



**National Incubator for Community-Based Jewish Teen  
Education Initiatives  
Qualitative Research on Jewish Teens  
Fall 2014-Winter 2015**

**Insights and Perspectives from Jewish Teens:  
A Report on Research Conducted for the  
National Incubator for Community-Based Jewish Teen Initiatives**

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This document features testimonials and an analysis of focus groups of Jewish teens, conducted by the National Incubator in December 2014 and January 2015 with the goal of hearing from teens—on their own terms and in their own language—how they spend their time and the ways in which they identify (and do not identify) with Judaism and Jewish community. The National Incubator facilitated 16 focus groups for a total of 139 teens from Los Angeles, Denver, Boston, and Atlanta (four groups per city). Participants spanned ages 12 ½-17 and higher and lower levels of connection with organized Jewish life. These efforts were a significant part of the comprehensive qualitative research conducted by the National Incubator, which also included digital ethnographies and a literature review.

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**Introduction and Research Background**

The National Incubator for Community-Based Jewish Teen Initiatives of The Jewish Education Project, supported by the Jim Joseph Foundation, seeks to expand and deepen Jewish teen education in the United States through its collaborative work with 14 members of the Jewish Teen Education Funders Collaborative—strategic funders re-imagining Jewish life for teens in 10 communities throughout the United States. The National Incubator consults with these organizations as they develop their strategies and initiatives and supports the Funder Collaborative as a thought partner in this large-scale project. To support and enhance this work, the National Incubator is working with a team of researchers and evaluators to create shared outcomes, indicators, and measurement tools that will gauge Jewish education and engagement among teens participating in Jewish experiences during their middle school and high school years.

The work of developing these outcomes and tools has been multi-faceted, with each stage of the process building off of those that preceded it and informing those that followed it. The initial stage consisted of an in-depth review of recent research and insights about teens in general and Jewish teens in particular, as well as interviews with researchers and practitioners who have studied and worked with Jewish teens and youth organizations. This research was summarized in a report (M. Woocher, 2014) which used the framework of the “Six C’s of Positive Youth Development”—competence, confidence, connection, caring, character, and contribution—to explore how Jewish teens develop as their move through adolescence and what positive impacts Jewish youth engagement programs and organizations can have on this development.

In the next stage, insights from the literature review and expert interviews were used to develop a framework for describing more precisely how Jewish life and engagement can help teens – and Jews of all ages – live more meaningful, purposeful and fulfilling lives. This framework is rooted in four Core Questions that teens and others ask themselves as they move through their lives and the world - Who am I? To whom am I connected? To whom am I responsible in this world? and How can I bring about change in the world? From these Core Questions emerged Eight Dimensions of Jewish Teen Education & Engagement, which are expanded into approximately 30 specific Jewish Teen Education & Engagement Outcomes. (These outcomes are used as headings for each section of this report).

Once this framework was developed, its validity and relevance to the actual lives of Jewish teens was explored through sixteen focus groups of 139 Jewish teens ages 12½ -17 living in Atlanta, Boston, Denver, and Los Angeles. Key findings from these focus groups are detailed in this report. The groups were designed to capture the voices and perspectives of a diverse set of Jewish teens as they contemplated key issues related to their lives as Jews and as adolescents: relationships, commitments, community involvement, values, self-identity, and their place in the world. The discussions also sought to elicit the kinds of language that teens use when they discuss the role of Jewishness in their lives, so that future research can speak to teens in ways that are most relevant and salient to them. Although the focus groups did not cover each individual outcome to the same extent, they were designed to address all of the Core Dimensions, using probing questions and engaging exercises to elicit rich and detailed insights from the teen participants. As this report will show, the discussions both reflected the individuality of the teens as they drew upon their personal experiences and backgrounds, and revealed many common themes and patterns – across the range of ages, connection levels, and locations – in the ways that the teens view their experiences and make meaning from them.

A few words on methodology: The groups were divided by age (younger teens ages 12 ½ -14 and older teens ages 15-17) and by level of connection to the Jewish community, as determined by a screening questionnaire.<sup>1</sup> By design, there were very few “observant” (Orthodox or Ortho-praxis) teens among the participants, as the goal was to learn more about and hear from teens who are not as involved in communal institutions and activities. Prior to their participation in the groups the teens completed “digital ethnographies” online, reflecting on how they spend their time, how they view Shabbat, Israel and Jewish holidays, and their favorite things about being Jewish. This provided additional insights into the lives of the teens, allowed them to express some thoughts individually rather than in the group settings, and provided the researchers with insights to help them shape the focus group discussions.

Finally, it is important to note that – as is true for all in-depth qualitative research – the goal of these focus groups was to illuminate important themes, allow teens to share their thoughts and perspectives in their own words, and provide direction for further research. Therefore, the findings presented here should not be assumed to be generalizable to all American Jewish teens, or even all Jewish teens in the communities studied. In later stages of the initiative, the insights presented here will be used to develop a battery of survey questions—crafted using language that resonates with teens as per our findings—along with other research tools that more comprehensively will test whether these 139 Jewish teens do in fact represent an accurate portrait of their generation.

The following sections present the core questions followed by the dimensions and outcomes that Jewish teen initiatives might work to achieve.<sup>2</sup>

**Core Question One: Who Am I?**

Bein Adam L’Atzmo/a – The Self Dimension	Jewish Teens develop a strong <b>sense of self</b> and <b>self-worth</b> . Jewish Teens develop <b>healthy bodies and minds</b> . Jewish Teens develop positive <b>ethics</b> and <b>values</b> . Jewish Teens engage in life-relevant and challenging <b>learning</b> .
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<sup>1</sup> As there was some overlap between the “higher” and “lower” connected groups, they might be most accurately described as “low to medium connected” and “medium to high connected.”

	<p>Jewish Teens develop and enhance their <b>skills and talents</b> that help them to succeed in life.</p> <p>Jewish Teens develop a positive <b>emotional connection</b> with their Jewishness.</p>
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At the start of the focus groups, teens were asked to identify and describe their favorite things to do outside of school during their afternoons and weekends. Their responses showed that they, like many Jewish teens today, are involved in a wide array of pursuits. Sports and physical activities (both through school and community) was most frequently mentioned, along with academic teams (math league, robotics clubs, etc.), performing arts such as theatre and music, volunteering, after-school jobs, gaming, and the ever-popular “hanging out with friends.” When asked why they pursue these activities and what they get from the experience, the teens cited feelings and experiences that match well with the “self-development” outcomes identified above – they feel a sense of accomplishment and pride in their achievements, they feel engaged on multiple levels – intellectually, physically and socially, and they feel that they are developing skills and talents that will positively impact their lives both in the present and future, as they pursue some of their interests through college and into adulthood.

For the most part, Jewish activities were not part of the teens’ recitations of their “favorite things to do,” although a small number of teens (particularly in Boston and Atlanta) did cite youth groups such as BBYO, NFTY and USY, Jewish Culture Clubs at school, or volunteer work (such as teaching young children) at their synagogues. When asked specifically about Jewish activities, many more teens spoke about their engagement in youth groups, Jewish clubs, and post-B’nai Mitzvah Jewish educational programs through synagogues or community Hebrew High schools. Further probing about why these activities were not mentioned initially revealed that even when Jewish activities are perceived as positive or meaningful, they are generally not considered by the teens to be “free time” – rather they occupy a separate category that falls somewhere between the obligation of school and freely chosen, “fun” pastimes. Even when teens said

they enjoyed Jewish activities, they generally didn't seem to see them as contributing to "self-development" outcomes as described above. In addition, even though a number of teens cited Jewish camp as one of the most important and enjoyable parts of their lives (as will be explored further in later sections), the fact that camp takes place over the summer also compartmentalizes it into its own unique category, separate from activities enjoyed during the rest of the year (apart from opportunities to see camp friends during the school year).

