Engaging Jewish Teens: A Study of New York Teens, Parents, and Practitioners was made possible by funding from UJA-Federation of New York and benefited from the input and support of the Experiments in Teen Engagement Task Force of UJA-Federation of New York and its forward-thinking chair, Hillel Wallick. We are particularly appreciative to our professional colleagues: David Bryfman, Bill Robinson, Tova Garr, and Nike Silberstein at The Jewish Education Project, and Daniel Fast at UJA-Federation.

The research would not have been possible without the cooperation of the rabbis, educators, administrators, and lay leadership at the congregations that participated in the study. We also thank the members of the Youth Professional Panel, who made certain that the research was grounded in reality.

A special thanks to Linda Benesch, who compiled the literature review on American and Jewish teens as part of the Lily Safra Internship Program of the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute at Brandeis University. We are grateful for the contribution of our colleagues at the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies: Matthew Boxer and Graham Wright who added their technical expertise to the analysis and our student assistants who helped field the surveys and enhance response rates. As always, we owe a debt of gratitude to our editor Deborah Grant and to Leonard Saxe, Director of the Center, for their invaluable assistance in the development of this report.

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Executive Summary

UJA-Federation of New York is reprising an idea dormant for the past decade. The idea, simply put, is that the community has an opportunity and obligation to engage teens in Jewish life in a way that is meaningful and powerful. To that end, the Experiments in Teen Engagement Task Force of UJA-Federation of New York (ETE Task Force) was created. In collaboration with The Jewish Education Project, the ETE Task Force seeks new answers to the longstanding questions of who our teens are and how Judaism and the Jewish community can remain important to their lives through high school. The Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University was funded by UJA-Federation of New York to carry out research to inform the ETE Task Force’s planning.

Engaging Jewish Teens describes Jewish teens, their everyday reality, and the factors that contribute to, or detract from, their engagement in Jewish life. Its purpose is not simply to check our beliefs and assumptions, but to open a conversation about Jewish adolescents and the possibilities for stimulating their Jewish sentiments and captivating their imagination.

Method¹

The study employed multiple surveys in order to view Jewish teens and their relationship to Jewish life from three perspectives: that of the teens, their parents, and communal professionals involved in the work of teen engagement.

The surveys were web-based and administered in waves between March and June 2011. The teen sample was drawn from lists of 9th, 10th, and 11th graders who celebrated a bar/bat mitzvah in synagogues in Brooklyn, Manhattan, Nassau County, or Westchester between 2006 and 2009. Knowing that all of these teens had started on the bimah at age 12 or 13, the purpose was to find out how many had continued with Jewish education and involvement and how many had left the path.

Response rates on each survey were 50% or more. Results come from 1,125 parents, 344 teens, and 244 youth professionals. The teen and parent surveys include many of the same questions so it was possible to compare the two points of view. The survey of youth professionals is based on Quality of Work Life measurements and replicates an earlier study from the 1990s.

The research benefited from a Teen Professional Panel, convened under the auspices of The Jewish Education Project. The panel, comprised of 12 outstanding youth professionals from across the spectrum of youth movements and work environments, consulted on the design of the research and carried out face-to-face interviews with teens. Results helped us understand the importance of a “special

¹ Methodological details are available at http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/noteworthy/EngagingJewishTeens.html and http://www.ujafedny.org/
teacher” at school, the early formation of the close friendship circle, and the continuation of Jewish home practices during a time when the teen’s involvement in Jewish activities has dwindled or disappeared. These and other insights were incorporated into our survey instruments and informed our interpretation of results.

Findings

Teens and Their Parents

The selection method produced a sample of Jewishly-educated teens from affiliated families; in other words, those most likely to become or remain engaged. Almost all of the teens in our sample have had some form of Jewish education and celebrated a bar/bat mitzvah. Over two-thirds attended a Jewish preschool. Over half have attended a Jewish summer program and over half have visited Israel. About two-thirds currently receive formal Jewish education, either in a Jewish day school, Hebrew high school, or other part-time program.

The parents seem well positioned to direct their children toward Jewish life. The great majority had some type of formal Jewish education growing up, attended a Jewish overnight camp, and visited Israel. On average, they are assuring that their teens receive far more formal Jewish education than they themselves did as adolescents. Over 80% say that being Jewish is very important in their lives today and that it is very important to them that their child have a strong Jewish identity. Moreover, the parents ensure that the family is together for Jewish holidays, whether lighting Hanukkah candles, celebrating the High Holidays, or holding a Passover seder, which the vast majority do every year.

