
Being A Jewish Teenager in America: Trying to Make It

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December, 2000



Acknowledgments

The study was sponsored by Brandeis University's Institute for Informal Jewish Education, along with the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies. Support for the conduct of the study was provided by the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies and the Mandel Foundation. We are particularly appreciative to Professor Joseph Reimer, Director of the Institute for Informal Jewish Education, for his support and feedback on the development of this study. The help of Lesley Litman who served as liaison to participating congregations is also acknowledged. The authors also wish to thank Professor John Mollenkopf and Victoria Allen of the Center for Urban Research at CUNY and Andrew Weiss and Judith Stein of SRBI for their assistance with this project and to Carla Miller who served as a research assistant. Professor Larry Sternberg and other colleagues at the Cohen Center provided invaluable feedback and assistance in the development of the study and this report.

We also thank Shira Palmer-Sherman, who served as a summer intern at the Cohen Center and helped to compile data for the present report. Several months after completing her internship, Shira was struck by a car and killed. Her loss is felt deeply by those of us whose lives she touched.

This report is a publication of the
Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Jewish Adolescent Study (JAS) is a large-scale investigation designed to develop a comprehensive picture of the attitudes and behavior of contemporary young Jews – in particular, to understand how they view themselves both as Jews and as teenagers in the American environment. The study is a systematic inquiry into the contexts, Jewish and American alike, that shape Jewish identity and affiliation among contemporary Jewish teenagers.

Methods

Nearly 1,300 *b'nei mitzvah* ages 13 to 17 from Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and independent congregations were surveyed. One parent of each child was also interviewed. The respondents came from three regions of Eastern Massachusetts selected to allow generalizability to regions of varying Jewish population density. For purposes of comparison, an over-sample of Jewish day-school students was included.

To provide an interpretive context for the teenagers' self-reports, both parental and peer influences were examined, as was the institutional impact of synagogues and day schools. To ensure the validity of findings encompassing such a wide range of variables, a high response rate from teenagers of diverse levels of Jewish commitment was sought and obtained.

Findings

The findings of the JAS capture the transition from *bar/bat mitzvah* to the end of high school and show how embedded Jewish adolescents are in their American context. Young Jews lead complex lives as they navigate between childhood and adult life. Specific findings include the following:

Overall Jewish Involvement

The study documents a decline in participation in Jewish activities from the time of becoming a *bar* or *bat mitzvah* through the high-school years. Whereas nearly all adolescent respondents participated in some Jewish educational, volunteer, or recreational activity in 7th grade, just over half did so in 12th grade. An increase in participation in Israel experience programs and Jewish employment opportunities throughout the high school years fails to offset the broader pattern of decline, which is due primarily to cessation of formal Jewish education.

School

School dominates the daily lives of adolescents by monopolizing their time, concentrating numerous activities under one roof, and creating a community where it is critically important to succeed and gain recognition. For JAS respondents, academic demands

increased as they progressed toward graduation from high school. Although many felt stressed by academic demands, most were successful in meeting those demands. More than 70% planned to attend an elite university. Interestingly, those with the highest academic aspirations also tended to be those for whom being Jewish mattered a great deal.

In general, however, the respondents' positive attitudes toward their secular education did not carry over to their Jewish education. Thus, for the most part, these teenagers took their secular schoolwork seriously and enjoyed school. In contrast, their attitudes toward pre-*bar/bat mitzvah* Hebrew school were negative. Boys rejected their supplementary Jewish education - and, with it, continued involvement in Jewish life - more decisively than did girls. Actual participation in formal Jewish education showed a decline predictable from these attitudes, with the same gender differences persisting, though it may be surprising that so many students continued at all given the extent of the negative feelings. Overall, weekly participation declined steadily from 60% in 7th grade to 22% in 11th grade.

Extracurricular Activities

The overwhelming majority of teenagers (86%) participated in school-based extracurricular activities – a level of participation that varied little by grade or gender. Sports, arts, and other clubs occupied a good deal of the teenagers' free time. Through 10th grade, those who were more involved in extracurricular activities were also more likely to participate in formal Jewish education. Both the rate and frequency of participation in Jewish youth groups were modest.

Paid Employment

The percentage of adolescents engaged in paid employment during the school year doubled from 36% to 71% between 7th grade and 12th grade. In the early teens girls worked mainly in child care, boys in lawn and pet care, but both genders gravitated to well-paying sales jobs in high school. Job choices were driven more by rate of pay than by personal satisfaction. Teaching jobs, including those in the Jewish community, attracted some interest.

Summer Activities

Summer offered an opportunity for Jewish involvements to claim time and attention otherwise preempted by school. Teenage summer activities mainly involved camp, work, and travel, with summer jobs (including camp jobs) replacing summer camping as the teens grew older. Jewish programs were among the five most popular summer activities for students in all grades, and the proportion of teenagers who participated in those programs increased throughout the high-school years. The vast majority of participants in Jewish summer programs came from households that made continued Jewish education a priority.

Participation reached a peak with the Israel experience programs offered after the sophomore and junior years, then declined sharply after graduation. The impact of the Israel experience on participants' religious opinions and on their connection to Judaism depended greatly on parental Jewish commitment. Girls were more interested in Israel experience programs than boys and were more likely to report that their connection to Judaism was enhanced by such educational trips.

