen, first impressions are important for those who are "synagogue shopping." The parent quoted above made a judgment about congregations' inclusivity based solely on their websites. This account also demonstrates that families who belong to more than one faith community may opt to participate in the non-Jewish one if it is more accessible and welcoming. Such was the case for another interfaith family, Honeymoon Israel alumni raising their children in both Catholic and Jewish faith traditions. In contrast to their lukewarm experiences in Jewish institutions, they were actively

engaged by their neighborhood Catholic church. As a result, the family is more active in the church community than in any Jewish community, even though the Jewish spouse grew up locally and has several Jewish family members and friends nearby.

> *[After our son's baptism], the community manager [of the local Catholic church] I connected with asked us to lead the interfaith ministry there. I had never experienced an interfaith group at a Catholic church. But they were like, we don't want people to feel like the partner needs to be Catholic, even if they don't come to mass. We want them to come to the church programming if we do a fish fry or whatever. So, my husband was like, okay, it sounds like they're being very open-minded about this. So, he and I are the ministry leaders for their interfaith ministry. … It's been nice for me to connect with the church and feel that I'm doing something involved with the church.*
>
> Interfaith PoC

For more information about this family, please see Appendix A: Portrait 3: "Robust Infrastructure, Elusive Community."

3.6 Missing Services or Supports

Beyond questions of welcome, some interviewees complained about gaps in programmatic scaffolding for those with limited Jewish cultural capital (sufficient familiarity with Jewish life to navigate Jewish practices and places). Even when Jewish infrastructure is not sparse, it doesn't always include opportunities for remedial adult learning.

> *Sometimes when I went to synagogue, I would feel lost. … And since I am already considered Jewish, I'm not treated as a convert. So, it's like I feel like there should be something for beginners too. There's still a lot that I feel that I don't know how to do as well.*
>
> Interfaith PoC Sparse pop EV

In the same vein, interviewees with infants and young toddlers shared stories of feeling shut out because synagogues and other communal spaces did not sufficiently accommodate parents with infants and younger toddlers. They did not know where they fit in the communal landscape.

> *Our temple's Friday night services are not set up to have children at them or at least have babies at them. And our child is quite rambunctious, so she can stay in the service for 15 minutes, maybe 20 on a really good night and loves the beginning of service with songs and recognizes the rabbis and the cantor and whatnot. But then she's got to go, there are too many people giving us looks because of the noise that she makes, which is sad and fine. And we're trying to shift the culture of the temple with our one family persisting.*
>
> LGBTQ

> *My wife and I, we move a lot, different jobs, finding opportunities. And especially at the age we're at, and in the next nine months or so, it's a weird place to connect Jewishly. There's a lot for young adults, and once your kids go to school there's a community, but in between it seems rather isolating. There are some Jewish mothers' groups, but not a lot for them, and I find that rather surprising in today's day and age. I'd say that's challenging. …You find a Moishe House or Federation, but there's not much in this weird little space.*
>
> General

A Wider Lens: The Continued Relevance of Synagogues These accounts indicate that intentional, explicit practices of inclusion are essential if Jewish institutions are to attract families with marginalized identities or circumstances. For dual-faith families, other religious communities may win out if they are more effective in this way. Despite research showing a long decline in attendance at religious services in the United States,[14] synagogues remain one of the most viable touchpoints for young families seeking Jewish community. Families of young children seek institutions that provide welcoming community for "people like them." Evidently, Jewish institutions, and synagogues especially, have continued potential to foster Jewish life at a time when many parents are unmoored from other systems of support. Institutions must, in turn, provide sufficient child-friendly resources for families.

14 Jeffrey Jones, "Church Attendance Has Declined in Most U.S. Religious Groups."

4 Making it Work

Jewish institutions, especially synagogues and preschools, continue to appeal to the parents of young children; parents seek nearby, child-friendly, and genuinely inclusive spaces to foster Jewish connection. Emergent, informal communities complement—and often compete with—institutional settings, especially for mixed-heritage, PoC, and LGBTQ+ families who seek fully inclusive gatherings. Parents strive to create meaningful Jewish experiences at home, often relying on online resources to do so, but they face challenges when they lack strong community supports or Jewish literacy. Ultimately, while parents aspire for their children to embrace their Jewish identities, they balance this aspiration with contemporary parenting ideals and a deep commitment to expressing and celebrating the diverse identities in their families.

Despite the challenges and obstacles described above, most participants in our study were connected in some fashion to Jewish institutions such as preschools and synagogues. Their reflections on how such connections came about or what gave them meaning shed light on what might inspire other families who are not currently connected.

4.1 Institutions That Work: Nearby, Child-Friendly, Authentically Welcoming

For parents, proximity is crucial. When they have access to Jewish institutions or live near Jewish family members, especially their own parents, their options to provide Jewish experiences for their children considerably increase.

> *We belong to a local Reform temple and my son attends Jewish preschool. He's learning about Jewish holidays and traditions. He's still really young to comprehend what it means to be Jewish, but my in-laws are [Jewish] as well, and they live within waving distance. So, we get together with them for holidays, and I think it's very special that my son gets to celebrate with grandparents and keep those traditions alive. I mean, we're in South Florida, so we're basically southern New York; there is a huge Jewish population here. And through the temple we've been able to meet more Jewish families with young children and get to do things with them. So that camaraderie has really been great for us.*
>
> PoC LGBTQ+

> *I feel really lucky. I think we have all the resources we could ever want and need within 15 minutes of our home: the JCC, which is where we are members, and we go there for other activities. Plus, that's where my two-year-old goes to preschool. … And then the amazing synagogue that we go to … all the great programs they have for young families. … So we feel very fulfilled there.*
>
> General

As a corollary to the earlier discussion about barriers, mixed-heritage, PoC, and LGBTQ+ families narrated how early signals of inclusion let them know a community would be an accepting place. Consistently, these signals conveyed that the spirit of welcome was an important part of institutional culture, not a marketing strategy or the initiative of one individual. The person below describes her first impression of the synagogue where she eventually chose to complete her conversion to Judaism:

> *One of the first things I remember was [the synagogue] put a really, really big emphasis on just being welcoming to all persons. And it was kind of just noted everywhere. In the bathroom there were stickers, "This is a safe space." That was the first shocking part to me was like, it's just a bathroom … I thought that was really, really interesting. You're not only showcasing that throughout your synagogue, but it's even prevalent in the bathroom.*
>
> PoC

There were many interfaith families, many diverse families, and many people who had converted to Judaism or who had come back to it after leaving it for many years. … I think we just felt really welcomed. It felt like people weren't going through the motions of like, oh, here's a new person. Check off their name, give them a thing and say hi. … It was like, here's people, and they genuinely wanted to know me and what interested me. And the rabbi, too, it was like she made it a point to come over and get to know us.

LGBTQ+ Sparse pop Single parent

Finally, the spirit of welcome was reinforced by structures and services that meet the needs of parents with young children. These institutions have provided wraparound support. They enable families to find community, access activities, and draw on additional resources to enrich Jewish practice in their own homes.

This is [my son's] third year [at a Jewish preschool]. He has brought that into our home by bringing home homemade challah that they make on Fridays and by singing all the songs they do at Tot Shabbat every Friday. I swear he knew more Shabbat songs than he did nursery rhymes before he was two. … Plus, all the events they hold outside of school have been really amazing. They do so many things and it was really easy to go and all the kids are running around, so you never felt pressured that they had to sit at a service. It was all kid-friendly, which I did not grow up experiencing. I look around and I see a lot of kids and a lot of families, young families, and it blows my mind because again, I never had that.

General

4.2 Emergent Grassroots Communities

Sometimes, the qualities of community described above can be created outside of traditional institutions and locations, among local friends who form informal groups to share Jewish practice together. One interviewee described launching a community for herself and her child by bringing together women who shared her interest in Rosh Chodesh (new moon) practices infused with pagan—what she called premonotheistic—practices. Another evocatively conveyed how a group of friends came together, mixing informality and deliberateness, to celebrate Shabbat in a way that works for both children and parents. These self-created experiences of community are marked by the same qualities as those that are more institutionalized: they are hyperlocal, inclusive of people who share the same values, and fun for kids.