### Emotional Connection to Jewishness

Echoing some of the findings from the Pew study and other recent research, the research revealed that even if Jewish activities and commitments are perceived by teens as something separate and compartmentalized from their daily pursuits, their Jewish identities and emotional connections to Jewishness can still be strong, positive and pervasive forces in their lives. When asked to complete the sentence "Being Jewish makes me feel..." the most frequent ideas the teens shared – in both the higher and lower connected groups – were "proud," "connected" and "unique," as shown in the quotes below:

#### Jewish Pride

- *Being Jewish makes me feel proud and strong and independent and a lot more because we Jews – we have been through a lot in history and we've still survived.* (Younger, Low-Connected Boston Teen)
- *I said it makes me feel proud and a part of something different. I said I can meet new people and it creates a whole other side of my life, and it also allows me to experience new things.* (Younger, High-Connected Boston Teen)

#### Feeling Unique

- *In my town or around here in general, it kind of makes me feel special that I get to celebrate other holidays, that not everyone is celebrating the same thing.* (Older, Low-Connected Boston Teen)
- *Being one of the only ones makes you feel unique, and it's kind of good to feel unique and you feel happy that you're not just like everybody else at your school.* (Younger, High-Connected Denver Teen)

#### Feeling Connected

- *It's nice being different, but it's also good to know that you're a part of something bigger than yourself.* (Older, High-Connected Denver Teen)
- *Being Jewish makes me feel like I'm connected to something bigger than myself, which brings me a sense of happiness. And it also makes me feel immediately connected with a big group of people that I also consider to be my family that I can rely on.* (Older, Low-Connected Denver Teen)
- *To me it doesn't feel like a religion, it kind of feels like, it sounds like kind of weird, but like it's a part of me.* (Older, High-Connected Los Angeles Teen)
- *Being Jewish makes me feel like I'm not alone, because there are millions of people like me, and they all go through the same things – like synagogues, celebrate holidays, and Jewish customs.* (Younger, High-Connected Teen Atlanta)
- *Being Jewish makes me feel different. I enjoying being unique, but also I like coming together with people who are like me. It helps create connections. I would be connected with people who I would normally not connect with.* (Older, Low-Connected Teen Atlanta)

Even among the teens who expressed positive feelings about their Jewishness, a number also acknowledged that it brought challenges as well as a sense of pride, as the difference the teens feel due to their Judaism in the context of the broader society could be a double-edged sword. Some teens expressed both pride in feeling special and unique, and discomfort when being Jewish makes them feel *too* different from peers – the positive and negative feelings were not mutually exclusive – and that while they generally enjoyed explaining Judaism to their non-Jewish friends and peers, the need to explain oneself could also grow tiresome. In each of the four communities, there were teens who had experienced behavior from their peers they perceived as anti-Jewish, or at least revealing ignorance about Judaism. These ranged from insensitive questions or comments meant to draw attention to one's Jewishness, to teasing and bullying such as having pennies thrown at them, to more overtly anti-Semitic incidents involving swastikas or other Holocaust references. One older, lower-connected Atlanta teen shared that her sister sometimes claims to be Christian because of a sense that people are “against the Jews,” and that she herself struggles with being a Jewish minority in her largely Christian community:

*My sister will tell her friends that she's Christian because like a lot of people are not really good friends with Jews. Just like, like the Holocaust, everything – everyone's just against them I guess. And where I live, there's all Christians and no Jews. I guess I got used to feeling like no one really – they're not big fans. Because if a person's like, oh, that person has a big nose. He's a Jew, she's a Jew.*

For the most part, the teens described themselves as taking any anti-Jewish behavior they experienced in stride, finding it more of an annoyance than a cause of great distress (although of course the emotions teens are willing to express in front of their peers and a researcher may be rather different than the actual emotions felt at the time.) One high-connected, younger Boston teen even reframed the experience into a positive one that gives him the opportunity to “defend Jews” from negative beliefs and set the record straight: “I like being Jewish because I get to defend it, because most people in my town aren't Jewish. So they think all of this crazy stuff. One kid in fourth grade, he was like, do you have horns? I'm like, why would I have horns? Because of a sculpture? So I get to defend Jews.”

Finally, there were also teens – particularly in the lower connected Los Angeles groups – who expressed stronger indifference, ambivalence or discomfort about their Jewishness. One older teen in Los Angeles explained how he struggled to figure out which aspects of Judaism he could relate to, and which seemed irrelevant or meaningless:

*I went through my Bar Mitzvah. I was pretty much forced to by my parents, even though they're not very religious at all, either. Religiously, I just don't believe in anything. Just reading my Torah portion, it was all nonsense to me. And so, in that way, the religion, I'm an agnostic. And so all the religious parts, I don't believe in. They're not a part of who I am. So I'm indifferent in that sense. But I guess culturally, I'm Jewish. Whatever that means. I'm not exactly sure what that means, either. There are certain values we have or I—I think that are part of Judaism like education. And so, in that sense, I'm not indifferent about being Jewish. But, in most other senses, I'm indifferent.*

Others in this older, lower-connected Los Angeles group (along with several teens in focus groups in other cities) felt strongly that while being Jewish may be



a part of their background, it doesn't "define them" or influence how they present themselves to the world:

- *There's a lot of people who let religion dominate their life. It's kind of all they are. And I don't do that because, I don't believe in it, but I also don't want to have that label just because of what people think of me.*
- *When people ask me, tell me about yourself, saying that I'm part Jewish or I believe in some of the Jewish practices or whatever, that doesn't even cross my mind. It has nothing to do with who I am as a person, really.*
- *I'm not particularly religious. I don't really believe any religious stuff. So I'm just saying that I don't really care what religion I am. I'll celebrate the major holidays and I'll go to church or temple once in a blue moon. But I don't let it define me. When I'm at school, I don't think of myself as Jewish. It's not really part of my personality.*
- *[To define myself] I will say I'm a teenage American boy. I am Jewish and Christian, but I don't really care about either. I like to eat, sleep, watch sports.*

Bein Adam L'Hochmato/a – The Knowledge Dimension	Jewish Teens apply <b>Jewish wisdom that informs their lives.</b> Jewish Teens appreciate and access a <b>broader wisdom that empowers them to make informed choices</b> in their lives. Jewish Teens obtain <b>knowledge that empowers them to be able to participate</b> in various Jewish communities.
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In general, the experience of Hebrew school – the most common setting for Jewish learning – was not particularly positive for the teens. Many who mentioned it described it as “boring” and/or something they were “forced to do” by their parents. Some recognized the link between Jewish education and having a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, which was generally a very positive and meaningful event (as will be discussed further below). Still, others who attended Hebrew school in addition to their training for their Bar or Bat Mitzvah seemed to only see the connection with the specific study of prayer and Torah chanting for the event, and not the previous multiple years of learning. Overall, the teens rarely spoke of using Jewish values/wisdom to inform significant life choices. Even those who were proud of having studied Jewish text and prayer for their B'nai Mitzvah

framed this about being proud of their accomplishment rather than finding enduring value in what they learned.