The parents’ Jewish practices, however, do not extend to attendance at religious services, Shabbat dinners, or engagement in activities sponsored by a synagogue, JCC, or other Jewish institutions. Fewer than half of the families regularly engage in these activities. About a third of the parents do not feel their child’s involvement in a Jewish community is very important and over half do not feel Jewish ritual is very important for their child. These parents, it should be noted, are synagogue members and relative Jewish “elites.”

Reality of Teens’ Lives

School dominates the daily lives of adolescents. Teens spend most of their waking hours at school and place academics at the top of the list of what is important in their lives and what concerns them most. Over 90% say getting into a good college is very important to them; over 80% say that doing well in school is a great issue or problem in their life. School lives are generally positive. Most of the teens have close friends in their classes and a teacher that they respect and admire. In terms of the academic experience, few are bored and many, albeit fewer than half, are very challenged by their classes. Teens view having good friends as the most important aspect of their lives. Importantly, almost a fourth have few or no close friends who are Jewish. About a fourth have mixed friendship circles and just over a half have
friendship circles that are predominantly Jewish. The Jewish nature of their friendship circles appears to be set by 9th grade.

Virtually every teen is engaged in at least one extracurricular activity and over half hold at least one leadership position. Teens were asked to name the one extracurricular activity in which they are most involved. Sports appear at the top of the list and Jewish activities at the bottom. The main reasons teens choose these activities are that they are fun and give them opportunities to learn new things and develop skills. The presence of friends or likeable adult leaders and the contribution of the activity to their college application, albeit important, are in the second tier of the list of attractors. This finding holds equally for Jewish and non-Jewish sponsored activities. When it comes to their Number 1 activity, the teens are drawn by interest, enjoyment, and even passion for the particular activity. This motivation largely explains why only 7% cite a Jewish activity as their top involvement.

Teens are busy. Close to half are very stressed about school. Over half are very concerned about finding “free” time and getting enough sleep. And even though parents are far less worried about their “over-programmed” teen, the time demands of school and extracurricular activities are fundamental to the teens’ reality.

Teen Jewish Involvement

Though not their top involvement, 45% of the teens in our study participate in an organized Jewish activity such as a youth group. The primary factors are related not to friendships or to aspects of Jewish identity, but rather to the synagogue. Teens with at least ten years of part-time school education (most of which we can assume was in a synagogue setting) and teens whose families attend synagogue-sponsored events are more likely to participate in youth group than are other teens.

Most parents know about various Jewish-sponsored opportunities for their teens. By and large, the teens, too, are aware of what the community offers and have a positive view of it. Almost all are familiar with one or more Jewish youth organizations. The great majority of respondents wrote positively about how these organizations provide opportunities for involvement and leadership, help people in need, create community and friendships outside of school, and incorporate Jewish content. A small minority had negative comments that referred to Jewish organizations as too religious or not religious enough, too pushy, exclusive, cliquey, or unfriendly.

From the teens’ perspective, the decision of whether or not to participate in a Jewish activity is almost entirely in their hands. Some 73% of parents say they have at least some influence on their teen’s choice of activities, but only 38% of teens say likewise. It is possible that the parents and/or the teens are over-estimating their own influence on these decisions.

Teens’ Jewish Identity

Qualitative data show the teens to have positive feelings about being Jewish. Their feelings are grounded in an appreciation for the sense of community, connection to other Jews, and Jewish tradition and culture, most especially holiday
celebrations with family. Like most American Jews, their views are not unqualifiedly positive and they also express negative feelings about antisemitism, Jewish stereotypes, religious services, and divisiveness within the Jewish community. At the same time, the quantitative data reveal that fewer than half of these teens very much feel part of the Jewish people or connected to Israel. Having a strong Jewish identity is very important to about half of them, but the sentiment generally does not translate into an interest in ritual observance or organized Jewish activities. Jewish identity and participation in Jewish life appear at the bottom of the list of what is important to them in their lives. Many give high importance to family and to making the world a better place, but they do not attribute their sense of personal or societal right and wrong to Jewish teachings.

Teen Engagement Practitioners (TEPs)

There is no unitary definition for teen engagement work and our sample of practitioners shows great variety: volunteers and paid professionals, full- and part-time employees, those in jobs fully dedicated to teens and those spending a fraction of their time on this population. Jobs differ in sponsorship, denomination, and position within the organization. Other than a shared mission to engage Jewish teens, there may be few commonalities among TEPs when it comes to their responsibilities, job design, and the like.

Most of the practitioners are mature, married, and well-educated in terms of both secular and Jewish education. Three-quarters had experience at a Jewish overnight camp and a similar percentage were involved in a Jewish youth group during high school. For many the motivation for their work may have started in their childhood home: 60% had at least one parent who was a lay leader or professional in the Jewish community. Women outnumber men in our study (58% versus 42%), a division that mirrors the gender imbalance found throughout the Jewish sector.