There is a group in my area of DC that has basically created a lot of tot Shabbat music programs. They've recently gotten a [nonprofit] designation, but the intent isn't to create an organization, it's just a great couple that we're friends with and they invite 30 of their friends over with their kids and we all get together once a month or in a park or at their house and people bring food and play guitars and bongos and sing some songs and get together. It's more informal and, especially for my kids, it's just about creating a positive vibe and a positive association that there's a community here. We have a common connection and we sing and be silly and eat some yummy snacks.

General

Institutions are not completely absent from this trend. We heard from several parents who benefited from institutional support in fostering informal peer communities. These included more traditional, local entities like Federations and JCCs, as well as national organizations like Honeymoon Israel and PJ Library. The participant quoted below recounts making an extra effort to ensure one such program fit her needs.

I love the PJ Library "Get Together" grants [which provide funds to support families gathering around Jewish activities]. I use them all the time. … For me, one of my biggest things is I wanted to have Jewish friends. So, I really leaned into a program here called Shalom Baby, which put us together with playgroups. But instead of just accepting the random playgroup that I got, where nobody lived by me. … I actually asked, who has had a baby within six months

of me who lives by me? I just need a friend who lives by me, who's Jewish. And that friend who I met, our kids are four months apart in age, but we've been friends since they were babies, and now they go to the same school and we'll often do Jewish holidays together.

Interfaith

Those who participated in more informal groups spoke of them with great enthusiasm. They felt fortunate to have access to such opportunities. This resonates with the popularity of innovative, inclusive community models that continue to gain momentum throughout the country, such as Harlem Embrace in New York City and Olamim in the San Francisco Bay Area. In the absence of local institutions alongside them, these alternative models will probably continue to be popular.

A Wider Lens: Challenges for Inclusive Communities Because emergent grassroots communities form around and cater to smaller and like-minded groups, they typically avoid the challenges faced by institutions that serve as bigger tents, seeking to include ever more diverse identities. Just as families wrestle with how to blend the diverse aspirations and commitments held by parents and extended family members, so do established communities in their desire to remain relevant. Communities can find themselves facing existential questions about when Jewish becomes "Jewish-and", and when "Jewish-and" stops being Jewish. These concepts help explain the mix of affection and ambivalence inspired by Chabad institutions, specifically preschools and synagogues. Striving to be both uncompromisingly Jewish (in a traditional sense) and genuinely inclusive, they're admired for their welcome and their authenticity while they can also feel constraining. They make space for "Jewish-and" while not institutionalizing it.

4.3 Creating Jewish at Home

Focus groups and interviews inquired into the nuts and bolts of how families create Jewish experiences—how they try to "make it work"—at home. In this section, we first describe the sometimes-overwhelming responsibility parents feel to cultivate their children's Jewish lives. We then explore parents' positioning vis-à-vis their own upbringing in terms of how they raise their children. We consider the online and offline resources people mine to create Jewish experiences at home. Finally, we examine the creative practices that mixed-heritage families implement to form families that are "Jewish-and" (including Jewish and other identities).

4.3.1 If I Don't Teach Them, Who Will? The Burden of Transmission

In general, the parents we spoke with expressed feeling responsible for curating their children's Jewish lives in ways that are fun and engaging. At the same time, they want to "correctly" teach them about practices and beliefs. Parents who lacked access to broader community support felt particularly "on their own" in this endeavor. Women-identifying participants often (but not always) reported shouldering more of this burden in their households, consistent with research literature demonstrating that the American cultural norm is for mothers to be the bearers and transmitters of religious practice and identity.[15] The anxiety that some parents feel in bearing this responsibility came through in these conversations.

I would like to expose them more to what it means to be Jewish. … Just when it gets to holiday stuff, they'll ask questions, and I want to answer the questions. And it's really important to me that if they are curious about something, that I can explain it to them and give them a perspective that they're not going to get in school, most likely, because there just aren't very many Jewish kids here at all.

Interfaith

15 Fern Chertok, Rachel Minkin, and Matthew Brookner, "All in Her Day's Work"; Micaela di Leonardo, "The Female World of Cards and Holidays."

I've been trying. … I grew up having the Sunday school, the Hebrew school, Hebrew high school, going to services. They don't have that option. So, if I don't teach them, who will?

Sparse pop Single parent

4.3.2 Replicating, Recasting, & Initiating: How Parents Relate to Their Own Jewish Upbringing

Parents often framed their responsibilities in relation to their own childhoods, whether from a desire to *replicate* what they had experienced or to *recast* those experiences in more positive form, seeking to depart from the practices of their own parents. Those who embraced Judaism as adults followed a third path, seeking to *initiate* something they had not experienced as children; this includes parents who had converted or otherwise came to identify as Jewish later in life and those who were supporting their children's Jewish identities alongside a Jewish spouse. As we explore these three kinds of relationships to childhood experiences—replicating, recasting, and initiating—it is important to bear in mind that these are not necessarily discrete categories (for example, families may wish to replicate some aspects of their childhood, while recasting others).

Parents who wished to *replicate* aspects of their childhood Jewish experiences often spoke of the warmth and vibrancy of family gatherings.

Everything was really just positive, so I just knew that I wanted to instill that in my own family and children as well. It was such warm, loving memories of just always being with family … even extended family; it wasn't just immediate family. Particularly for things like break fast [after Yom Kippur] and Passover. … I wanted to do the same for mine because [these were] such wonderful memories for me.

Interfaith PoC

Those who had been raised as Jews and who wished to *recast* their childhood experiences and do things differently, included some who had felt marginalized in Jewish settings and didn't want their own children to feel that way. Others didn't want Judaism "forced" on their children in the same way it had been forced on them.

I am half-Jewish, half-Puerto Rican, and so I grew up understanding both religions and both sides of my family wanting to make sure that we celebrated and believed in each side. … And so, growing up it was a little bit confusing for myself and my two siblings because we felt that it was kind of pushed on us and we didn't really have an opportunity to enjoy it the same way. After my [Jewish] grandmother passed, I started to read a little bit more about [Judaism], started to purchase some books and started to really incorporate that with my kids. Not necessarily forcing it on them the same way that it happened with us, but more just trying to bring out the fun side of things so that way they can really celebrate both sides [Jewish and Catholic]. … I'm making sure that [my kids] can have a say.

Interfaith PoC

Those who are *initiating* Jewish practice as adults have various profiles: these include non-Jewish people in interfaith partnerships, many of whom do not wish for their children to miss out on the cultural and spiritual resources of their Jewish heritage. The parent quoted below explained how she is raising her child as both Chinese and Jewish in terms of culture, but only as Jewish in terms of religion (a distinction explored further below).

I converted seven years ago before we got married. And now as a seven-year-old Jew I want to learn everything. We have a Jewish household. We celebrate all the holidays. I have our PJ Library books, it's not just about her learning, I'm also learning, and I want to be a resource for her. If we have grandkids I want to share with them in a meaningful way and not just look stuff up on Google.

PoC LGBTQ+

A handful of those *initiating* Jewish practice had Jewish ancestry but were raised with few or no Jewish

experiences. Now, as adults, they were embracing a Jewish identity for themselves and their families. These included the children or grandchildren of interfaith unions, those who had discovered Jewish ancestry through DNA testing, and descendants of Jews from the Former Soviet Union.

> *So, I was actually raised Christian. My grandmother, she told us about her Jewishness, so that's how we found out. … I prayed about it, and then I was like, maybe I should see where my ancestors are from … maybe I should meet with a rabbi. So, I actually met a rabbi at Chabad, and at the time I was still holding onto Christianity. … He was like, you're Jewish. And then he invited me to come meet with him, and he was like, you should attend services and see if you like it. That's how I pretty much ended up where I am. So, for me, it's just really been about how do I translate the part of me that is so connected to [Judaism] to my kids, especially since it falls on me. I don't have a partner that will help me, he'll support me, but he's not going to drive it.*
>
> Interfaith PoC

Like others initiating Jewish practice in their families, such parents are hungry for opportunities to support their own learning and that of their children. Whether they are replicating, recasting, or initiating, parents seek resources and support for guiding their children's Jewish journeys.

4.3.3 Using the Resources on Hand (or Online)

What are parents to do if they lack the know-how to create meaningful experiences for their children? They go online! The internet plays a critical role in the Jewish home life of many families. When asked specifically which resources they sought, most parents couldn't name a specific site and said they "just Googled." Often they go to websites in preparation for holiday celebrations at home, for example for ideas of how to celebrate or how to explain things to their children. Again, parents are often looking for ways to make things fun and exciting for their kids, relating to the sense of responsibility mentioned above for making Judaism something positive that their children will someday choose for themselves. Some spoke of seeking Jewish resources related to other interests, hobbies, or values (for example, music, cooking, or nature). Finally, some parents are seeking their own spiritual or intellectual fulfillment online.