The few positive comments about Jewish learning suggested that teens were most likely to experience Jewish knowledge as meaningful or interesting when they could see the connections and relevance to the rest of their lives:

- *Learning about Jewish stuff is cool sometimes. Because I go to Jewish school, we have a dual curriculum, so this year I have to take philosophy in Jewish studies. And so it applies the Jewish values to our real life, and it's integrated with AP literature, so we look at things through a Jewish lens. (Older, High-Connected Los Angeles Teen)*
- *I think after my Bar Mitzvah, I kind of wanted to know more about Jewish opinions on things. So we got to go on a really interesting trip to in Washington DC, like from a Jewish stance, which I thought was really cool, because then we learned a lot of Jewish opinions on gun control and abortion and that kind of stuff. And even if I didn't agree with some of them, it was just cool to know that my religion has a stance on this stuff. (Older, Low-Connected Denver Teen)*
- *I enjoy [my synagogue program] because the first half hour we eat pizza and then we watch movies that relate to Judaism. And then afterwards we have discussions about how it relates to Judaism and our thoughts about it which I enjoy because I like to write – I kind of want to be a journalist when I grow up or something like that – and I find it fun to just be a part of something that has to do with my religion. (Younger, Low-Connected Boston Teen)*

**Core Question Two: With Whom and What am I Connected?**

<p>Bein Adam L'Zmano/a - The Time Dimension</p>	<p>Jewish Teens develop an understanding and appreciation of the <a href="#">Jewish life cycle</a>.          Jewish Teens appreciate and integrate the <a href="#">Jewish calendar</a> into their life.          Jewish Teens spend their time according to healthy and considered choices that they have made.</p>
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Jewish Life cycle

Given the current life-stage of the teens, it is not surprising that the Jewish life cycle event with by far the most salience and importance was the Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebration. Nearly all of the teens in the High-connected groups had a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, as well as more than half of the teens in the Low-connected groups (which speaks to the ubiquity of the B'nai Mitzvah in American Jewish culture.) As mentioned above, for nearly all of those who had experienced B'nai Mitzvah, it was a highly positive source of pride, accomplishment, connection to Jewish life, and – for a few higher-connected teens – a sense of newly acquired Jewish responsibility, at least within the context of the synagogue. Sharing the event with family and friends, and being able to demonstrate for them the skills they had learned, was a highlight for many. Some said they especially enjoyed having non-Jewish friends attend so that they could share Jewish traditions with those who weren't familiar with them.

### Sense of Accomplishment

- *I feel like because we had to prepare so much, the fact that we did it was just a major accomplishment. Like if we only had to say a couple prayers, I feel like it wouldn't have been that big of a deal, but we did a lot.* (Younger, High-Connected Boston Teen)
- *I think it was that feeling of accomplishment when you finish with your Bat Mitzvah—and I worked really hard on it, and I also liked writing my D'var Torah. I liked it. I like writing speeches a lot, and that was something really meaningful that I could do for my Bat Mitzvah and it was just a really good experience.* (Younger, High-Connected Denver Teen)
- *When you do your prayers, after you finish reading and you're done and everyone comes up and congratulate you it feels really good. You feel really accomplished.* (Younger, High-Connected Los Angeles Teen)

### Pride in Sharing Event with Friends

- *I thought it was pretty cool to invite a lot of my friends and show them something that they hadn't seen before, see the Jewish culture.* (Older, Low-connected Atlanta Teen)
- *I invited most of my friends and they had never seen that, so it was cool to have them see it and be there for it.* (Younger, High-connected Denver Teen)

- *A lot of my friends weren't even Jewish and that was pretty cool having all the kids that didn't know what it was or anything—they had just heard of it. (Younger, High-connected Denver Teen)*

### Jewish Responsibility

- *I definitely feel more connected to Judaism after having my bat mitzvah. Like I feel like I have a lot more responsibility with the religion. (Older, High-Connected Boston Teen)*
- *I liked how I felt like I could participate more in like, my synagogue services now by like volunteering to read Torah or something like that. I just felt like I was contributing a lot more than when I was younger. (Older, High-Connected teen Boston)*
- *The adults at temple, the rabbis and everybody, they treat you a little bit differently, now that you're an adult, they greet you differently, 'cause they know that you're a Jewish adult, and they've been through that process with you, so they treat you more adult-like which is pretty good. (Younger, High-Connected Boston Teen)*
- *It was kind of like the kickstart for my Jewishness because I got super involved afterwards. I mean my dad worked at that temple too, but I was like there more often than not because I was always helping with this, helping with that. And they asked me after my Bat Mitzvah to teach the Hebrew school. That was kind of like the start for me. (Older, High-Connected Atlanta Teen)*

A number of teens also described their Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a time when they felt spiritual and/or connected to God, as will be further explored in the later section on Adam L'Makom – the Spiritual Dimension.

Finally, while the majority of the teens who had had a Bar or Bat Mitzvah had positive feelings about the event, there were a few who expressed quite negative associations, describing the experience as either a burden due to the intense preparation required, or something “ancient” that had no personal meaning or relevance:

- *It was demanding; you get tired of it. I really didn't want to do it and then when it's over you're just so happy 'cause you don't have to deal with it anymore. (Younger, High-connected Los Angeles Teen)*

- *I had my Bar Mitzvah. Still, it doesn't really mean much to me. My Torah portion was about sacrificing animals and what kinds of shapes of cloth you can wear and what different types of materials you can't have next to each other. And how to sacrifice animals and which animals you can sacrifice and not—these are things that—they're ancient. From an entirely different universe of time. It's like none of it applies to me. It's all malarkey. And so I just really—this is meaningless to me. So I did my Bar Mitzvah. I memorized everything. But it still doesn't mean that much to me. Didn't mean that much to me then. And I didn't want to do it the entire time leading up to it. (Older, Low-connected Los Angeles Teen)*

### The Jewish Calendar – Holidays and Shabbat

Jewish holidays – particularly the American Jewish “primary holidays” of Hanukkah, Passover, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – are almost universally part of the teens’ experience. As befits the placement of the Jewish calendar in the Core Dimension of connection, holidays are a source of multiple levels of connection for the teens – to family and friends, to Jewish history and mythology, and to the worldwide Jewish community. Of these, the linkages between holidays and family is the strongest and most often mentioned by the teens when discussing the meaning of holidays in their lives. Holidays are – first and foremost – a time to bond with immediate family, to visit extended family, and to create and nurture family traditions, particularly around “traditional” foods:

- *Hanukkah first came to my mind. I have a very small family and all the rest of the Jewish holidays, we celebrate just me and my parents, or we go over to a family friend's house that's also Jewish. But Hanukkah is the one holiday that we spend with our whole entire family. And so, I think that's special. (Older, Low-connected Boston Teen)*
- *I think of all the little traditions that my family has around the holidays, and bringing all your family together, around those holidays. (Younger, High-connected Denver Teen)*
- *Well, during Passover I think it's kind of cool to have another one of those days where it's a sit-down big family meal. It's another one of those big food holidays where we're allowed to just sit and eat with our families and talk and just do it and it's kind of a cool feeling. (Younger, Low-connected Denver Teen)*

- *I think the only time I feel actually connected, I guess, is holidays. When I'm with my family for Shabbat or holidays and stuff. I feel sort of connected when my mom lights the candles on Hanukkah.* (Older, Low-connected Los Angeles Teen)

Beyond connecting with family, a number of teens – mostly higher connected – also articulated other levels of meaning contained within Jewish holidays, whether the history behind them, the connections to a larger community and people, or the feeling that holiday celebration lifts one above daily routines and concerns:

- *Holidays kind of force you to stop and think and not focus on the craziness of everyday life, just focus on the point of the holiday and why you're there, and the fact that you are there and how lucky you are to be there with your family or your friends or whoever you're with.* (Younger, High-connected Boston Teen)
- *When I think of Christmas I just feel like it's a holiday for big businesses to make money. But Jewish holidays I feel like they're more spiritual. You go through something; each of them has their own type of personal endeavor part of them. Also if you're going through Passover or you're fasting or something you feel like there's a whole bunch of other people that are also doing it. When you know other people are doing the same stuff you feel more connected with them, you're going through similar situation as them.* (Younger, High-connected Los Angeles Teen)
- *I can connect with people, with a community, with some traditions and some history, some culture. I think that's why I like celebrating certain holidays, because when I do celebrate them it reminds me that, "Yes, I do have a culture, and yes, I do have this thing I'm able to identify with." And it's nice.* (Younger, Low-connected Atlanta Teen)
- *The story of Passover is really very cool, no matter where your Jewish faith might stand. It's awe-inspiring to consider our history and the things that we've gone through to get where we as a people are today.* (Denver Teen, from survey response)

While these teens were able to share deeper personal associations of the holidays, particularly among the lower-connected teens there were also a fair number of blank stares or incorrect responses when asked to name less well-known holidays (such as Purim or Sukkot), or articulate the meanings behind

them. For some of these teens, the meanings behind these celebrations was very vague, including the one teen who commented, “well, on Hanukkah, we light the candles and my grandma, she says a set of words. I dunno. If she would say it to me, I would be reminded. But I couldn’t tell them to you because I forget. I enjoy saying it. I dunno why. It’s kinda weird.”