Parental Influence

Most of the teenagers came from intact, well-to-do families. As a rule, they enjoyed good relations with their parents and followed their example in living a moderate version of a Jewish life that did not include rigorous observance of rituals. Parental influence was felt especially strongly in the decision to continue formal Jewish education. Just over half of the parents either required or strongly encouraged post-*bar/bat mitzvah* Jewish education, and this parental mandate or support was the second strongest predictor of actual enrollment. (Age was the first.) Parental attitudes also strongly influenced exposure to and impact of Jewish summer camps and Israel experience programs.

Endogamy and Jewish Continuity

Nearly two-thirds of the adolescents thought it was important to raise their own children as Jews, a value they shared with their parents. On the question of endogamy, however, there was a more complex interaction between parental and other social-environmental influences. Only one-third (32%) of the teenagers thought it "extremely" or "very" important to marry a Jew, as compared with 60% of their parents. In line with a general cultural drift away from in-marriage, the intergenerational value consensus was much stronger when parents thought Jewish endogamy was irrelevant than when they thought it essential.

Regional Variations and Peer Networks

Parents living in areas of high Jewish population density were more likely to be endogamous and to have mostly Jewish friends than those in areas of low Jewish density. With the exception of Jewish day-school students, teenagers had more ethnically heterogeneous social networks than their parents.

Jewish population density significantly affected teenagers' friendship patterns. Again with the exception of Jewish day-school students (whose close friendships and romantic involvements were almost exclusively with other Jews), teenagers living in high-density areas had a higher proportion of Jewish friends – especially school friends -- and were more likely to date only Jews than those in the other regions. Teenagers in areas of low Jewish density relied more on Jewish organizations for out-of-school friendships than those in other areas. Jewish immersion programs (e.g., summer camps, trips to Israel) were also likely to nurture friendships with peers not known through school.

Risky Behaviors

Rates of sexual activity and drug use (mainly alcohol and marijuana) were similar to those for comparable national samples of teenagers. Except for the youngest group, Jewish commitments appeared to have little influence on sexual activity and drug use.

The Search for Meaning and the Meaning of Being Jewish

Three-quarters of the teenage respondents cared seriously about a search for meaning in life. Among these, only 40% sought to find that meaning through their Jewishness.

For many of these teenagers, being Jewish was about remembering the Holocaust, countering anti-Semitism, being ethical, making the world a better place, caring about Israel, or feeling a connection to other Jews. But they did not implement their commitment to peoplehood, survival, and ethics through Jewish philanthropy, volunteering for Jewish organizations, or observing Jewish law.

Conclusion

Not surprisingly, the picture of today's Jewish adolescents that emerges from the JAS resembles that of two groups to whose influence Jewish adolescents are continually exposed – namely, their parents and their non-Jewish peers. The adolescents who responded to this survey care about being Jewish and about Jewish history and culture, but do not express this allegiance by engaging in practices that might set them apart from a largely secular, pluralistic culture in which they are trying to “make it.” Judaism is important to them, but only as it coheres or coexists with their aspirations for academic success, financial security, and social belonging.

Being A Jewish Teenager in America: Trying to Make It

“[S]ociety has two responsibilities towards its adolescents. The first is to support [the] search for the pieces of the adolescence puzzle that are still unknown. The second is to use the knowledge and the more complete understanding of this period of life to better facilitate and nurture adolescents’ development.” -- Ayman-Nolley & Taira (2000), p. 46

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a time of transition, experimentation, and change that often seems like a twisting highway driven on a rainy night. The teenage years are the path to adulthood and are filled with promise. Yet they are also replete with danger points as the child separates from parents and finds his or her way – indeed, as a whole generation finds its own way. Young people in the United States, living in an era of unprecedented peace and prosperity, have access to material and technological resources that enable them to expand their vistas in almost undreamable ways. Even so, adolescence is not a wholly safe or comfortable period of life, as shown by current rates of drug and alcohol abuse and other high-risk behaviors (Johnston et al., 2000; Kann et al., 1998).

To be sure, the preoccupation with the dark side of adolescence, epitomized by events such as the Columbine tragedy (see Aronson, 2000), highlights the half-empty as opposed to the half-full cup (Ayman-Nolley & Taira, 2000). Nevertheless, today’s teenagers show the strain of having to delay the beginning of their productive lives through an extended period of mandated schooling that, in many instances, may not meet their developmental needs (Hine, 1999). Added to this dilemma are others posed by their parents’ ever-increasing levels of prosperity and accomplishment. Finding one’s own path to a meaningful life, yet matching up to the success of the older generation, is no simple feat for teens whose daily pursuits and learning trajectories are often unsuited to their lofty ambitions (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999).

Jewish youth have a particular dilemma. They are two generations removed from World War II and the *Shoah*, perhaps the most difficult era in the history of the Jewish people. Young American Jews live in a society overfilled with material goods and devoid of the overt anti-Semitism that shaped their grandparents’ lives. The ways these young Jews define, or fail to define, their Jewish identity give us a glimpse into the future of the Jewish people. They also speak volumes about the future of our society and the place for spirituality in a sea of materialism.