> *There's a clip we use for our Havdalah ceremony [at home]. We just pull up the same YouTube video every week and they sing the song with us, and we don't necessarily need the clip anymore, but it's nice to have the guitar playing in the background. … I also like the resources that bring traditions into contemporary moments and with contemporary concerns. Every year I just kind of go digging, getting ready for Passover and oh, what am I going to find? There was one organization that had the 10 plagues for modern times instead of the biblical plagues. It's social justice issues that we're dealing with today. Oh, I really like that.*
>
> General

> *There is a podcast that I listen to, a Sephardic rabbi, and he gives lectures every morning. He actually has very good stuff, and he also doesn't beat around the bush. … There are some different rabbis that I find on YouTube. I just listen to their lectures or* shiurim *and take whatever I need to take from there. It's eye-opening to a lot of things I didn't know before.*
>
> Interfaith PoC EV Sparse pop

While online resources are essential, many parents find them insufficient for creating or sustaining Jewish life at home. They still hunger for community or at least for help from someone with whom they are in an ongoing relationship. One participant put this very powerfully:

> *I don't think I'm doing a very good job at any of it, honestly. I don't have the people to go to. I don't necessarily think Googling it is going to suffice. I feel like I've done as much as I can on my own, but I need people, I need guidance. … After COVID, it finally hit a point where I need people and I need people's guidance, not the internet. …*

With my kids, too: what they need is interaction. And I feel kind of hopeless because of the community I'm in. There isn't anything here.

Sparse pop

The ever-expanding marketplace of content plays an important role in enriching Jewish home life, wherever Jewish families find themselves. Nonetheless, parents still seek, and ultimately prefer, in-person relationships and communities. That is why, as we have seen, they relish such experiences when they find them.

4.3.4 Cultural Sharing and Meaning Making in Families with Diverse Backgrounds

A major goal of this study was to understand the identities, practices, and desires of mixed heritage families. Consistent with previous research, we found these families making creative, purposeful decisions about how to honor their multiple heritages.[16] As institutions look for ways to attract such families, it continues to be instructive to see what families are doing in their homes.[17] For example, incorporating diverse foodways into Jewish rituals is a popular practice, although not always without tension.

I consider us a Jewish family; we do Jewish stuff in the house. We do Christmas with our [Korean] in-laws, belong to a temple for the past seven to eight years, and we do a lot of Korean stuff, food and language and culture. There's not much tension except for the food. We're not kosher, but I grew up kosher, and I'm still not that comfortable having octopus in the sink. They do that a lot at their house, and it was hard when [my mother-in-law] wanted to do it at our house. So, there's a little tension there around food, but otherwise we've achieved sort of a stable equilibrium around that.

Interfaith PoC

Another strategy for promoting multiple heritages is through cultivating and maintaining different languages. In some such cases, the boundaries between language and culture can become opaque and even fraught, especially when one of those languages is closely associated with a particular religious tradition. Language is rarely a neutral vehicle for communication.

I have my family in Mexico and identify as Mexican. My husband is Italian, so there is a lot of rich culture in the family. But how that manifests is that his mom handles the Italian stuff and Christmas. But what's harder is my kids go to a Spanish immersion [school], and I think most of the kids there are pretty Catholic. Catholic culture sort of underlies what they talk about there, so I have to bring in the Jewish part and sometimes it feels competitive.

PoC

In describing their approach to maintaining multiple traditions, many parents made a distinction between "religion" and "culture." According to this logic, "religion" is the domain of religious institutions only, with their respective dogmas and competing truth claims. "Culture," on the other hand, designates more neutral practices that can more readily coexist within the lives of individuals, families, or communities. In this schema, many ritual practices (for example, lighting Hanukkah candles or putting up a Christmas tree) are assigned to the domain of culture.[18] Our participants demonstrate that this remains a pervasive logic that mixed-heritage families employ in blending traditions. However, it is not applied in uniform ways. Some expressed that they are religiously Jewish, while the other traditions they observe in their home are strictly cultural. Others designate all the practices they follow as "culture." Still others are raising their children as dual-faith, begging the question of if and how divergent theologies are navigated with young children.

16 See, for example, Thompson, *Jewish on Their Own Terms;* McGinity, *Marrying Out*; Miller, *Being Both*; and other works cited in Rosov Consulting, "Jewish Families Today: Insights from Literature and Advisors."

17 See: Ariela Ronay-Jinich, "Latin Jewish Families and Their Educational Choices: Navigating Multiple Identities."

18 Samira K. Mehta, *Beyond Chrismukkah*, 137.

My husband brought up very early on that it was important to him to raise his children Jewish, and I was like, oh, what's the big deal. … I was happy he felt strongly about something. But it was always important to me that we would honor where I come from, so we do celebrate the Christian holidays in our household, too. We celebrate them and tell [the children] that we don't do it for religious reasons, but cultural reasons, and there's no right or wrong way.

Interfaith

We have both Christian and Jewish faith in the house. So I embrace both; the children embrace both. … It's just always been that way, and we explain that to them, that everyone has different values of what they believe in and we are just combining two together, so you get the best of both worlds.

Interfaith PoC LGBTQ+

A Wider Lens: When "Good Enough" May Have to be Good Enough As the findings from this study repeatedly attest, parents' desires around their children's Jewish experiences, their interest in "creating Jewish at home," exist in tension with what they themselves are able and willing to provide. Nearly all parents we spoke to want their children to love their Jewish identity and feel proud of it; they're committed to what we called the "burden of transmission." Yet, many either don't have access to the kind of deep socialization that could generate such an outcome and/or they balk at the disciplinary rigor it would take to create. To make matters more complicated, they frequently pointed to the holes in their own Jewish literacy and the challenges this presented for building a Jewish life for their children. As seen above, online resources paper over those holes in a limited fashion; the notion of "exposure," described above, also provides a way to navigate such gaps. Ultimately, it seems, contemporary parenting norms (e.g., not forcing, letting children "choose") are in tension with a combination of parental ambitions and contextual barriers (wanting children socialized into Jewish identity and pride but not necessarily having access to the means). Wrestling with these compounding tensions, perhaps the best parents can hope for is to be what pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott famously called "good enough."[19]

19 Donald Winnicott, *The Child, the Family and the Outside World,* 173.

5

Israel: Ever More Complicated

Post-October 7, 2023, Israel became a prominent concern for Jewish families, heightening parents' desire for Jewish connection but also surfacing tensions in both Jewish and broader communities. Some participants expressed comfort in solidarity with Jewish neighbors, while others felt alienated by polarized views. Many want their children to appreciate Israel's significance but hope to convey its complexities. Parents struggle to discuss Israel amid the current divisive climate and seek Jewish spaces allowing nuanced conversations. For Jewish organizations, accommodating diverse views on Israel while fostering welcoming environments presents a growing challenge for community cohesion.

Inquiring into parents' perspectives on Israel was not central to the original research design of this study. While it did sometimes emerge spontaneously in our focus groups before October 7, 2023, it was unsurprisingly more prominent in those we conducted afterward. In those early days post-October 7, like Jewish people around the world, our participants were raw and reeling. They found comfort in talking to one another. People with diverse identities spoke of feeling greater connection to their Jewish neighbors—even those who held different political views from them—and a renewed sense of urgency to cultivate their family's Jewish identities.

> *We live in a very Orthodox and Israeli community. In the last number of weeks, I have felt very connected to those neighbors and very thankful to have that connection and being able to walk the baby and walk the dog outside. I feel like I don't need to worry about talking about it and saying the wrong thing because of my own personal feelings toward it when I'm speaking with some of my neighbors.*
>
> PoC

> *There's more of a motivation, I guess now, especially now with what's going on in Israel. You're taken aback. This is happening to people that are just like me. It could happen here. So, I definitely think that's a motivation to continue expanding my family and keep the Jewish religion alive.*
>
> Interfaith

We included specific questions about Israel and the war in Gaza in the one-on-one interviews conducted in April and May 2024. At that time, we inquired into how this issue affected interviewees' relationships with Jewish and general communities. Within Jewish communities and networks, there were experiences of greater solidarity but also some that involved strain—and sometimes, a bit of both. Either way, the majority of our 40 interviewees indicated that the topic of Israel was influencing their interest or comfort in participating in local Jewish institutions in some way.