There were also a number of teens from interfaith families who clearly celebrate and value holidays from both traditions. And there was yet another group of Jewish teens, not from inter-faith families who perform customs from other faiths, as one older, lower-connected Los Angeles teen shared, “For Christmas, instead of putting a regular star, we put a Jewish star on top of the tree. So that’s fun.”

Compared to holiday celebrations, Shabbat observance is a far less prevalent occurrence for most of the teen participants (or more accurately the teens who participated in this study). Those who do celebrate Shabbat regularly with their families – generally the most highly-connected teens – describe it as a source of relaxation and family bonding, though they also acknowledge sometimes feeling constrained by the need to remain home on Friday nights. For other teens, Shabbat, though it may be an infrequent event or only part of their camp experience, still offers opportunities for reflection and connection which may be enhanced because of their rarity:

- *Every Friday night we always light the candles and say the prayers and eat Challah and have a good dinner. I don't usually get that much family time in general, so it's nice to finally be able to sit down on Friday and relax and just enjoy the day. I just like it, I don't get to relax the rest of the week, everything's just rushed. You just slow down, everything's more relaxed you just do whatever. I like that.* (Younger, High-connected Boston Teen)
- *My mom like never does anything really Jewish but occasionally she'll bring home a challah or something, like once every year. And then she'll be like, it's Shabbat so I brought home like a challah, but really we never really do anything except like once a year like randomly.* (Older, High-connected Boston Teen)

- *I celebrate Shabbat like every few weeks. I like it because you think back on your week, how you want to improve on yourself for the next week, and I think it's just a really good time to reflect and kind of prepare yourself.* (Younger, Low-connected Denver Teen)
- *We are usually all busy with stuff on Friday nights. But when we're all together, we light candles and have a nice meal all together.* (Older, High-connected Denver Teen)
- *We don't celebrate Shabbat at my house, really. But at camp, we do. And that's I guess the tradition that I like.* (Older, High-connected Denver Teen)
- *I love Shabbat because my mom makes really good food and this week my parents are inviting my friends. Sometimes we invite people who aren't even Jewish to celebrate Shabbat with us and like it's fun. You feel like you're in Israel. I feel like I'm with my family that lives in Israel* (Younger, High-connected Los Angeles Teen)
- *I don't celebrate Shabbat every Friday, but my grandparents, they live in Delaware, whenever we go and visit them, we always celebrate Shabbat. I feel like it's a nice change. Even though we don't celebrate it every Friday, I still like doing it. I feel like it's something we get to do at my grandparents' house.* (Younger, Low-connected Atlanta Teen)

Even though many Jewish communities and institutions are today experimenting with alternative forms of Shabbat observance – e.g. yoga or meditation, celebrations in nature, “Shabbat Slams” – the teens clearly saw Shabbat observance in traditional terms involving family dinners and synagogue (or camp celebrations, which was its own category), whether or not they actually engage in these activities.

Bein Adam L'Chavero/a - The Ethical Dimension	Jewish Teens develop positive and strong <b>friendships</b> . Jewish Teens develop strong and healthy relationships with their <b>families</b> . Jewish Teens develop significant <b>relationships with mentors, role models, and educators</b> . Jewish Teens are able to articulate an <b>ethical responsibility based in Jewish wisdom</b> .* Jewish Teens develop and enact a <b>moral obligation</b> to their fellow human beings.*
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\*These outcomes will be addressed in the later section on “Adam L’Olam - The Global Dimension,” as the focus group findings overlap with those regarding doing good, volunteering, and Jewish values of Tikkun Olam.

## Friendships

As with most adolescents, the Jewish teens strongly value their friendships and peer relationships. Being with friends makes up a significant part of their experience in school and during sports and other afterschool activities. “Hanging out with friends” was the top response when asked to identify favorite pastimes. Most of the teens across the groups indicated that they have both Jewish and non-Jewish friends, and some highlighted the diversity of their peer groups:

- *I go to a Charter School so everyone is different, and I have a group of friends that are some Jewish, some Catholic, and some – I don't know what they are but they're from India.... We don't really think about it or talk about [religion] that much. But when they all came to my Bar Mitzvah they thought it was really cool. (Younger, Low-connected Boston Teen)*
- *-I have a Muslim friend, I have a Mormon friend.  
-I don't know all the religions of my friends.  
-I have some who are Christian, and I don't know what some of them. I just know they're not Jewish.  
-I have a couple of Mormon friends.  
(Younger, Low-connected Denver Teens)*

A number of teens felt that their Jewish friendships – often formed through camp or youth groups – were somehow different from their friendships with non-Jews. This theme overlaps with the idea - discussed further in later sections on Jewish community and peoplehood - that Jews have special bonds with each other that produce greater comfort and familiarity. As suggested in the quotes below, for these teens the difference comes from not needing to explain about one’s culture and background, and/or the sense that there are things that can be talked about with Jewish friends that non-Jewish friends just wouldn’t relate to in the same way.

- *Some of my best friends are people I've met at an all-Jewish camp. Those were the friends I had during a hard time I was having at school, so camp a really good place for me to go and kind of feel safer. (Older, High-connected Boston Teen)*
- *I think you can connect with your Jewish friends more because you have more to talk about. If you have a Christian friend, and the holidays are coming up, and they talk about what they got for Christmas and you talk about what you got for Hanukkah it's a little bit weird. But then if you have a Jewish friend you can always just say, "Oh my first night of Hanukkah I got this," and you don't have to explain. (Younger, Low-connected Denver Teen)*
- *I have a lot of Jewish friends who I feel like I can discuss many things within that I can't with my friends at school. And when I'm with my Jewish friends it makes me feel like these people here, I can talk with them about some of the stuff about my religion. But with my friends in school it's not bad, they just get confused whenever I talk about something that has to do with my religion and I have to explain it to them and I don't have to do that with my friends from synagogue and camp. (Younger, High-connected Atlanta Teen)*
- *With my Jewish friends, I know we relate about the holidays and stuff. With that, my Christian friends are like – Whatever. They're like, "What is Shabbat? What's this? What's that?" I have to say my Jewish friends are a little nicer than my Christian friends, because they know me and I know them, and we can talk, sometimes, about our religion instead of my other group of friends, who are Christian. I don't really know much about them, in terms of religion. (Younger, Low-connected Atlanta Teen)*

## Family

Most of the teens described positive relationships with their families, both parents and siblings. Many of the statements related to families came in the context of Shabbat and holiday celebrations, when bonding with both close and extended family is a goal and a highlight (as discussed above in the section regarding the Jewish Calendar). Teens also cited their parents as primary forces in their Jewish activities and choices. In the case of less appealing activities – such as synagogue and Hebrew school – this was often framed as something “forced”

upon them by parents or done because parents “expect” them to participate. Even so, a number of activities that started as obligations then became ones that the teens chose to continue – or at least were willing to continue in order to make their parents happy – suggesting that parental expectations are not always seen as negative or cause for resentment. One younger, low-connected Atlanta teen said about Hebrew school, “My parents make me go, but I feel like if I didn't have to go, I probably would still go, just because – even though it's not the most fun thing in the world, it's still a good experience, and you learn things.”