Yet Jewish identity does not develop in isolation from other forms of identity. The Jews of the Diaspora have always had a dual identity, maintaining distinctive beliefs,

values, and traditions while taking on some of the coloration of their immediate cultural environments. By now relatively few Jewish-American adolescents live in communities with a majority of Jews. From the evidence of rates and intensity of participation in Jewish day schools, synagogue, and youth groups, most spend relatively little of their time in purely Jewish involvements. Instead, from hour to hour and from day to day they move back and forth between the Jewish and secular spheres, both of which contribute to shaping their identities. Therefore, the development of Jewish identity in the young must be understood in the context of the larger social and cultural environments in which young people live (Kress & Elias, in press), as part of the complex overall process of adolescent self-definition, which Erikson (1950, 1968) described (Kress & Elias, 1995, 1998).

To understand Jewish teenagers in the United States, it is necessary to understand some of the context of American teenage life. Undoubtedly, Jewish adolescents resemble their non-Jewish peers in some respects, even though their lives are conditioned by having Jewish ancestors and experiences. The present report is based on a large-scale study of Jewish adolescents designed to develop a comprehensive picture of the attitudes and behavior of contemporary young Jews. The goal is to understand how they view themselves both as teenagers and as Jews. This study was developed as a systematic inquiry into the contexts that shape Jewish identity and affiliation among contemporary Jewish teenagers. As part of the study, surveys were conducted with nearly 1,300 *b'nei mitzvah*¹ ages 13 to 17, from Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and independent congregations. One parent of each child was also interviewed. The respondents came from three regions of Eastern Massachusetts that were selected to allow generalizability to regions of varying Jewish population density. In addition, for purposes of comparison, the study includes an over-sample of Jewish day school students. The study was designed, in its content and sampling strategy, to understand teenagers' lives within the community contexts that shape Jewishness.

Young Jews, as the future of the Jewish community, have become an increasingly important focus of research and intervention efforts (see, e.g., Keysar et al., 2000; Sales, 1996). To anticipate what the future holds, and perhaps to intervene to alter its course, a number of efforts have been undertaken to understand how today's adolescents identify themselves in ethnic and religious terms. These efforts have focused on how young people are exposed to Jewish life and traditions, how they have been influenced by their involvement in Jewish life, and how likely they are to be involved in the Jewish community as adults. As secure, accepted members of a diverse, affluent society, are today's *b'nei mitzvah* setting aside their Judaism when they step off the *bimah*? Are the enticements of the dominant culture an alternative to Jewish identity, or do they provide new avenues through which this identity can be expressed? To what extent do the ties of tradition and community remain vital, and under what conditions can those ties be strengthened? Especially in the wake of the finding that Jewish identity typically is not fixed or linear in its development, but may fluctuate in intensity or change in emphasis

¹ Becoming a *bar* (male) or *bat* (female) *mitzvah* (*b'nei mitzvah*) typically occurs at age 13. To mark the passage to adult responsibility, the young person is formally called to the Torah, a *mitzvah* not applicable to minors.

(Horowitz, 2000), empirically based answers to questions such as these can guide educators in designing effective programs to engage Jewish youth.

The present study (the Jewish Adolescent Study [JAS]) was designed to broaden the context of research on adolescent Jewish identity by focusing on both the generic and Jewish aspects of teenagers' everyday lives, as well as their attitudes and future plans. To provide an interpretive context for the teenagers' self-reports, both parental and peer influences were examined, as was the institutional impact of synagogues and day schools. To ensure the validity of findings encompassing such a wide range of variables, it was considered essential to obtain a high response rate from teenagers of diverse levels of Jewish commitment.

In an attempt to understand the contexts that influence Jewish affiliation in adolescence, this report considers how teenagers' lives are structured by their schools, families, peer groups, and neighborhoods. It examines how teenagers use their free time and their summers, what they care about, and how they feel about themselves and their experiences with institutions in the Jewish community. In so doing, it recognizes how the experiences of boys and girls can be sometimes similar and sometimes very different.

The JAS was not designed to test specific hypotheses. The effort is to take a snapshot of Jewish adolescents in different communities and try to understand how they experience their lives. This study should not be regarded as a report card on the Jewish community's efforts to engage teenagers, although the data have clear implications for policy. Rather, it is hoped that this report will inform efforts to engage adolescents in the Jewish community with an awareness of the impact of other relevant community affiliations.

Background

Jewish Identity in an Open, Evolving Society

Concerns about Jewish identity and the continuity of the Jewish people were heightened when the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) of 1990 found a 52% rate of interfaith marriages among Jews by birth who married between 1985 and 1990, compared with 9% among those who married before 1965 (Kosmin et al., 1991). Although there has been ongoing debate (see, e.g., Cohen, 1998) about the validity of the estimate, there is no question that intermarriage rates have substantially increased compared to earlier eras. Even critics of the NJPS finding such as Cohen (1998) have developed estimates that indicate a 40-43% rate of intermarriage in the 1990s.