> *[The PJ Library parent connector group is] a part of keeping that connection with other Jewish families, and I find it really important this past year since October 7. I think it's become even more and more important to have people who feel the same connection about Judaism.*
>
> Interfaith EV

A few people in our sample identified as non-Zionist or anti-Zionist, reporting feeling uncomfortable in mainstream Jewish spaces where uncritical support for Israel was assumed.[20]

20 We did not inquire into how people defined or understood Zionism, recognizing that the term has multiple subjective meanings and uses (see, for example, Mira Sucharov, "Do American Jews Really Know What 'Zionist' Means?" 2022).

What you want to have is space for anti-Zionist Jews to feel comfortable in more traditional Jewish spaces. [This city] is pretty conservative, in my opinion. [It's] a more conservative Jewish home population, I would say people who have been here for many generations. So sometimes some of the political work I want my family to engage in rubs up against some of the more conservative Jewish views, and that can make us feel unwelcome and not wanting to be in a space or not wanting to go to an event. That's been a little bit of a challenge.

Interfaith PoC LGBTQ+

Perhaps the most consistent theme post-October 7 was that of parents' experience of tension and strain surrounding Israel as a topic, both in Jewish and other communities. Many conveyed how hard it had become to talk about Israel in the current, divisive political landscape, expressing a desire for Jewish spaces that allowed for questioning and nuance. This was generally more about parents' experiences as community members than specifically related to their parenting. However, we note this phenomenon here because parents' sense of comfort or inclusion in Jewish institutions has a marked influence on which places they seek to enter with their children and the communities to which their children have access.

After October 7, it just kind of broke me a little bit as a parent, to think what everybody was going through and how hard it was. And then I live in a very confusing area that the only people that seem to be pro-Israel are the same people that are antigay or anti-Black. And everybody who I feel like would normally be aligned with me is just so heavily pro-Palestinian that I feel like I don't fit. [Crying] I'm so sorry. I didn't think I would get this upset talking about it. … It's hard. We've gotten so reactive and everybody's so scared of saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing, offending the wrong person, that it's hard to find a way to just talk and relate.

Interfaith LGBTQ+ Sparse pop

So my husband's family is so pro-Israel, and so kind of militantly Zionist, you don't say anything about Israel that's even remotely critical. It's like, well, I don't know how productive that is. I think there's a lot to talk about that's not working and a lot that we might want to challenge. And then on the other hand, we have some Jewish friends who are super liberal and kind of in the process of, I dunno, sometimes it feels a little bit posture-y that, well, Israel is just wrong. Everything about Israel is wrong and you've got to be pro-Palestine or nothing. It's really hard to be in between those groups. I'm not sure how much we would feel like we could be in a Jewish space right now while having really conflicting and complicated feelings about Israel.

General

Regarding hopes for their children's relationships to Israel, the majority of our interviewees wanted their children to develop some kind of appreciation for or attachment to Israel.

I think I want them to know that Israel is a special place and it's central and it has a special meaning in the hearts of our people.

General

I want to take my child back and I want to let my child know about all these histories, whether it's historical stuff or religious stuff. I want her to be part of this. And in the future, I'm hoping that she can really love her own identity and even Israel as a country or her holy land.

Interfaith PoC

At the same time, several parents indicated that they eventually wanted their children to understand Israel in all its complexity, echoing the frustration with the dominance of polarized discourse on the subject.

I want them to understand the history and the connection the Jews have. But I also want them to be sort of critical in the same ways that you teach your kids to be critical of human rights abuses anywhere or of regimes that aren't living up to the goals that we would want countries to live up to, including ours.

Interfaith PoC

Mainly I think I just want them to understand that it's not quite as black and white as it often seems on the news, or how people seem to portray it. … I'm hoping that they'll see the gray in between and that there's mistakes on all sides and that there's not an easy solution and that there's just more to it than meets the eye.

General

Some parents expressed uncertainty about how to talk to their young children about Israel. Others wanted their children to form their own opinions, echoing the language of choice used in discussions about religion:

She doesn't really understand what happened and what's going on. I think for an 8-year-old, they don't really understand what went on. And I think that's a benefit for her to not know all the details. I think it's too much to learn what happened there and everything like that. When she's older, when she's a little bit more mature, she'll be able to listen to it and come to her own understanding and what she feels about it. But, with religion, I won't pressure her to feel one way or the other.

Interfaith PoC

A Wider Lens: Israel as a Litmus Test Since October 7, 2023, Israel has become an active element in the mix of considerations that parents weigh when constructing their families' Jewish lives; prior, that was probably the exception rather than the rule. Israel draws them close to some institutions, alienates them from others, and leaves many despairing that they don't fit anywhere. Jewish communities are not immune to the extreme polarization of the current political moment, especially in relation to Israel; that constitutes a challenge both to young families seeking connection and to organizational leaders trying to create welcoming spaces. When parents reflect on what they want their children to know about or how they might relate to Israel, their responses are consistent with how they think about other aspects of their children's socialization and identity development. For many, these issues are loaded with tensions, but then—as we have seen—so many other aspects of their aspirations for their children come with such challenges.

Key Takeaways and Questions

It is not an easy time to raise children. The threats that keep people awake at night are both global and quite personal: environmental catastrophe, perpetual war, and pandemics; rising costs of living, a shrinking social safety net, and social isolation. Parents now seem to have less support and bear heavier expectations than their own parents did, and increasingly they are physically distanced from the communities in which they were raised. As each generation does, they enter a new world armed with aspirations shaped partially in the old one and partially in the new, and they grapple with the tensions this produces. Many of those who grew up in thriving Jewish communities want some of the same experiences for their children, but only some of them have landed in places where this is possible. Living in an age of identity conflict and celebration, parents want their children to be knowledgeable and proud of being Jewish, but to also know and understand and accept others, even as they confront antisemitic ideas in both metropolitan centers and further flung places. Parents probably have access to more direct resources for building Jewish life for children than at any time in history through the internet, but they have less time and support to curate them than ever before. These are just a few of the central tensions that emerged in the accounts of the parents whose experiences are represented in this study.

Most parents in this study aspire to raise children who are kind, respectful, and overall good people (we might say *mensches*). Finding resonance in Jewish concepts like tikkun olam and tzedakah, they want their children to treat others well, respect diversity, and work for the betterment of the world. They aspire for their children to feel comfortable in their own skins, proud of the Jewish and other components of their identities. Furthermore, they seek communities that will accept and embrace them for who they are.

This desire for Jewish community is challenged in multiple ways, many of them structural; the broader social, economic, and political conditions are largely beyond individual control. Geographic mobility fueled by the search for economic opportunity interrupts the development of locally based social networks. The rising costs of basic goods and services constrain parents' abilities to choose where they want to live and educate their children. Synagogue membership, Jewish preschool tuition, and community center fees are prohibitive for many. On top of these logistical barriers, families are often deterred from Jewish institutions by their lack of inclusion. Put more simply, families who don't fit stereotypical notions of what Jewish families are "supposed to look like"—for example, those that include People of Color, LGBTQ+, or single parents—continue to face discrimination, subtle or overt, in many Jewish spaces. Political polarization within the Jewish and general populations can present an additional barrier to community engagement.

It is clear, however, that the families we spoke to are not "fleeing from institutions," a common trope invoked to explain declining Jewish communal participation. They are simply struggling to find communities where they fit and that work for them: communities that are logistically accessible for ever-constrained budgets and schedules; communities that "walk the walk" when it comes to including diverse families and where they know they will be welcomed and affirmed for their whole selves; and communities that speak to their values. This is a tall order for institutions that must in turn make informed, intentional decisions about their policies and practices of inclusion.

The diversity of American parents raising children as Jews is striking. This diversity appears in multiple, intersecting domains: ethnicity (a category that includes language, physical appearance, culture, and often religion); different kinds of Jewishness; gender identities and ideologies; sexualities; socioeconomic status; and more. While broad demographic surveys have indicated as much, our interviewees flesh out the statistics, illustrating the multiple ways contemporary families experience Jewish religion, identity, and community.