The influence of parents also extends to teen's peer connections, although the teens themselves might not make that connection. Because it is generally parents who make the initial decision to send children to Jewish camp or encourage them to participate in Jewish youth groups – two of the primary places that Jewish friends are made – the opportunities teens have to form valuable Jewish friendships (of the type described in the above section) are in fact often outgrowths of their parents' Jewish identity, values and choices.

Parents were also identified as a primary source of Jewish identity and values, along with Hebrew school and camp. In discussions of values related to doing good in the world and giving Tzedakah, a number of teens cited parents' actions and commitments as being inspirations for their own desire to contribute to the world. Among the teens from interfaith families, those who identified more with Judaism than with other religions often did so because of the connections they felt with their Jewish parent. As one younger, low-connected Los Angeles teen explained, “Only my mom's side is Jewish, so for me I like being Jewish because it's something that my mom did, and I like seeing what she did and doing something that she also has always done in her life.”

### Role Models and Mentors

Only a few of the teens identified adults other than parents who serve as role models or mentors in their lives, such as rabbis, youth group leaders, or camp

counselors. For those who do have such relationships, they valued these adults for being “wise,” “someone to talk to” and offering Jewish knowledge in a “cool” and interesting way. One younger, high-connected Denver teen identified offering guidance as a core role of Jewish clergy and leaders: “I think in the Jewish community, if you're having troubles, you can rely on a rabbi or somebody to teach you, to help you with the situation.” Another Denver teen (older and low-connected) shared a very different view, explaining that his personal beliefs and identity made him feel less connected, rather than more connected, to potential mentors in the Jewish community:

*I think that's an interesting question and this kind of relates to the whole idea that Jews accept each other and the Jewish community is always there for you. Because I feel like I've looked into Jewish mentoring programs and stuff like that. My mom has offered to look into stuff like that. And I've rejected it because I feel like there are expectations among Jews for what a Jew is. And that depending on certain things about you, that you will be less accepted. Like, for example, in my politics, I wouldn't identify as pro-Israel. That doesn't mean I don't like pro-Israel Jews. It just means that I feel like some groups of people will be like, “What? You're not – you don't?” I'm queer. I don't think that there's a large – actually, my Jewish community is an exception, I have a lesbian rabbi. But that's like the one really queer Jew role model I have. And she's had a different experience than me. I don't know, everything's just kind of different. So that's why I feel like I don't have access to mentors or role models.*

Bein Adam L'Makomo/a – The Spiritual Dimension	Jewish teens develop the skills that allow their <b>spiritual selves to flourish</b> . Jewish teens develop a language to <b>grapple with and express their personal and spiritual journeys</b> .
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Although the concept of “spirituality” was not one that immediately resonated with most of the teens – many of whom struggled initially to wrap their heads around the concept – when encouraged to contemplate and discuss the subject, many were eventually able to articulate their ideas with a measure of depth and

thoughtfulness, though it is important to emphasize that the moderators needed to significantly prod the teens before they opened up on this topic. The teens shared a diverse array of perspectives on what spirituality meant to them, from ideas that touched on traditional Jewish concepts of God, prayer, and holy times and spaces, to those – like the spirituality found in nature or meditation – that seemed to be influenced more by secular American culture. The majority of the teens agreed that spirituality is ultimately a personal experience, that one can be spiritual without being “religious” or adhering to a particular set of beliefs, and that no-one’s spirituality is better or more “correct” than anyone else’s. As one older, high-connected Denver teen expressed, “Everyone has their own different definition of spirituality. And to some people it's being really religious, and other people being moderately religious. And wherever you fall on that scale is your own opinion. And spirituality reflects, or really depends on what you do.” This perspective fit squarely within the teens’ overall pull towards universalism and reluctance to articulate anything that would suggest that they saw themselves as “better” than non-Jewish peers.

For the teens that connected spirituality with aspects of Judaism (in both the High and Low connected groups) the associations ranged from Bar/Bat Mitzvah, to God and prayer, to experiences in Israel, camp or youth groups. For higher connected teens these experiences were sometimes identified as ones that provided time and space to step back and reflect, and/or opportunities to connect with something beyond oneself, be that family, community, tradition, or God (however God is defined) history. But for lower connected teens in particular, language articulating such concepts related to spiritual practice or belief was barely present.

### Connections to Prayer/Synagogue

- *I wrote [in response to a prompt posed by the focus group moderator] “preparing for your Bat Mitzvah” because whether or not you have had a strong sense of spirituality in the past, preparing for something like that kind of forces you to connect with it because you're reading it and you're*

- analyzing it, and you're really thinking about it, and it really forces you to think about everything. (Younger, High-connected Boston Teen)*
- *I think Judaism's sort of structured spirituality. Like the prayer thing, you believe in God. When I think of spirituality, I also think of a presence that was there. I didn't choose to go to Temple for the first time and I didn't realize what I was saying in Hebrew, reciting prayers, but saying it I believe in a presence that is there. (Younger, High-connected Boston Teen)*
  - *I don't really go to services that often. But I guess what I think about is we usually go on Rosh Hashanah. And that kind of like, a time to reflect on the past year and such. And it's usually a spiritual kind of time for me. (Older, High-connected Denver Teen)*
  - *Synagogues, sometimes. Feeling into the moments and praying. If there's ever a point in the service where he's like, "Take a moment to reflect or talk to God," I take advantage of that and be a part of that, and I have a conversation. (Younger, Low-connected Atlanta Teen)*

#### Connections to Tradition/History

- *For me it was going to the Western Wall. It was just like seeing young people and old people, and people would cry and right when they see it. That spiritual moment. Especially like touching and feeling the history. (Older, Low-connected Atlanta Teen)*
- *I thought of anything that you use your soul in. So that would be prayer or reading the Torah, reading the Bible. (Older, Low-connected Los Angeles Teen)*

#### Connection to Community

- *Havdallah at camp. It's like the whole camp is there and you're all just like, you're altogether and everyone is so happy and it's just kind of like that's my favorite thing. Even if you don't know the words, you sway with everyone and feel connected. And I think that's something that you don't necessarily feel during a typical service when everyone's kind of sitting in their own seat or you're doing some kind of activity, or something like that that doesn't necessarily bring everyone together. (Older, High-connected Atlanta Teen)*

#### Connections to God

- *When I think of spirit, I think of a presence that you can't see, but something's still there and can be helpful, and I feel like that's God. (Younger, High-connected Boston Teen)*
- *I do believe that there is a God. I don't really believe that he has that effect on every single thing that ever happens, but I don't know. I'm not really sure what I believe in the terms of like how the world came to be. But I think there is some power that we have been praying to. (Older, Low-connected Boston Teen)*
- *I think of my grandpa. He passed away in 2008, but what I think about it is—so, God is someone who they always say is looking down on you. And I was thinking of my grandpa just looking down on me. I mean, I always think of him and associate him with God, 'cause of looking down. (Younger, High-connected Denver Teen)*

Teens who described a more secular spirituality also identified spiritual experiences as providing time for personal reflection and connection to “something greater,” the difference being that the sources of the reflection and connection were not rooted specifically in Jewish tradition or community:

- *For me, going to gymnastics or going to volleyball, for me that calms me down. And for me, you could almost say that's spiritual in a way, especially in gymnastics because it's more of an individual sport. And if I'm having a bad day, I could literally go and flip and get all my energy out and that in a way could be spiritual. (Younger, Low-connected Boston Teen)*
- *I think in nature. When you're up high in the mountains or even just down in camp just in the woods somewhere, you feel that peace. You feel this thing that feels spiritual or connected, but you don't have to feel religious at all. (Older, High-connected Denver Teen)*
- *I really feel when I'm on the soccer field. Which is like, I feel like it's a really weird place, but it's where I like to go to think. That's when I feel most connected. (Older, High-connected Denver Teen)*
- *Meditation. It's a good way to connect with your inner self. (Older, Low-connected Los Angeles Teen)*
- *I felt spiritual most recently because my sister passed away. I need to figure out a way to kinda process, taking in, accept it more. So I had to look at it in that way. From the spiritual way. So that made things a little easier. (Older, Low-connected Los Angeles Teen)*
- *Just like, the meaning of life, beyond human knowledge. When you're spiritual, I guess that you're trying to connect with that and you're striving*

*to know more about life and about life's purpose. To connect to find something, "Capital S" Something. (Older, High-connected Los Angeles Teen)*

Even though many teens were able to discuss their spirituality and describe spiritual experiences, most also said that the term "spirituality" was not one that they used or found especially relevant to them. Instead, they preferred the terms "connection" and "reflection" to describe the two dimensions of outwardly and inwardly oriented spirituality.