The data about intermarriage, in the context of the commonly observed diffusion of Jewish culture in the American Diaspora, have stimulated intense interest not only in the incidence and impact of intermarriage specifically (Phillips, 1997), but also in broader questions of the maintenance and transmission of Jewish identity and peoplehood. For example, in an investigation of "moderately affiliated" American Jews, Cohen and Eisen (2000) elicited personal narratives to study respondents' motivations and priorities. They found that, in keeping with the individualism of American society, moderately affiliated

Jews experience their Jewishness largely in private rather than communal contexts. Family, friendship, and personal reflection, not organizational and public activities, are the primary loci of meaning and expression for these contemporary Jews. For this group of Jews, spirituality is to be found in the home rather than in the synagogue. With respect to the socialization of the young, Cohen and Eisen found that the family is the center of Jewish observance and teaching and that parents play a critical role in shaping children's orientation to Judaism. External influences, in particular Hebrew school, are negative experiences and obstacles to involvement.

The NJPS has resulted in a series of studies about contemporary Jewish life in North America (cf. *American Jewish Society in the 1990s*, Goldstein & Kosmin, eds.), in which intermarriage is only one of the issues identified as threatening Jewish communal integrity. Thus, for example, Goldstein and Goldstein (1996) have analyzed the dispersion of Jews from traditional areas of residential clustering. Using NJPS data, they found that 62% of "core Jews" (i.e., those who were born Jewish and did not adopt another religion, as well as those who chose to become Jewish) lived in neighborhoods that they themselves described as not or only a little Jewish -- a finding with serious implications for Jewish identity and community. Nonmigrants and those who had migrated more than five years prior to the survey were more likely than recent migrants to live in neighborhoods with a strongly Jewish character. The migration of Jews has followed general patterns of migration in the United States -- namely, from cities to suburbs and from North and East to South and West. With the exception of the elderly, who often move from one Jewish enclave to another (e.g., from New York to Florida), migration is associated with settlement in areas of low Jewish density. Thus, the migration of young and middle-aged adults for personal and career reasons disrupts social networks, weakens communal bonds as well as organizational structures, and is likely to accelerate assimilation. Although there may be positive effects (e.g., bringing out leadership potential in individuals compelled to play an active part in creating local Jewish institutions), most commentators regard the dispersion of Jewish population as inimical to fostering community.

According to Goldstein and Goldstein (1996), children (especially teenagers) in migrant households were found to receive less Jewish education than those who had not migrated. Migration is associated with a greater likelihood of intermarriage, although this association is declining in strength among more recently married couples. Now that intermarriage is common and broadly accepted (see American Jewish Committee, 2000), intermarried couples no longer appear driven to move to escape the disapproval of their home community. Overall, the dispersion of Jews across the country, mainly to areas of lower Jewish density, has been associated with a decline in various measures of Jewish identity and an erosion of both personal and organized Jewish networks. At the individual level, the effects of migration on Jewish identity remain to be disentangled from those of the selective migration of less involved Jews. Nonetheless, neighborhood and regional variations in Jewish population density are a critical variable to be considered in studying the Jewish exposure, identification, and practice of the young.

In a fluid society characterized by constant change, it is not surprising that generational differences in outlook and behavior have emerged. Particularly on dimensions of religiousness, with changing opportunities to intermingle with others from different religious backgrounds, different patterns across generations can be expected to emerge. Cohen (1998), for example, tracked the evolution of key dimensions of Jewish identity in a national survey of American Jews participating in a consumer panel who were, in aggregate, slightly more Jewishly identified than a representative sample of the U.S. Jewish population. Cohen found that younger adults are just as religious as older adults, but are less ethnically identified. Whether trends such as these continue in the generation about to reach adulthood is an important question for research on Jewish adolescents.

The Adolescent Generation: Studies of U.S. Adolescents

American adolescents are among the most closely studied people in the world. Classic studies of adolescence include Conant's (1959) blueprint for large, bureaucratized high schools to accommodate the baby-boom generation, Coleman's (1961) report on the "adolescent society" of the 1950s, when teenagers valued organized social life more than academic performance, Havighurst et al.'s (1962) case studies of young people (in high school and five years later) growing up in "River City," Friedenberg's critiques of the assaults of advertising and the mass media (1959) and the high school (1965) on the process of identity formation in adolescence, and Goodman's (1960) depiction of American teenagers as "growing up absurd." Adult concern about teenagers (a word coined in 1941) and the conditions shaping them crystallized in the postwar era. It was then that what we now call the "teen years" – a lengthy period of unproductive, school-based preparation involving reduced contact with adults and a concentration of experience in a youthful peer culture – had been created by a Depression-era society intent on keeping teens out of the labor force (Hine, 1999). According to Hine, the age-based stratification of American society, increasing the gap between physical and social maturity and intensifying young people's dependence on their peer culture, has become even more rigid since mid-century. Thus isolated, teenagers have come under a microscope of societal and scholarly concern.

In terms of this focus, consider the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY). The NLSY interviewed more than 12,000 young people aged 14-22 beginning in 1979, and yearly follow-up surveys have explored numerous aspects of respondents' lives (U.S. Department of Labor, 2000). Areas covered by the survey include demographic characteristics, family background, aptitude and intelligence scores, high-school experiences, health, alcohol and drug use, illegal activities, attitudes and aspirations, work history, and migration. The annual Monitoring the Future survey (e.g., Johnston et al., 2000) encompasses questions about drug use, delinquent behavior, victimization, educational experiences, health, personality variables, interpersonal relationships, religion, politics, work and leisure, concern for others, and attitudes and values about subjects such as conservation, materialism, race relations, and social change. In Csikszentmihalyi and Larson's (1986) *Being Adolescent* study, "experience sampling" was used to study the daily lives of adolescents. A recent follow-up, the Alfred P. Sloan Study of Youth and Social Development, was a five-year longitudinal study of a racially,

ethnically, socioeconomically, and geographically diverse sample of American teenagers (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). Its conclusions parallel those of an adolescent health study (cited in Hine, 1999) that highlights parental engagement as a major factor determining young people's well-being. Finally, the Rand Youth Poll (also cited in Hine, 1999) is an annual marketing survey that attests to the economic power of teens.