These circumstances are challenging for organizations. Those that are embraced most warmly do not seem to attempt to cater to each family's specific contours—likely an impossible task—but recognize, validate, and support perhaps the only single shared feature of these families: their appetite to foster Jewish family life in community. One of our participants made this point beautifully:

> *Understanding more families that are multicultural, not necessarily multifaith, interfaith, but just families where you have two people coming from different approaches to things based on how they grew up and how they might react to certain things. And that doesn't necessarily make it a bad approach, it's just different. And also, along the same lines, not making assumptions about who someone may be just based on what they may look like. If someone tells you that they're a multicultural or multifaith family, don't make your own assumptions about what that multi-ness may be.*
>
> PoC LGBTQ+ Sparse pop

Jewish families today may look and live quite different from those in the past, but much of what Jewish parents want for their families is not new. This study makes explicit the challenges and the opportunities at the intersection of these two phenomena, and the tensions with which parents live as they try to fit these pieces together. Their effort as parents is a work in progress, with no end.

Recommendations

A small team of scholars and practitioners served as advisors to this study from its design until its conclusion. Following their review of the findings, they offered the following recommendations to funders and practitioners interested in engaging Jewish families with young children. Special thanks to Tani Prell, Jonathan Shmidt Chapman, and Meir Muller for these suggestions.

Aspirations

Community

1. *Practitioners:* Help new families feel welcomed by reliably hosting **"new family" events** and **"new family" spaces** that are part of larger community events. This signals to your families that you are there for them if and when they are ready. The same offering can also be true for other affinity groups (interfaith families, LGBTQ+ families, single parents, etc.). Note: If a space is offered for an affinity group, then support the people involved to take the lead in creating spaces that are most meaningful for them. (Resources exist for supporting affinity spaces in Jewish institutions.)

2. *Funders:* Many Jewish institutions might not have a large enough mass of any one marginalized identity group in their current community. However, that number may increase significantly if all the Jewish communities in a region come together. Support families from diverse backgrounds by helping fund **regional convening spaces** and experiences for families from diverse backgrounds, across Jewish institutions.

3. *Funders:* Consider funding more opportunities for families to meet new families outside of institutional Jewish life through organized **regional weekend trips**. Honeymoon Israel successfully shows how the bonding that takes place during a shared trip can foster long-lasting and meaningful relationships and community. This offering can be especially helpful in supporting Jewish families who live in areas with sparse Jewish populations and provide a chance for families to make meaningful connections that can then be sustained in virtual spaces.

Identity

Support parents in their own education on how to "do Jewish" at home.

1. *Practitioners:* Consider replicating Jew by Choice (conversion) classes to something more similar to a **"Jewish Parenting 101"** class. This can serve as an "adult refresher" for people who might not have been to a synagogue since their B'Mitzvah or a low-barrier introduction for parents learning about Judaism for the first time. If classes are taught with a baseline assumption of no prior Jewish knowledge, anyone can then find the class to be accessible and judgment-free.

2. *Funders:* Develop a "go-to" online platform where parents can access all the **step-by-step "How To's"** for Jewish life and ritual. Everything from Shabbat, to hosting a Passover Seder, to answering "big questions" in Jewish life.

Obstacles

Geography

1. *Practitioners and Funders:* Consider **intergenerational programs** that pair Jewish elders with young families to help support parents who do not have family or institutional support readily available.

   The burden of transmitting Jewish knowledge and identity is especially felt by those who do not have family nearby or institutions to support them. **Jewish elders** can serve as role models and transmitters of Jewish wisdom, welcome, and support for young families. Young families can then be a source of vibrancy and joy for Jewish elders. The Jewish elders could support young families in navigating Jewish ritual and supporting Jewish identity at home, and they could also impart generational knowledge and wisdom to the young people.

   Funders: In this intergenerational model, Jewish elders can receive training around how to be a positive support to young families in ways that feel inclusive, helpful, and meaningful. Consider funding intergenerational resources that Jewish elders and young families can use together.

2. *Practitioners and Funders:* Create **"Pop-Up Jewish Spaces,"** temporary, flexible Jewish spaces designed to bring community experiences to underserved areas. These could include Shabbat dinners, holiday celebrations, or parenting workshops held in non-traditional venues like libraries, community centers, or outdoor spaces. Pop-up spaces would provide opportunities for families to connect, celebrate, and engage in Jewish life without the need for permanent infrastructure.

   Partner with local organizations or Federations to host quarterly pop-up Shabbat dinners or tot Shabbat programs, emphasizing inclusivity and cultural diversity.

3. *Funders:* Invest in **Digital and Hybrid Engagement Tools,** high-quality, accessible online resources and hybrid programming to support families with limited access to Jewish infrastructure. Create interactive digital holiday guides, virtual workshops, and online mentorship programs connecting families with educators or peer networks. Expanding digital offerings, in this way, ensures that families can access Jewish education and resources wherever they are.

4. *Funders:* Invest in **creative virtual resources** to support Jewish families who live away from Jewish infrastructure. Jewish umbrella organizations can create virtual resources that help overcome barriers for families looking to deepen their children's connection to Jewish identity. These interventions could include:

   - Products and resources that help parents create meaningful and accessible Jewish engagement within the home on their own
   - Online network-building by region, so that families can find other families near them seeking Jewish community for meetups and informal gatherings.
   - Virtual affinity groups or learning circles for parents in different regions to learn from and with each other about carving their own path in creating Jewish engagement within their family/community.

Cost

Many small steps can help lower financial obstacles to family participation.

1. *Practitioners:* When planning, consider that many families budget their entire yearly spending well in advance. The luxury of disposable income is no longer something we can assume our families have to spend. Help people not feel the burden of trying to accommodate last-minute expenses by allowing them enough time to **budget ahead** for your

more high-priced Jewish offerings. The ability to plan ahead can be one factor that helps mitigate feelings that Jewish communal life is financially out of reach for families.

2. *Practitioners:* If you are able, make access to financial support easily available and low barrier. Completion of a form can feel more accessible than requiring someone to email an individual for support, for example.

3. *Practitioners:* When planning your programming calendar, identify your highest-cost experiences (High Holiday tickets, family retreat weekends, etc.). Brainstorm how you can make more **low-barrier alternatives** for families—in terms of time, commitment, and money. This also becomes an opportunity for inclusion, since many families with neurodivergent children are unable to participate in longer programs but would be able to attend a campfire Havdalah the week before a family retreat, for example.

4. *Funders:* The cost of childcare can be a major stressor on families. Consider funding a **"community babysitter" program** that trains and prepares Jewish teens and young adults (madrichim, camp counselors, Hillel students, etc.) to be childcare options for families in the area. This program can be made available during any Jewish programs at institutions and also an ongoing option for parents.

   Funders can offset the cost of childcare by supplementing a portion of the amount paid to the sitter and funding the training.

   The "training" can include ways for the sitters to instill Jewish experiences with the young people in their care (e.g., baking challah together, making Jewish crafts, reading PJ Library books).

   With a readily accessible childcare option, parents are then freed up to be able to share in adult Jewish experiences together like attending Shabbat services or planning a date night where they discuss their Jewish parenting.

Lack of Welcome

1. *Practitioners:* Demonstrate welcome through representation. Consider having **greeters or "socializers"** at your events who represent a range of diverse backgrounds and who will mingle with families with intention. People from diverse backgrounds seeing themselves represented can help people feel safer and more welcomed. This representation can offer a sense of relief and an idea that, "If they are here and happy, maybe I will be too."

   Note: If people from diverse backgrounds are asked to do additional tasks, provide additional insight, or do anything beyond what other attendees may be asked to do, plan to compensate them for their time. Compensation could be in the form of payment, free admission to an event, or something similar, since you are asking them to provide their labor, time, and/or emotional energy.

2. *Practitioners:* Show inclusivity by **defining terms** in writing and during in-person events. This is a great signal for people that they will be able to attend your events and fully access the content, regardless of their prior levels of Jewish knowledge.

3. *Practitioners:* Offer **childcare** during programs that are geared toward parents. This way, parents do not need to consider the cost of childcare when deciding whether or not to attend a Jewish event. Childcare during events also allows parents to be fully present when in community with other parents. The ability to foster connection among other parents will allow for community and connection to then later occur among children.

4. *Practitioners:* Consider ways that your organization can shift culture to become a more inclusive and welcoming community. Even when synagogues and organizations attempt to welcome Jewish families with intersectional identities, challenges can exist in the interpersonal interactions within the community. Organizations can explore ways to shift the culture within the community to create an environment more genuinely ready to be accessible and welcoming.