**Core Question Three: To Whom and for what am I Responsible in This World?**

Bein Adam L'Kehillotav – The Communal Dimension	Jewish Teens understand the <b>power and potential</b> of being a part of a <b>community</b> . Jewish Teens feel connected to their various <b>communities</b> . Jewish Teens are empowered to <b>make a difference in the civil societies</b> in which they live.
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Community was a concept that resonated strongly for the teens (even if, like "spirituality," it isn't a term they would use except when prompted). Most see themselves as part of many different overlapping communities, including school, neighborhoods, sports teams, camp, synagogue and the broader Jewish community. Not all of the teens find their community in Jewish settings, but those who do often experience those environments as being particularly close, welcoming and supportive. Teens often used words like "accepting," "belonging" "safe," "supportive" and "always there for me" when describing close-knit settings that they had strong connections to, some of which were Jewish (in particular Jewish summer camps). Most of these sentiments were more attributable to close friends than any other factors such as role models or the (Jewish) ethos of that setting:

- *Being Jewish makes you feel like part of a community. I really felt accepted at my camp. And also, I don't really attend Temple as much as I want to. But, I feel like whenever I do, it's always very accepting*



- environment. There's always people to talk to, always new people to meet. The rabbi is very welcoming. (Older, Low-connected Boston Teen)*
- *I think that camp has to do more with community, just the way it's set up. If you get something out of it, you get something really deep out of it. It's a profound sense of belonging and friendship. (Older, Low-connected Denver Teen)*
  - *I'm in the marching band at my school, and we're all real close friends. We spend whole days together and go out in competitions, but just all of us as a school community, are just one big happy family. But in my opinion I think school isn't as close a community as camp is, 'cause I spend 24/7 with those guys at camp. (Older, High-connected Denver Teen)*
  - *When I'm at camp I feel completely different than when I'm here. It gives me more of a sense of what the community is really like and how everyone really treats each other. And I think it brings that aspect of the community part out to a much greater sense. And it just gives me a sense of – I don't know how to say it – but I feel more connected and more safe around people. Safe is the wrong word, but more comfortable around people. (Older, High-connected Atlanta Teen)*  
*I know for a fact the Jewish community is always there for me. And I can't imagine anyone no matter what you're interested in or your beliefs, being excluded. (Older, Low-connected Denver Teen)*
  - *Being Jewish makes me feel like I have more confidence because having the whole community behind you in whatever you want to do just gives you an extra push or support. (Younger, High-connected Atlanta Teen)*

On the other hand, there were some teens (particularly lower-connected Los Angeles teens) who felt very differently about Jewish community, seeing the synagogue in particular as a place where they did not feel they could be themselves, or felt disconnected because they did not share the same knowledge or levels of observance (which also relates to the section below on feelings of connection to fellow Jews):

- *When around other Jews at services and stuff, it does almost make me feel less Jewish and less connected to them because I don't really do as much as probably most people would. So that almost makes me feel less Jewish just because – or, less connected at least because I don't really do all the things that they would do. So I might not always understand what they mean by something they're saying. So that just sort of makes me feel a little less connected to them. (Younger, Low-connected Los Angeles Teen)*
- *When I do attend services, I sort of feel like I have to tone down a bit. I can't be quite as crazy as I can be at times with my friends. I have to be a*

*little bit more polite, sitting still and quiet ...At school I feel like I can still be myself more because there's break when I'm just hanging out with my friends. (Older, Low-connected Los Angeles Teen)*

<p>Bein Adam L'Amo/a - The Jewish People Dimension</p>	<p>Jewish Teens develop a strong sense of <b>connectedness to their fellow Jews</b>.</p> <p>Jewish Teens develop their relationship to the <b>land, people, and State of Israel</b>.</p> <p>Jewish Teens develop the <b>desire and commitment to be a part of the Jewish people</b> in the future.</p> <p>Jewish Teens <b>learn and appreciate rituals</b> that allow them to participate in various aspects of Jewish religious, spiritual, and communal life.</p>
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Connection to Fellow Jews (Present and Past)

The sense of having a special connection to fellow Jews, expressed predominately by higher connected teens, was closely related to their feeling part of the Jewish community and less about the global Jewish people per say. Many higher connected teens described a shared understanding and common ground with other Jews and being able reach out to and connect with Jews wherever they are:

- *Even if I dislike some of my fellow Jews, I feel like I have to stand up for them if people are treating them in a mean way. Because we're the same. We're connected. (Younger, High-connected Boston Teen)*
- *[Being Jewish] kind of gives you a common bond with a lot of people, especially since a lot of the time that you can feel like some of the people you know in your life like closely and maybe friends at school don't really understand some stuff the same way that you do, so you have this like common ground of things that like only you can connect with. (Older, High-connected Boston Teen)*

- *I like being able to do things with other Jewish people and share common traditions and beliefs and stuff. And I like being in a group with other people that share common things with me. (Older, High-connected Denver Teen)*
- *Being Jewish, I can feel like I can connect with other people that are Jewish. Whether or not we're friends, it just feels like we have an automatic connection. (Older, Low-connected Los Angeles Teen)*
- *When you're Jewish there's always someone to help you or support you. If you visit a city and you know absolutely no one in the city, if you can find a shul chances are you can find someone who'll give you a warm Shabbos meal for instance. Which I think is really cool, there are a lot of religions where you don't know someone then you're pretty much out of luck. (Younger, High-connected Atlanta Teen)*
- *There's something about just being with other Jewish people, being with other Jews and other Jewish teenagers –there's something just so welcoming. It's such a powerful community that it's just so much – I feel like it's warmer than just the average people, teenagers. (Older, Low-connected Atlanta Teen)*

There were also a few teens (generally lower-connected) who resisted the idea that Jews should feel differently about Jews than about other people, seeming to be drawn to contemporary American ideals that favor diversity and universality over particularism. One younger, low-connected Los Angeles teen expressed this feeling by emphasizing the diversity of her friendship groups:

*I don't think it really matters that much. I have friends who are Jewish. I have friends who aren't Jewish. I've been friends with almost all of them since kindergarten. I don't really see how it makes a difference. I invited all of them, Jewish and not Jewish, to my bat mitzvah. So really it's just never really made that big of a difference to me. I connect equally well with all of them.*

An older, low-connected teen in Atlanta rejected the idea that the targeting of Jews made the recent terrorist attacks in Paris particularly upsetting:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Atlanta focus groups in January 2015 were held less than a week after a series of terror attacks in the environs of Paris, carried out by affiliates of Al Qaeda's Yemen branch. The last of these incidents involved the siege of a kosher supermarket in the 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris, where an armed assailant entered, took customers and employees hostage, and killed four people.