Americans generally, not only Jews, are deeply concerned about the health and well-being of their children. In line with this concern, much of the research about adolescents in the U.S. is focused on the incidence and consequences of high-risk behaviors (drug use, sex, violence) – or, as in the case of the Monitoring the Future Survey, public attention is directed mainly to those areas. Some research is alarmist in tone; for example, a report by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1996) characterized half of all 10- to 14-year-olds as being “at risk” of ruining their lives and damaging society. Ayman-Nolley and Taira (2000) comment that adolescent risk-taking “may in fact be the other side of the very mechanism that brings about healthy and much needed change in our society: the change for which the `adults’ are not willing to take the risks” (pp. 45-46).

In a review of more than 2000 journal articles published between 1985 and 1995, Ayman-Nolley and Taira (2000) found that psychological research reflects a cultural bias to view adolescents as troubled, unstable, vulnerable, and often antisocial. Positive aspects of adolescent development (e.g., creativity) are underrepresented in this research, yet the literature does offer much evidence of normal teenage development. In research replicated internationally, Offer and his colleagues (Offer, 1969; Offer & Offer, 1975; Offer et al., 1981) have repeatedly found that about 15 percent of teenagers have serious psychological problems – the same percentage as adults – and that the “generation gap” has been exaggerated by the popular media. In a study of teenagers’ current difficulties in adjusting to the internalized pressures of an achievement-driven society, Schneider and Stevenson (1999) nonetheless reassure us that the “overwhelming majority of teenagers ... graduate from high school, do not use hard drugs, are not criminals, and do not father or have babies while still in their teens” (pp. 3-4). But we know less about this full range of normative teenage attitudes and behaviors than about the non-normative.

As background for understanding the issues investigated and the findings of the JAS about Jewish adolescents, several themes that emerge from research on U.S. adolescents should be noted:

- White American teenagers typically live in a suburban world of affluence and relative uniformity, a world created by their parents and grandparents (Gaines, 1998; Gans, 1967; Jackson, 1985). At the same time, along with their parents and grandparents, they have experienced a breakdown of communal life in favor of personalism and individualism (Bellah et al., 1985).
- Contrary to the popular image of adolescent rebellion and parental impotence, only 5-10% of families experience a significant deterioration in parent-child relations during adolescence (Steinberg, 1990). Moreover, contrary to Harris'

(1998) conclusions concerning the lack of parental influence on children, mothers and fathers exert a strong influence on adolescents' values, aspirations, and behavior (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999).

- In contrast to the predominantly secure, programmed lives of teenagers in the 1950s, when many high-school graduates moved immediately into clearly defined adult career and gender roles, adolescents in the 1990s and 2000s face a more complex, uncertain future, including the prospect of extended schooling after high school. More than 90% of high-school seniors expect to go to college, and more than 70% look forward to working in professional jobs. Many of them envision futures very different from their parents' model, but are unsure and anxious about how to negotiate what has become a difficult transition to adulthood (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). What they do know is that they must excel in the competitive school environment.
- With the possible exception of the family, no single institution does more to shape the lives of American adolescents than schools. Teenagers spend the majority of their waking hours inside a single institution, immersed in an age-stratified community of peers (cf. Eckert, 1989, who also notes exceptions to this pattern). Along with academic pressures, a variety of school-based extracurricular activities concentrates teens' social life within the institutional setting (Coleman, 1961; Hine, 1999). High schools constitute mini-communities with their own norms, sub-cultures and status hierarchies. Research has documented the power of schools to orient students positively toward the institution's goals (Eckert, 1989; Gaines, 1998). These include participation in extracurricular activities, which, as a demonstration of community spirit, confers status and popularity. In this regimented atmosphere, unstructured individual pastimes tend to be neglected. For example, fewer than 20% of tenth-grade students read for pleasure nearly every day (Zill et al., 1995).
- As they get older, adolescents spend more and more time in paid employment. More than 80% of U.S. adolescents work during their high-school years, typically 15 to 20 hours a week. They are more likely to work and they work longer hours than their counterparts 20 years ago or their counterparts in other industrialized countries. Although much of this work takes place in the summer, teenage employment during the school year has been increasing in recent years. This increase has been attributed to the greater availability of part-time jobs and an extension of business hours in the service sector, as well as school shift schedules that allow students more continuous working hours (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). Teenagers have thus been swept up into the U.S. work ethic. However, their exclusion from the productive adult economy has largely consigned them to work that lacks intrinsic or educational value. Although teenagers value some jobs for practical experience or to enhance their college applications, their principal goal is to earn spending money (Hine, 1999; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). Some research has found this teenage employment to have detrimental effects

academically and psychologically (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986). However, this view is not universally held (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999).