   Adult learning initiatives that support community members to deepen their understanding of intersectional identities within the Jewish community and within Jewish families

   Strengthening **partnerships with institutions/ communities outside of the Jewish community**

   Building **affinity-based meetup opportunities** within the organization for families not currently represented to meet and connect with each other

Making it Work

1. *Funders:* Launch a "**Jewish Home Innovation Fund.**" These would be microgrants for small groups of families to develop creative, home-based Jewish practices that align with their unique cultural backgrounds and identities. These grants would empower families to create meaningful Jewish experiences, especially when institutional access is limited. They could support projects like creating interfaith holiday experiences or organizing small-group, home-based celebrations around a Jewish theme (challah baking, adding a mezuzah to each home, etc.).

2. *Practitioners:* Expand dialogues through **"Resetting the Table"** or **"Perspective Honoring,"** structured initiatives that foster open and respectful conversations around complex and sometimes polarizing topics, emphasizing the process of dialogue rather than specific subjects. Dialogue programs create safe spaces for nuanced discussions, making Jewish organizations more inclusive and appealing. Offering facilitated sessions can increase community, building an appreciation of diverse viewpoints.

3. *Funders:* Explore innovative family programs that **emulate best practices** for inclusive, accessible, engaging formats from other sectors. Jewish institutions can learn from other sectors that engage families (e.g., arts-based family workshops, music classes, baby gym classes, "baby raves," family yoga) to experiment with new formats/models for Jewish family programming for very young children within Jewish institutions. Changes can include:

   - Pricing models
   - Marketing strategies
   - Community-building practices
   - Program design

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Appendix A: Participant Portraits

To round out some of the themes discussed in this report, we offer the following portraits of four individuals we interviewed. These four cases are not intended to be representative of all the families we spoke to. They do, however, illustrate some of the most common themes across participants. These include the challenges of geographic mobility, within and across cities or regions, and the logistical and other barriers to participation in organized Jewish life. These stories give a taste of the diverse paths taken to becoming a Jewish family and of different strategies and postures vis-à-vis parents' own upbringing and cultivating multiple traditions in the home.

1

MIKE

Logistical Barriers in a New City

2

ALLISON

Finding Support as a Jewish-And Family

3

ANA

Robust Infrastructure, Elusive Community

4

HELEN

Struggling in a Small Town

Portrait 1: Logistical Barriers in a New City

"**Mike**" is a Jewish man who recently relocated to a midsize city in the Southeast for a new job. His wife is Catholic, and they are both committed to raising their children as Jews. Mike wants his children to have the kind of Jewish upbringing he himself had. However, he faces challenges that his parents did not. For one, he grew up in the Northeast in close proximity to his synagogue, Jewish Community Center, and extended family. For him, the core of Judaism is celebrating holidays with family. Without that support, he finds it difficult to foster the kinds of Jewish experiences he wants for his children. He would like to participate more in local Jewish institutions, but distance and cost are major barriers, even though the family is not economically vulnerable at this time. Logistics are more of a challenge than presenting in Jewish settings as an interfaith family.

> *It's our first year here in a new city and the costs [of Jewish life] are exorbitant. It's crazy. We have not budgeted properly for it. We have not figured out exactly what we're going to do yet. But when I tell you it's two or three times what I envisioned spending for, whether that be a JCC involvement or the local synagogue, it's exactly that. And I know that things are totally different now than what they were in the eighties or nineties, but I know that on a one-to-one basis my parents couldn't have afforded the things that both of these resources would cost for me and my family. And that's been a real challenge. It's honestly been probably the biggest wrench in everything. Also, things are very spread out in the city ... the JCC happens to be on one side of town, it's about 25 minutes away. And the synagogue that we believe we belong the most is about 25 minutes in the other direction. The two are probably about 40 minutes from each other and both have, I mean, truly amazing programming for children and then for adults as well. ... All that's great, but when you factor in what it may cost just to kind of keep Jewish education in their lives, that's a real struggle for me right now.*

He goes on to say that he is considering alternatives to institutional participation; for example, hiring a tutor to prepare his children for their B'nai Mitzvah ceremonies. In addition to cost and distance, time is another limiting factor. His job requires him to work several weekends. Athletics are important to their family, and he foresees his children being active in club sports that will likewise require weekend commitments. In fact, sports have already involved a conflict with Jewish participation:

> *We didn't want this to occur, but at the same time that we were introducing them to the new synagogue down here, my daughter was told that the only night she could do gymnastics was Friday night. So, it's certain things like that that we're just trying to navigate and get used to while also balancing religion. ... How do I maintain a certain level of Judaism but also stay in the norm with where I work or how I'm raising the kids?*

For now, he's doing his best to make holidays fun and interesting for his children, often struggling to distinguish Jewish holidays from other popular American holidays they are exposed to at preschool. He notes, "It's been really hard for them to identify the difference between a Jewish holiday and a regular holiday or any other holiday. A Hallmark holiday, something like Valentine's Day, is fun because they get candy and there's hearts everywhere." He draws on resources like 18Doors and PJ Library, which he appreciates for providing ideas and materials for fun, home-based holiday celebrations. Still, he desires more regular Jewish experiences for his children: "I think the constant education, the constant week-to-week flow, that's really what's been missing."

Mike's story illustrates the challenge people in geographically dispersed metropolitan areas have to access Jewish institutions and how cost and other logistics can impede parents' most earnest desires for their children's Jewish lives—even when parents are pulling in the same direction.

Portrait 2: Finding Support as a Jewish-And Family

"**Allison**" is a Chinese woman who lives with her Jewish husband and four-year-old daughter in a major West Coast metropolitan area. She first came to the United States for college, where she met her husband. Through him, she had her first exposure to Judaism. After they had been married for two years, they went on a Honeymoon Israel (HMI) trip, which is where the couple concretized their decision to raise their future children as Jews:

> *That was the first time I really got a full exposure to how deep the culture is and how far back it traces. … It was the first time I felt like, whether I convert to Judaism or not, I would for sure need to make sure my child would have this Jewish identity. … I would definitely not want to see her losing this part of her identity and forgetting about the tradition, the culture. I want her to be very involved. I'm very proud that she's a Jew and I want her to know everything about it.*

According to Allison, although her husband had distanced himself from his Orthodox upbringing, the HMI trip inspired him to reconnect with his heritage. Now, "we are very much on the same page of how we should raise our child. … We're not raising her Orthodox or anything like that, but we would definitely make sure she knows everything, and she learns everything and she, in the future, would have her freedom to choose what she wants to do and be the kind of Jew she wants to be."

They are also on the same page about raising her with a strong connection to her Chinese heritage: "Religiously, for sure, we're raising her Jewish, but culturally I'd say half Jewish and half Chinese. … There's a big Chinese community here, and I want her to access both Chinese and Jewish culture." Allison doesn't experience contradictions or tensions in this combination. In fact, she finds overlap between Jewish and Chinese cultures, including the shared emphasis on family, education, and treating others with respect.

Although they live far away from her Jewish in-laws, Allison and her family have multiple resources for Jewish community. They are still in touch with their HMI cohort, although they find it increasingly hard to see one another, as families relocate to other parts of the city or move to completely different regions. When their daughter was first born, they lived in a part of the city with a lot of Jewish infrastructure. They participated in a large progressive synagogue, and Allison took classes on Judaism at an adult learning institution. After their child was born, they moved to an area with much less Jewish infrastructure. However, a Chabad synagogue recently opened up in their neighborhood, and that is where they now find their Jewish home. In addition to offering several activities for children, the rabbi's concerted efforts at relationship-building make it a welcoming place:

> *The rabbi, he's very responsible, he does things in person and he's very detailed and warm. He makes sure he remembers all of our names, he knows who we are. … He often stops by our house to bring us challah or apples and honey, things like that. He would knock on the door and give things to us in person and make sure to chat with us and make sure to see how we're doing. Even if he didn't do anything, we would still want to belong to this community. But when you do things like that, of course you feel like they care and they value your participation and your involvement. … So now we want to reciprocate even more.*

Allison had mentioned that her daughter had "done the mikveh;" that is, undergone a formal conversion ceremony, since Allison herself is not Jewish. While she did not state as much, it is likely that the child's conversion is important to the Chabad rabbi's welcoming of the family into their community, given the organization's adherence to Orthodox Jewish law. Even so, it is noteworthy that the family feels similarly welcomed in both their original, progressive synagogue and in the smaller Orthodox one, pointing to the importance of intentional practices of welcoming and relationship-building regardless of denomination.