Quality of Work Life. The quality of work life of the Teen Engagement Practitioners mirrors that reported by youth professionals in the 1990s. All in all, 84% of the TEPs are satisfied with their current jobs. Their highest level of satisfaction is with the chances they have to accomplish something worthwhile, and commensurately, almost all say that they are making a difference in the lives of young people. As well, over 90% say that their organization encourages them to be creative and to experiment with new ideas. Creativity is the hallmark of informal, experiential education, and it is thus not surprising that support for creativity and experimentation is strongly correlated with overall job satisfaction.

Nonetheless, over 45% of the TEPs in our sample are somewhat or very likely to leave their current position in the next two years. High turnover among TEPs was identified in prior research and is well known in the field. At issue are low satisfaction with opportunities for advancement, supervision, and pay. These items imply that youth work is not designed as a long-term career.

Importantly, outside of age, the number one predictor of the likelihood of turnover is unsatisfactory supervision. Even where
job structures do not permit career tracks and where resources do not permit better salaries, employers could do more to provide the kind of supervision that improves the TEPs’ work experience, performance, and longevity on the job.

**Programming.** The greatest programming challenge for TEPs is competing against academics and extracurricular activities for teens’ time and attention. Few report that the resources they have for accomplishing their goals are “very adequate” whether these concern staffing, technology, space or, most especially, funding. TEPs feel highest levels of support from co-workers, rabbis, and educators in their organizations. They feel the lowest levels of support from the parents of teens.

**Vision for the Future.** The predominant vision of the TEPs for their program five years from now includes “thriving” and “dynamic” programming that engages teens, makes them feel part of a greater Jewish community, and prepares them for college and beyond. For some, the vision includes added resources of space, funding, and staffing, all of which they believe will make a difference in their program’s future success.

**Conclusion**

Findings are based on a sample that is disproportionately affiliated and, therefore, should be viewed as the most positive description of the Jewish teen population. Nonetheless, the Jewish community is failing to reach one-third of these teens. Beyond this sample are untold numbers of teens equally untouched by the Jewish community. Efforts must be redesigned and redoubled not only to do more for the affiliated teens but also to reach those on the margins.

There are several pieces to the puzzle of teen engagement in Jewish life: the place of extracurricular activities during high school, the role of friends, parents, teen engagement practitioners, and the synagogue. Each of these has strengths and weaknesses in terms of its potential role in helping to solve the Jewish teen engagement problem. Synagogues, for example, should be a way to tap into a talent pool of youth professionals and to gain access to large numbers of Jewish teens. We estimate that at least 16,000 teens are known to the synagogues within the four geographic areas of our study. At the same time, the synagogues’ readiness to embrace the teen agenda is questionable as evidenced by their post-bar/bat mitzvah retention rates, their reluctance to participate in the teen study, and comments made by the TEPs who work in congregational settings.

Steps can be taken to move parents toward greater concern with their teens’ engagement in Jewish life, to improve the work lives and performance of the Teen Engagement Practitioners, and to energize the youth movements and synagogues to embrace a new teen agenda. Past experience suggests that these steps, however important, are unlikely to produce a sea change in teen engagement. They would limit efforts to current institutional structures and would have little impact beyond the realm of the affiliated.

Teen engagement may be a “wicked problem” and, as such, requires what Good to Great author Jim Collins calls BHAG: “Big Hairy Audacious Goals.” The community needs a multidisciplinary problem-solving process that can generate new thinking and action. The purpose is to seek big ideas—powerful concepts that can mobilize energy and drive a social
movement. These ideas may already exist and, if so, the first purpose of problem solving is to uncover them. They might harness the teens’ wide ranging interests and talents and enormous energy. Or they might change the bar/bat mitzvah so that it becomes more of a launch pad and less of a graduation. Or they might capitalize on teens’ curiosity about the world and take advantage of the global nature of the Jewish enterprise. Or they might emphasize the application of Jewish values to life. Or they might concern teen empowerment, healthy development, or life success, to name just a few possibilities.

The challenge for the community then is to move quickly and audaciously from ideas to action by creating a profound Jewish experience that touches young people and becomes a normative or expected life opportunity. The community will know that it has succeeded when the child on the bimah is not only relishing the moment of becoming a bar/bat mitzvah but is also looking forward to what awaits him or her as a Jewish teen.
The Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University is a multi-disciplinary research institute dedicated to the study of American Jewry and religious and cultural identity.

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