- Religious beliefs and values, whether merely asserted or deeply felt, appear to have a significant place in the lives of adolescents. More than half (58%) of high-school seniors reported in a national survey that religion was important to them (Bachman et al., 1997). In another survey, 76% of 13- to 17-year-olds said that they believed in a personal God, 29% believed that they had experienced the presence of God, and 74% prayed at least occasionally (Gallup & Bezilla, 1992). Attendance at religious services and the belief that religion is important in one's life are correlated with altruistic behavior in teenagers (Donahue & Benson, 1995). At the same time there is a decline in religious beliefs and practices during adolescence, especially in the transition to high school (Donahue & Benson, 1995). Notwithstanding the importance of religion in teenagers' lives, two recent studies of teenage conflicts (Hine, 1999; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999) barely mention religion or spirituality in their emphasis on school, work, and family. (Hine does characterize left- and right-wing religious revivalism among teenagers since the 1960s as a rebellious, subversive tendency.) It may be that religion and spirituality, whatever pull they may exert on adolescents, are not well integrated with their day-to-day activities and concerns, except (given the centrality of school in adolescent life) for those who attend parochial schools.
- Teenagers commonly engage in behaviors that carry significant risks. For example, among unmarried, white, non-Hispanic females aged 15-17 in 1995, 34% reported having had sexual intercourse (Abma et al., 1997). Alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs (especially marijuana, which some teenagers associate with alcohol and tobacco as not really a drug) are also very much a part of the teenage landscape. Thus, for example, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1996) survey data indicate that 31% of 12th graders reported regular drinking, while 25% reported illicit drug use. Among a group of 12th graders demographically similar to Jewish adolescents in the 1998 Monitoring the Future survey, 76% reported having been drunk at some point in their lives. Two-thirds (66%) had smoked cigarettes, one-quarter (26%) regularly. In this sample 65% reported some lifetime marijuana use, and half of those reported current use.
- The pressures and conflicts of teenage life are further reflected in a suicide rate which, between 1980 and 1997, increased 109% for 10- to 14-year-olds and 11% for 15- to 19-year-olds (Centers for Disease Control, 2000). There are indications that these rates have leveled off (and even declined for older teens) since the early 1990s. Nonetheless, whereas suicide was the eighth leading cause of death nationally in 1998, it was the sixth leading cause in the 5-14 age group and third among those age 15-24. Only accidents and homicides kill more 15- to 24-year-olds than does suicide (National Center for Health Statistics, 2000).

These data, and the characterizations of adolescent life they project, can serve as benchmarks for interpreting the findings reported below.

The Adolescent Generation: Studies of Jewish Adolescents

Only in the past decade has a substantial body of research begun to accumulate about Jewish-American adolescents, both in their uniqueness as Jews and in their typicality as Americans. From the data in the NJPS it is clear that Jewish families stand out from the general population in a number of ways (Keysar et al., 2000). A large majority live in intact two-parent families. These are small families, since few Jewish mothers have more than three children and most have fewer. When divorce occurs, fathers are much more likely to retain sole or joint custody than they are in the general population. Jewish adolescents grow up in relatively affluent households with well-educated parents. The combination of high incomes and small families enables parents to spend more on each child. For example, 38% of Jewish children attend private school, as compared with 11% of U.S. children overall. Stable families and high socioeconomic status together suggest well-being. As Kosmin and Keysar (2000) put it, "Jewish teens in the 1990s are a fortunate generation which has largely avoided the traumas associated with family breakup and residential dislocation..." (p. 5).

Regionally, young Jews are still clustered in the northeastern United States and, more generally, on the two coasts. Among the Core Jewish population in the NJPS, 41% live in the Northeast, 27% in the West, 20% in the South, and 13% in the Midwest. Migration, however, as described above, is altering these patterns. Whereas only 21% of the Core Jewish population of all ages lives in the western United States, 27% of those under 18 do (Keysar et al., 2000).

A major contribution to our understanding of Jewish youth is Keysar et al.'s (2000) extraction of demographic and sociological findings about children and adolescents from the 1990 NJPS data. Based on interviews of adult household members rather than the children themselves, this study examined how different environments and household structures affect long-term Jewish socialization, what institutional and community interventions are needed to supplement family socialization, and what ongoing trends in the demography and socialization of Jewish youth can be predicted. Jewish adolescents raised in traditional nuclear families are more likely to live Jewishly than those in single-parent households, and those raised in households observing traditional Jewish practices are more likely to socialize with Jewish peers and join Jewish activities. Parents mediate the relationship between children and the community. Because parental decision-making is the critical factor determining children's Jewish education, parents must be the primary targets of influence of community interventions. Yet even while the secularization of children's lives reflects the preferences of many younger Jewish parents, the parental monopoly of influence over children is eroding. Because the family alone cannot be relied on to transmit Jewish values in an era of dispersion and assimilation, the community can compensate through Jewish schools, camps, youth groups, community centers, and other institutions.