Portrait 3: Robust Infrastructure, Elusive Community

Another HMI alum, "**Ana**" is a Catholic woman from Central America raising her children in a dual-faith household in a major Southeastern city. Although they live close to both ample infrastructure and her husband's institutionally connected family, they struggle to find Jewish community that works for them.

Ana loves many aspects of Judaism and is enthusiastic about raising her children both Jewish and Catholic. She teases her husband about being more knowledgeable about Judaism than he is. She believes that both faith traditions can coexist and co-flourish, although she struggles to convey this to others:

> *Neither of us is strict with religion, but we're both very strong in our faith, we both believe in God. I want my kids to see God as something that connects people, not divides, and see being Jewish and Catholic as the same as being bilingual, able to connect to and translate between people. … Especially being half Latin, half Jewish, and half Catholic in the South, [it's important to be] building up their sense of self, that it's okay to be different, that having these pieces is a good thing, and that other's beliefs are okay, too. … Being in [this state], one of the challenges is I feel like I'll say to people, I feel our Jewish and Catholic family have so much in common, and they'll say, but what about Jesus, you have to believe in Jesus. That's challenging. I spend a lot of time thinking about how to arm my kids, and even myself, with how to respond when people say this, how do I articulate how this works, and how do I make people open their heart and mind a little bit.*

Ana met her future husband in California. Once they were engaged, she read all she could about interfaith families, which led her to Honeymoon Israel. After they moved to a city in the Northeast, she persuaded her husband to apply for the program despite his fears that they may pressure her to convert. The trip was deeply fulfilling for both, and they formed close ties with other mixed-heritage couples. Upon their return, they participated in a regular Jewish Catholic shabbat with other couples in their cohort. Ana felt like she had really found "her people."

They had to leave this community behind, however, when they moved to their current, Southeastern city in 2019 to be closer to her husband's family. Ana immediately started a job with the local HMI chapter. Despite these familial and professional Jewish ties, finding community with other mixed-heritage families has been a struggle. During the pandemic, they joined HMI Zoom activities. Since these were open to everyone across the country, however, they did not necessarily facilitate connections to local interfaith families. They once participated in an 18Doors event, but "it was more like a 'do this activity' kind of thing versus 'meeting people' thing." Ironically, although they have multiple connections to Jewish institutions via her husband's family and childhood friends, the strength of these preexisting networks has made them difficult for Ana's dual-faith family to penetrate.

> *Many of [my husband's Jewish friends], their kids are going to Jewish school, and my husband's brother's kids go to Jewish school, and that has been really tricky. It feels like a very insulated community; you're either in the school or you're not. Before we got married, when we talked about school, we said we didn't want them to go to religious school, we wanted more neutral ground, and that's been hard. Friends we were [once] really close with [now] have birthday parties that are just classmates, or soccer teams, or whatever.*

While they occasionally attend services or programs at local synagogues or JCCs, this has not led to more sustained participation. She has, however, been more successful integrating into their local Catholic church. As reflected in her quotation in the body of this report, she was approached by a church representative about leading the church's interfaith mission after the baptism of her son, which had led to friendships with other local Jewish-Catholic families. The experience with her son's *bris* (Jewish ritual circumcision), in contrast, did not lead to further ties:

There's a local pediatric surgeon who is also a mohel, and he did a wonderful job [with their son's circumcision]. He was like, yeah, I've worked with interfaith families before. And he planned this really beautiful service and was just so thoughtful and inclusive, but he wasn't part of a synagogue who would've continued that conversation.

Ana's story demonstrates the importance of peer communities for mixed-heritage families, even when they have strong Jewish cultural and social capital—that is, the knowledge, experience, and connections that would theoretically facilitate a family's entrée into communal life. It also demonstrates that, absent intentional practices of welcoming and inclusion, Jewish institutions may fail to engage those who should be well within their geographic and social reach. Jewish institutions are wrestling with questions about how to welcome and integrate families that are raising their children in two faiths, as distinct from interfaith families raising their children as Jews. Ana's story helps with better understanding the experiences of a population that has not been extensively studied.

Portrait 4: Struggling in a Small Town

"**Helen**" has Jewish grandparents but grew up in a secular, "culturally Christian" family. She explored Judaism in college, eventually embracing Jewish identification and Orthodox practice. Helen met her future husband, who was raised Orthodox, at a modern Orthodox synagogue in a large Mid-Atlantic city. She shares that, "although our backgrounds are different, we were similar in the sense that as adults we had both sort of taken the time and the space to actually carve out something that was meaningful for us, and to sort of work out what we wanted Judaism to be in our own lives, which was quite different from our families." They lived in that city for 10 years, where they had their first child and enjoyed being part of an independent, traditional-egalitarian minyan. Then they moved to their current location, a small, Midwestern town, for their jobs in higher education.

At first, they tried living in a suburb of the nearby metropolis where they would have easier access to Orthodox community life. As first-generation college graduates who both work in education, however, they quickly realized they could neither afford the costs of participation, nor keep up with the class culture of their higher-SES neighbors.

> *There are Jewish communities here in [this state] that I think would be what we'd be looking for, but they're only in neighborhoods that we can't afford to live in, and we are not in that same socioeconomic demographic. When we first moved here, we lived in a much cheaper section of one of those neighborhoods so that we could be part of an [Orthodox] Jewish community. We ended up feeling really let down by it, because the reality was, we just didn't have anything in common with the folks who were part of the community. We were just from a very, very different socioeconomic place. So, if the conversations around the kiddush table were about the vacations people had gone on or the cleaners that they had coming to clean their house, we couldn't relate to any of that. My husband would get invited to play golf with the other guys and he's like, that's just not part of my cultural world. And so, we felt very alienated from the community, not to do with anything Jewish, but to do with the fact that we were just socioeconomically in a different place and ultimately decided to move away from the Jewish community and closer to work because we have more in common with people who live where we do because we share a socioeconomic situation.*

They now belong to the local synagogue in their small town and their child goes to Hebrew school, "but we don't really enjoy going there." Their previous, Shomer-Shabbat minyan had a culture of tolerating or accommodating young children during services; it was a "shul-going" culture, and all the children grew to know each other. In contrast, the more liberal synagogues in their current town are not so child-friendly, especially for her neurodiverse 3- and 6-year-old. "There is no Tot Shabbat and no babysitting. There's nothing for them to do, and so it's just uncomfortable all around." Because of this, "Judaism is mostly something we do at home." Although they are no longer Orthodox in practice, they try to keep Judaism alive in their home as much as possible, including hosting other families. However, being this center of gravity can be taxing:

> *I would really like my kids to grow up with this sense that Friday night is kind of special time and we have people in our home and we share a nice meal … we have a festive meal or as festive as I have the time to make it. Sometimes it's mac and cheese. We would have people in our home for Friday night dinner every Friday if I had the time and the physical and emotional bandwidth to do it. But it just takes a lot of energy when you're the only one doing the hosting to reach out to people and invite them in and plan a menu and go grocery shopping and cook their meal whilst also trying to hold down a full-time job and multiple part-time jobs.*

Helen's story resonates with many of our participants who live in small towns with sparse Jewish populations. In her words, we see the frustration and resignation that many such families—deeply committed to Judaism but utterly without support—expressed regarding their Jewish aspirations.

Appendix B: Methodological Approach

Overall Research Design

We conducted this research in two phases, separated by an interim analytic period of data collected during the first phase. We began by conducting 40 focus groups. The focus groups, held from September through November 2023, covered broad questions about how parents think of and define their families as Jewish and/or in other ways, the varieties of Jewish practices they engage in at home, the kinds of Jewish communities they seek and/or are part of, and from where they derive Jewish inspiration and support.

Some focus groups were made up of demographically targeted groups, including only parents who met a particular demographic characteristic (such as being in interfaith partnerships or living in areas with small Jewish populations) or who shared a particular life circumstance (as single parents, for example, or identified as economically vulnerable). Other focus groups were categorized as "general population" and included participants with a range of identities, backgrounds, and experiences.