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*I mean obviously I'm horrified at what happened, but I don't know if I necessarily like feel worse because they were Jewish. Because I feel like all human life is or should be valued as the same. Does that make sense? Because I mean the loss of any life is awful regardless of whether or not they're Jewish.*

Nevertheless, some of the teens in Atlanta (the only community in which the focus groups took place after the January attack in Paris) did feel a particular connection to and empathy with the Jewish victims. One younger, low-connected teen was able to easily relate her experiences as a Jew to the similar lives and experiences of Paris Jews before the tragedy:

*These were people who, although they were French, probably had a similar upbringing to what I did. They probably went to temple. They obviously were shopping in a kosher supermarket, so they probably are kosher. They did Shabbat with their families. They probably celebrate Chanukah. They do similar stuff to what I do, and when you can see yourself in a person who has been the target of a hate crime, it's really, really an awful feeling.*

In the groups that took place before the Paris attacks, a number of teens spoke of the connection they felt to Jews throughout history, and the respect they had for Jewish communities of the past who had faced challenges and persevered:

- *I just feel like being Jewish, our ancestors struggled so much with maintaining a strong identity or even identifying themselves as Jewish at all. And I feel that in our modern society, even though there's still some discrimination against Jewish people. In middle school, I definitely struggled with that. But, I just feel like I have to embrace it because I if don't, then I'm just disrespecting everything that my ancestors worked for. (Older, Low-connected Boston Teen)*
- *Being Jewish makes me feel special. That I was born into this specific group of people that have been through so much and still thrive. (Older, High-connected Denver Teen)*

Finally, it is important to stipulate that the special connection to fellow Jews described by some teens was, on the whole, balanced by a firm commitment to universalism. Even higher connected teens who strongly value their Jewish

connections expressed appreciation for their diverse groups of friends and concern about global issues (see Core Question Four below), showing that the two perspectives are not mutually exclusive for this population.

### Perspectives on the Holocaust

As the last quote above suggests, the Holocaust continues to resonate for Jewish teens as a critical part of the Jewish experience. Because the Holocaust is a subject taught in many American schools during middle and high school, most Jewish teens are knowledgeable about the Holocaust even if they haven't studied it in Jewish educational settings. In one focus group the mention of the Holocaust sparked an animated discussion in which the teens compared books they had read on the topic and resources for learning more about it. One Los Angeles teen shared how she met a Holocaust survivor while performing community service through her school. Although she described the encounter as "random" (likely because it did not happen during a specifically Jewish-focused activity), it was still memorable enough to become part of the discussion:

*For a community service thing I do for my school club, we got to deliver food for Thanksgiving, to people who don't have a family to spend Thanksgiving with. And we met such cool people doing it. Like we met this one woman who's a Holocaust survivor. And it was totally random, I know. It was just an experience that was cool.*

A few teens in a number of groups did express some frustration that the subject can seem too prevalent in discussions of Jewish history and identity – particularly if they had been singled out for their Jewish connection to the Holocaust during public school classes. One younger, high-connected Atlanta teen said, "I feel like every time you're in a Jewish discussion, everything associated with Judaism, the Holocaust always comes up as if it has to because being Jewish means carrying the baggage of the Holocaust." Another participant in that group was quick to agree, but pointed out that this emphasis on the tragedies of the past can also be used to inspire and encourage the community today: "But that's the amazing thing, we're still here today, a lot of Jewish people are here, we're still strong. We

keep the legacy going. And that's kind of why I feel like the Holocaust somewhat gets brought up a lot. Because we're still here today.”

As a Jewish-related topic often first encountered in public schools, learning about the Holocaust can be an experience that uniquely blends particularism and universalism, such that the moral lessons drawn from the Holocaust reinforce commitments both to the Jewish community and to the world at large. An older, lower-connected Denver teen shared the perspective that the Holocaust ultimately had a positive impact both through raising awareness about the plight of the Jews in the world, and by inspiring Jews to care for themselves and others:

*It was horrific. It's a horrible event in our history. But if you think about it, in a horribly ironic way, it actually did benefit the Jewish people, not that, obviously – not that. But for our generation, and for generations beyond us, because of the horrible things that Hitler and the Nazis did to the Jews, we have – in a way, we actually have a better chance of growing as a religion. Like, for our entire history, we have been prosecuted and hated and prejudice against and so many different things. And it sort of came to a head with the Holocaust. It was the biggest Jewish – I guess you could call it extinction event in our history and it opened a lot of people's eyes to our situation. And as horrible as it is, if it didn't happen, where would we be now? Coming from that, we as a people kind of learned how to carry yourself and advocate for yourself and advocate for others.*

### Connection to Israel

The discussions of Israel were among the most varied in perspectives. Israel was, for some teens, a “homeland” that is a source of connection, meaning and pride (though also concern about the violence there), and for others a place both geographically and emotionally distant, and/or a source of tension because of the public perception of Israel or feeling that one had to defend Israel's actions. As might be expected, teens who had visited Israel tended to have the first reaction, while those who had not made up more of the second group – although there were teens who felt connected to and positive about Israel even though they had not (or not yet) been there. A few teens focused on Israel's historic purpose as a

place of safety and refuge for Jews, expressing comfort in knowing that Israel would be there for them if they needed it.

### Sources of Connection to Israel – History, Technology and a Place of Refuge

- *When I think of Israel I think about the Torah and how many different places in Israel have such Biblical significance, and I imagine people living their lives in those different places. And I'm descended from those people. This is also my home. (Older, High-connected Boston Teen)*
- *I wrote "advanced technology" and "innovative" because a lot of times, when we think of Israel, we think of the spiritual aspect because that's what we're taught about in Hebrew school. But in science and social studies classes recently, we've been studying technology and medicine and that kind of stuff, and Israel has actually played a very big role. They have a lot of big scientists that work there, and they really help the world in ways that we wouldn't think that they would. (Younger, High-connected Boston Teen)*
- *I think even if you haven't been there you probably have like a close spiritual connection to it, you've heard about it and you might have family there, you probably brought it up one way or another. So it's one of those places that when you probably go to, you'll probably feel like another home. (Younger, High-connected Denver Teen)*
- *I think there's such a connection between the Jewish people and Israel because of all the violence we've had and the trouble we've had protecting it. It's just like a protective thing. Israel is really the only place where we we'll be Ok and face then whatever it is to be Jewish. Like if there's ever a time of trouble in the U.S., I know I can always go to Israel. And I don't have that anywhere else. (Older, Low-connected Atlanta Teen)*

### Feelings of Disconnection and Distance from Israel

- *I wanted to write home [to describe Israel], but I have Polish and Soviet Russian lineage or whatever, which probably at some point traces back to Israel. But, I really just feel like it's an origin point and so I'm indifferent towards it. I'd like to see the wall – Wailing Wall or whatever. I think that's a cool idea in itself. But overall, I'm not super excited over Israel. (Older, Low-connected Denver Teen)*
- *I'm Jewish. But that's not my homeland. The USA's my homeland. We started there and diverged, everyone – just about everyone came from*

*there, at some point or another, and then spread. (Younger, Low-connected Los Angeles Teen)*

- *I'm from Austria, so I go there every summer and Israel's not really - I just don't have any personal connection to it. I don't have any reason to. (Younger, Low-connected Los Angeles Teen)*
- *I think if I was more into Judaism, I would love to visit Israel. And since I'm not that Jewish, it just doesn't seem that thrilling to me. (Older, Low-connected Los Angeles Teen)*

### Discomfort with Perceptions of Israel/Needing to Defend Israel

- *The Israel-Palestine thing is going on in the media a lot. And a lot of people—it's become trendy to be anti-Semitic now, so everyone's like, free Palestine. And they're really not educated on it. And just going to Jewish school, you don't get that varying opinion of like, oh Israel's terrible because everyone believes in the Jewish state. So it's just different rather than when I talk to people who aren't Jewish, or who just like, believe everything they see, like Israel's killing people. (Older, High-connected Los Angeles Teen)*
- *Sometimes people think you're sort of a – I don't know, a representative of Israel even though you might not necessarily agree with Israel's policies, and the people who disagree with Israel's policies will target you even if you don't like, really even know what's going on there. (Older, High-connected Boston Teen)*

### Desire for Future Connection to Judaism

Focus group participants were asked to share a general description of what they thought their lives would be like at age twenty-five. Most teens are concerned first and foremost with being “happy,” which is often closely followed by or connected to being in strong relationship with their friends and family. Even after a two-hour conversation focused on Judaism and Jewish life, the majority of teens did not reference Jewishness in their descriptions of their older selves, instead focusing on college, jobs, and relationship status (e.g., “I’ll be married” or “I’ll have a girlfriend.”), which paralleled the focus in their introductory statements on school, extracurricular activities and friendships.