Citing Phillips (1997), Keysar et al. note that early socialization through informal Jewish education (specifically, two or more years of Jewish sleep-away camp or a Jewish youth group or an Israel trip during the teen years) can influence friendship and dating

patterns in a way that is associated with a marked reduction in intermarriage. The need for such socialization is intensified by Keysar et al.'s ten-year projections from the 1990 population data. NJPS 2000 may show, they predict, that as many as two-thirds of the children of Jewish parents are living in mixed families and that the number of "effectively" Jewish children has decreased by 25 percent. The numbers of children growing up in non-normative families and in areas of low Jewish population density are likely to increase as well. The researchers note that, given the growing size of the teenage population at the turn of the millennium, it is imperative that the organized Jewish community develops effective agents of socialization to reach teenagers when they are most likely to "drop out."

As distinct from this cross-sectional study based on adult interviews, Kosmin and Keysar's (2000) survey of Conservative Jewish teenagers and their parents in the U.S. and Canada have had a longitudinal dimension. As part of the North American Study of Conservative Synagogues and Their Members, the teenagers were first interviewed in 1995 during the year following their *bar/bat mitzvah*, at the age of 13 or 14. They were interviewed again in 1999-2000 at the age of 17-18. (A third wave of data collection is planned for their late college years.) In the first survey, Kosmin and Keysar's adolescents strongly resembled their parents in religious practices, attitudes toward Israel, and friendships with other Jews in their synagogue. On the other hand, they differed markedly from their parents in being less concerned about anti-Semitism, far more accepting of intermarriage, and much more likely to assert that belief in God was essential to being a Jew. As would be predicted from the convergence of gender roles both in the larger society and within the different streams of Judaism to varying degrees (including uniform training for girls and boys in Conservative synagogues), gender differences in the teenagers' religious attitudes were practically nonexistent (Keysar & Kosmin, 1997).

The follow-up survey confirmed and expanded upon these findings. This group of Conservative adolescents had an even higher level of family stability and family Jewish commitment than the national Jewish population sampled by the NJPS. Like that larger, more diverse sample, most of them saw Judaism as multi-dimensional, that is, as a religion, a peoplehood, and a culture. Confirming Cohen's (1998) finding about young adult Jews, these teenagers were more religiously and less ethnically oriented than the older Jewish generation. However, they were not very observant, and their level of religious practice fell off in their teenage years both from their parents' modest levels and from their own *bar/bat mitzvah*-age involvement. Moreover, their beliefs about religion (ostensibly formed by a Conservative background) changed, with fewer adopting the Orthodox position and more the Reform position (Kosmin & Keysar, 2000).

Still, they maintained strong personal Jewish involvements throughout their high-school years. Over 90% continued to go to synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and/or Yom Kippur, three-quarters were involved in some organized Jewish activities, and half participated in an Israel experience. More than half (55-60%) had some Jewish involvement into their senior year of high school, and 55% regarded marrying a Jewish partner as very important for themselves personally. Kosmin and Keysar conclude that, for those educated in Conservative synagogues, the concern that the *bar/bat mitzvah* will

be an exit from Jewish life is largely unfounded. Yet, as Saxe (in press) has noted, the declining level of involvement means that fewer of this already self-selected group are on a path to intense involvement in the Jewish community.

Kosmin and Keysar tested three possible causal explanations for the different levels of Jewish identity and engagement shown by these teenagers. Gender and region (within the U.S., leaving aside Canada) had no explanatory power. What did explain the differences was an experiential model that scaled various identity-building experiences into a hierarchy of intensity. This scale of intensity of Jewish socialization produced highly robust, statistically significant differences in most measures of identity and engagement.

A study with important implications for the development of Jewish identity and for adolescent programming was not a study of adolescents at all, but of American-born Jews aged 22-52 in New York (Horowitz, 2000). It did, however, ask these (predominantly young) adults to report about some of their experiences in childhood and adolescence. This in-depth study of the “connections and journeys” of American Jews showed that Jewish identity is not a static, all-or-none trait. Rather, it is dynamic, waxing and waning and changing direction in response to various influences. In this study 60% of the subjects experienced an evolution in their relationship to being Jewish. Moreover, for those who did not have the intensive early exposure to Judaism characteristic of an Orthodox upbringing, later voluntary experiences such as Jewish youth groups, Jewish studies or Hillel-like activities in college, and trips to Israel had a significant relationship to the development of Jewish identity.

These findings can only intensify the revival of interest in informal programs to involve children and adolescents in Jewish life (see, e.g., Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach, 1990; JCC Association, 1998; JESNA, 1998; Klarfeld & Sales, 1996). Although such programs can be expected to play a critical role, the importance of sound evaluation studies is evident. Studies of participation in youth groups, Jewish summer camps, and Israel experiences have had promising results, but few have measured the affects of such participation on adult Jewish identity (Sales, 1996). A study of 15 programs with acknowledged histories of accomplishment identified seven common factors in their success: staff leadership, group process, peer influence, Judaic substance, the impact of the setting, the amount of time participants spend together, and lay support (Alexander & Russ, 1992).

Israel Experience Programs

Israel experience programs have been a special focus of evaluation research – an emphasis likely to be heightened by the high-profile Birthright Israel initiative (cf. Post, 1999). These studies of a potentially transformative experience provide a window into the thoughts and feelings of Jewish teenagers, especially as to what can bring them into a closer relationship with the Jewish community. However, except for short- and long-term outcome comparisons, these studies are limited to participants; they do not constitute general-population data.