The second phase of research involved follow-up one-on-one interviews with 40 individuals who had previously participated in the focus groups. These participants were hand-selected from the focus group sample to represent some of the stories, perspectives, and experiences we wanted to know more about based on the analysis of the focus group data. The interviews, conducted in early spring 2024 after an initial analysis of the focus group data, focused more deeply on what parents wanted and were finding vis-à-vis community and Jewish resources, and they also delved more into the role of Israel in Jewish identity and institutional relationships.

All focus groups and interviews were conducted by our team over Zoom. Focus groups generally had four or five participants and lasted 90 minutes; interviews ran for 45 minutes. Transcripts were uploaded to NVivo and coded using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches. Codes were generated based both on themes associated with the specific questions we asked and themes that emerged spontaneously in the conversations.

Recruitment

Recruitment for the focus groups was conducted using an online screening survey, in partnership with a number of local and national Jewish organizations. In addition, we employed a research panel management company to assist us with recruitment, in the hope that such a company would aid us in reaching relatively unengaged Jewish families that had little-to-no connection with Jewish organizations. Ultimately, the latter effort was less successful than we hoped, and we turned back to our recruitment partners from within the Jewish communal space to complete our efforts. A list of Jewish organizations that assisted these efforts is below (see Figure B-1). We would like to thank PJ Library, in particular, for their recruitment assistance—they were generous with outreach to their subscribers who live in areas far away from Jewish institutional centers, and their recruitment help was indispensable for garnering the diverse sample we recruited.

The online screening survey ("screener") contained information about the study and 20 questions designed to elicit specific information for a complex sampling design, described below. Participants received a link to this screener from one or more of our recruitment partners (in a newsletter, posted on

Figure B-1: Recruitment Partners

social media, or in a designated email invitation). The screener began with basic eligibility questions (to make sure respondents had children and were raising them with Jewish experiences). Those who were eligible were then shown additional questions designed to capture the information needed for sampling and scheduling purposes. As noted above, individual interview participants were recruited directly from the focus group sample, and their selection was guided by both what participants had shared initially in focus groups and the questions that emerged from our initial analysis of focus group data.

Sample

Our recruitment efforts were guided by somewhat complex sampling goals, most of which we were able to meet. The original sample design included splitting the 40 focus groups into two main sample groups, each of which was to have a parallel sampling structure. We aimed to hold 20 focus groups with more institutionally engaged families, and 20 focus groups with less-engaged or unengaged families. Within each of those main sample groups, we hoped to have two each of the following groups: interfaith families; families with members who identify as LGBTQ+; families with members who identify as PoC; families living in sparse Jewish communities; families experiencing economic vulnerability; and families headed by single parents. The remaining eight groups were general groups, containing parents who didn't fit any of those other categories, and others who may fit any one or more of those other categories.

We were ultimately unsuccessful in building two discrete sample groups differentiated by engagement level. On the other hand, we were quite successful in composing the complex sampling structure that we had developed within each group (shown in Figure 1 in the body of this report).

Notes on Engagement

Our research included an important focus on levels of "engagement," and identifying distinct levels of engagement was an intrinsic part of our sample design at the outset of this study. While engagement continues to be an important concern of the study, we have run into numerous challenges in defining and measuring this concept in ways that

Figure B-2: Screener Question to Determine Engagement Level

People connect with Jewish communities, Jewish identity, and Judaism in different ways. Which of the following statements is true of your family? (By "your family," we mean yourself, your child(ren), and your spouse/partner, if you have one.) Please select all that apply.

- We do Jewish things and/or talk about Jewish topics at home, at least occasionally.
- We celebrate Jewish holidays or other Jewish traditions with family and/or friends.
- We combine Jewish traditions/rituals with those from other cultures or faith traditions at home or with family and/or friends.
- We talk or learn about Israel at home or with family and/or friends.
- We belong to or attend a synagogue or other kind of Jewish religious community, or attend services/events at least once a year.
- We participate, at least once a year, in events organized by Jewish organizations (including, but not limited to synagogues, Chabad, JCCs, and Federations).
- Our/my child(ren) attend or have attended a Jewish child care program, preschool, day school, Jewish camp, or afterschool/weekend Jewish educational program (e.g., Hebrew school).
- We connect with Jewish communities, Jewish identity, or Judaism in a different way. Please describe: _____
- None of the above.

feel meaningful, reliable, and valid; as a result, we have had to redefine the concept along the way. We began with an institutionally oriented definition of engagement measured in a quite simplistic way, essentially viewing membership in or attendance (to any frequency) at events organized by Jewish organizations as an indicator of engagement, and categorizing those who are not involved with Jewish institutions in some way as unengaged or less-engaged, regardless of other ways they are connected with Judaism, Jewish identity, or informally organized Jewish community. We were determined to use a single question with numerous options to measure engagement for two reasons. One, because of our complex sampling goals, our screener was quite long, and we wanted to minimize the number of questions as much as possible. And two, because we were particularly focused on including families that are at the margins of organized Jewish life, we were attentive to the possibility of alienating those with little or no connection to Jewish institutions or conveying the impression that the study was not for them. For this reason, we included a number of items that spoke to more informal involvement with Jewish activity or practice and tried to minimize the number of items that spoke to institutional involvement. Our attempt to balance these concerns with our desire to accurately represent and measure engagement level resulted in the screener question displayed in Figure B-2.

Once we recruited people and spoke with them, we began to find that our criteria were not sufficiently sensitive to the personal or contextually circumscribed Jewish journeys that families often take. A large number of people with whom we spoke deeply desire connection to Jewish community but simply have no resources or infrastructure in their geographic vicinity with which to create it, thereby complicating the meaningfulness of assessing engagement in terms of membership or attendance in Jewish institutions. On the other side of the coin, some families were members of synagogues, which would have put them in the "engaged" category, but rarely attended due to distance, lack of offerings for families with infants, or other reasons. Ultimately, we came to understand that observed degrees of engagement with institutions are the result of the interaction between (1) interest and desire to engage; (2) the availability of institutions that are resonant

Figure B-3: Revised Engagement Metric Based on Selected Engagement Items from Screener

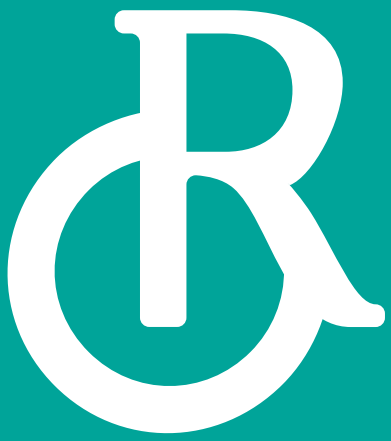
- Child attended Jewish childcare, preschool, or other school = 3 points
- We belong to or attend events at a synagogue at least once a year = 3 points
- We participate at least once a year in events organized by Jewish institutions = 2 points
- We celebrate Jewish holidays or other Jewish traditions with family/friends = 2 points
- We do/talk about Jewish things at home = 1 point
- We talk about or learn about Israel at home = 1 point

Scoring:
9–12 points = More Engaged
5–8 points = Somewhat Engaged
0–4 points = Minimally Engaged

with families' identities, values, and goals; and (3) the degree to which families actually have access to such institutions (particularly their geographical proximity).

Complex questions about the meaning of engagement and its measurement presented a temptation to dispense with the concept altogether, but its centrality to our research questions and research design forced us to continue reckoning with it. The construct was important in helping guide recruitment for the second interview-based phase of our research, in part so that we might continue grappling with the nuances of this construct. We still wanted to learn about the least-engaged people in our sample, albeit ones that do care about building Jewish lives for their children. Ultimately, we used the screener question we began with in a new and more granular way to identify three groups: Minimally Engaged, Somewhat Engaged, and More Engaged. This metric defines engagement more broadly by encompassing experiences with Jewish culture or traditions at home *and* participation in informal Jewish community, but it still privileges institutional engagement by more heavily weighting actions such as enrollment in day schools or synagogue membership (see Figure B-3).

The engagement breakdown of the full focus group sample based on this new measurement scheme is shown in Figure 2 in the body of this report. While we did not fully meet our recruitment goals pertaining to engagement, we were still able to talk to many parents who find themselves on the margins of institutional life for a variety of reasons, an important goal of the study. Ultimately, the rich data we generated in this research suggests to us that hearing from Jewish families who depart from many of the normative categories that often accompany Jewish identity provided much of the kind of nuance that we were looking for when seeking unengaged participants.



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