A small number of teens in each of the communities did share that they hoped to remain connected to Judaism through joining a synagogue, raising their children as Jews, and/or marrying a Jewish spouse. The teens who expressed this were from both the high and low connected groups, although the higher connected teens tended to be more definitive in their statements, such as an older Atlanta teen who stated, “I think I’m a really involved Jew and I want to give that to my kids, like the Jewish camps and the Jewish school, because my kids will be Jewish no matter what, because I’m Jewish.” Many of the lower-connected teens who did mention future Jewish involvement for themselves and their family were more tentative about these commitments, wishing to expose their children to Judaism but not pressure them to affiliate should they choose not to, such as this younger, lower-connected Boston Teen:

*I'm not sure if I want to have kids at twenty-five, but maybe when I'm thirtyish or around that age I'd like to, if I have kids, raise them Jewish – like the way I was taught or more. Definitely not less because I do enjoy it very much and I want to give my children a way to always have that if they want to. But I don't want to push them into it either like if they don't want it. I'll start them on their way and then if they don't want to then that's their decision, but I'll try to like raise them that way because I want to give them what I had.*

**Core Question Four: How Can I Bring about Change in This World?**

Bein Adam L'Olam/a - The Global Dimension	Jewish Teens strive to make their <b>communities, environments, and the world better places</b> . Jewish Teens are empowered to bring about <b>positive change in the world</b> . Jewish Teens are able to <b>articulate Jewish precepts</b> in their desire to make the world a better place.
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Nearly all of the teens had engaged in some kind of program or activity that encouraged them to contribute to society and effect positive change, whether through school-based community service, B’nai Mitzvah projects, youth groups, or with their families. Most described the experience of “doing good” as personally meaningful, even if it was done to fulfill a school or synagogue requirement, or for some teens, more altruistically as the expression of a

universal humanistic value. A number of teens were familiar with the Jewish concepts of mitzvah and tzedakah, and a few with Tikkun Olam (though not all used the Hebrew terms). Many who used these terms could give specific examples of how they saw these values enacted within, and saw their actions as embodying these values, particularly when done in the context of the Jewish community Jewish contexts:

- *I feel like Jewish people are kind of known for caring and doing good deeds. Even at our Temples there's boxes where you can donate money and food. (Younger, High-connected Boston Teen)*
- *Judaism emphasizes doing good a lot in specific ways, such as tzedakah. When I was little going to Hebrew school, every time we went there would be a coin box, a tzedakah box. We'd put coins in that, and then at the end of the year we'd pick a charity to give it to. (Older, Low-connected Boston Teen)*
- *Tikkun Olam is repairing the world. And what it means to me is taking care of the world, trying to put as much good on this world as possible, since after all I am here. Make the most of your life, I guess. (Younger, High-connected Denver Teen)*
- *I think that a lot of the foundation of Judaism, isn't just how to be a good Jew, technically, but how to be a good person. I think it teaches you – there's a lot about helping the needy, helping the poor, giving to those in need. (Older, Low-connected Denver Teen)*
- *In Reconstructionist Judaism there's the whole idea that the world started out as a pane of glass and it shattered. And then we have to take the shards and put them back together. So that definitely applies to doing good in a Jewish way. (Older, Low-connected Los Angeles Teen)*

At the same time, there were also a number of teens who strongly rejected the idea that doing good should be linked specifically with Judaism, perhaps feeling uncomfortable with the particularism that implies. Instead they took a universalist/individualist stance by asserting either that all religions are equally committed to improving the world, or that doing good is a personal choice not dependent on any particular religious commitment:

- *I don't think [Judaism and doing good] really necessarily go together at all. Because it says in Judaism that doing good is good, but it also says that in most other religions, so I don't think it's necessarily just for Jews.... I agree with she said, it's not just Judaism. I have heard that before where people associate being good with Jewish people. And I don't think it's necessarily true. I think that anyone can be good. It just depends on the person. (Younger, Low-connected Los Angeles Teens)*
- *I think, at their cores, all religions have a message of helping people and spreading love and understanding. That message does get skewed in certain cases, but I feel like, as a whole, that's kind of what religion is. It's supposed to better you. It's supposed to give you a connection to a higher power, to inspire you to do the right thing. I feel like Tzedakah is just one way of doing that for the Jewish people. In Islam, there's the Five Pillars. Christianity, they have Jesus, who is the role model for all things, spreading love and goodness. (Younger, Low-connected Atlanta Teen)*
- *I think that some people definitely think about Judaism when they do, like, good things. Personally I don't. I think about like what I'm doing and, like, why – like why I'm interested in it. Like I'm not really motivated by like Judaism to like do good deeds. (Older, High-connected Boston Teen)*

### **Conclusion – Key Overarching Themes**

As stated in the introduction, the findings from these focus groups are meant to be a guide for future research and practice, not a definitive statement about the lives of all American Jewish teens today. Nevertheless, certain themes emerged whose prevalence across the groups suggests that those who study and work with Jewish teens will likely find these to be common factors in teens' experience and self-identity (particularly as they echo findings from previous research on this population):

1. For the majority of the focus group participants, Jewish life and experiences seemed to play a peripheral role compared to other, more prominent aspects of their lives, as demonstrated by the lack of references to Jewishness in either their listing of favorite activities or their visions of their lives in the future.

2. At the same time, Jewishness is viewed by most of the teens – both higher and lower connected – as something positive that offers feelings of pride, connection and uniqueness.
3. The difference the teens feel about being Jewish in the context of the broader society can be a double-edged sword. Some teens expressed both pride in feeling special and unique, and discomfort when being Jewish makes them feel too different from peers – the positive and negative feelings were not mutually exclusive.
4. Many of the teens feel a special connection to fellow Jews and Jewish friends. Higher connected teens were more likely to extend those feelings to specific Jewish communities (e.g., synagogue communities), Israel, and Jewish history. Immersive Jewish experiences – especially overnight camp – offer a particularly potent source of connection and strong Jewish friendships.
5. Many teens both value their Jewish connections and express inclusive, universalist ideals that value diversity and assert that no one culture is better than others. While a few teens may have seen contradictions between these perspectives, most are comfortable with both and see little conflict between them.
6. For most of the teens, family connections are important and positive dimensions of their Jewishness, particularly when tied to holiday celebrations and traditions. Even when teens expressed that certain Jewish activities (such as Hebrew school) were done because of parental expectations rather than personal interest, they did not seem to resent their parents for placing these requirements on them.
7. Although issues of spirituality, prayer and God may not be innately comfortable and familiar topics, some teens, when asked directly about their spiritual lives, were able to discuss the subject with depth and thoughtfulness, suggesting that their spiritual growth and development is something that can be nurtured and encouraged.

In the next stages of this initiative, the findings from the focus groups will be used to develop a comprehensive survey to be disseminated to Jewish teens across North America. Together with the Core Questions, Dimensions and Outcomes framed by The Jewish Education Project, this wealth of research data will support and guide the work of the many educators, leaders and funders who are committed to creating programs to help Jewish teens thrive along all the dimensions of their lives.