Research on Israel experience programs includes evaluation components built into the programs themselves (e.g., Cohen, 1994; 1995; Sales, 1998, 1999) and ethnographic studies of high-school trips that analyze the dynamics underlying successful experiences (e.g., Goldberg, 1995; Heilman, 1995). As summarized by Mittelberg (1999, p. xiv), this body of research indicates that the Israel trip “is a unique experience that connects American Jews to their past, to Israel’s present, and...to the future well-being of the Jewish people.” Nonetheless, as Mittelberg (1999) and Chazan (1997) note, much of this research only establishes an *association* between trips to Israel and an interest in Israel and the Jewish people. The effect of self-selection for the trips by those already more interested in Judaism must also be considered.

The encouraging findings of such research are part of the background and inspiration for the ambitious Birthright Israel program, designed to give many young Diaspora Jews an expenses-paid educational trip to Israel. An initial report on the experience of the first wave of participants (Saxe et al., 2000) indicates that the program had a very positive immediate impact, measured three months after the trip (it remains to track these findings longitudinally). By comparing participants’ attitudes before and after the trip and by comparing participants’ responses with those of non-participants, this study addressed the direction of causality in the association between visiting Israel and being engaged with Judaism and the Jewish people. It should be noted, however, that the Birthright Israel “gift” has been limited thus far to young people aged 18 to 26, somewhat older than the teenagers who are the focus of the present study.

Jewish Adolescents in the American Context

What is lacking to date is an exploration of the relationship between the Jewish and American aspects of the lives of adolescents. Few surveys of U.S. teens, the Jewish samples are too small for reliable findings. Studies of Jewish teenagers specifically, on the other hand, have been concerned almost exclusively with Jewish questions and preoccupations. There is much to learn from research that treats Jewish-American teenagers as both Jews and Americans, comparing their responses on general, non-Jewish questions to those of their non-Jewish peers and examining how their Jewish concerns and self-identifications may shed light on their secular ones (and vice versa). An index of the paucity of such research is Sales’ (1996) catalogue of studies of U.S. teenagers generally and Jewish teenagers specifically along various dimensions (e.g., demographics, adolescent development, views and values, religion). Although much useful research in both realms is found, typically the questions investigated are different, so that little direct comparison of findings is possible.

The most comprehensive survey of Jewish-American adolescents undertaken to date was conducted in Minneapolis (Leffert, 1997). A low response rate of 37% limited the applicability of the findings by skewing the sample toward those with high levels of engagement in the Jewish community. Nonetheless, the Minneapolis findings were generally consistent with the emergent pattern seen in other adolescent and adult studies. The adolescents who responded to the survey reported that they cared deeply about being Jewish and about Jewish causes (including Israel and the Holocaust). However, their concern was expressed not in synagogue attendance or ritual observance, but by

enthusiastic participation in family celebrations and social activities. They claimed that they prayed regularly, although not in the traditional communal context. They were impatient with denominational differences, integrated non-Jewish friends comfortably into their lives, and were open to dating and marrying non-Jews. At the same time, a substantial majority considered it important to raise their children as Jews.

Herring and Leffert (1997), who designed the Minneapolis study, interpreted the findings as confirming Fishman's (1996) concept of "coalescence" as an evolving form of Jewish identity. According to Fishman, whereas previous generations of Jews struggled to harmonize two different cultural realms – the American and the Jewish – today's American Jews increasingly do not even perceive a boundary between the two. Rather, the two value systems have merged, or coalesced, into one. Herring and Leffert also anticipated Cohen and Eisen's (2000) findings about adults when they noted that the Jewish identity of the adolescents surveyed in Minneapolis was centered more on self and family than on the larger community. Herring and Leffert concluded that "the American values of autonomy and individualism have become merged with the Jewish values of community and collective responsibility to produce adolescents...who have strong, personal Jewish feelings but who choose to exercise their faith on their terms and in their own ways" (p. 10).

An important supplement to these findings is provided by the JCC Maccabi Teen Survey (Sales, 1994). The respondents did not constitute a representative sample of American Jewish youth, since all were participants in an event that was both Jewish and athletic. A large majority (82%) came from in-married Jewish families, many with multiple attachments to the Jewish community. Notwithstanding this skew, all levels of engagement with Judaism and a range of denominational affiliations (one-third Conservative, one-third Reform, 9% Orthodox, and 17% "just Jewish") were represented, and the on-site administration made possible a nearly 100% response rate. The survey placed Jewish issues in the context of overall life issues, with questions about how the teenagers spent their time, what was important to them personally, what thoughts and concerns preoccupied them, and what social problems they wanted to help solve. Being Jewish was highly important to a majority (62%) of these teens, with holiday observances the main focus of their Jewish identity. Although they were very busy with homework and (58%) paid employment during the school year, nearly half (44%) were involved in formal Jewish education (afternoon or Sunday school). Developing skills and abilities and spending time with friends were of near-universal importance to them, and they expressed greatest concern over their personal future (college and career) and school performance. Concern with personal attractiveness rose while concern with substance abuse declined from 7th through 12th grade. Students also wanted to make a difference by being involved in social action. Half indicated that they wanted to do something about HIV/AIDS, followed by anti-Semitism (40%) and crime and violence (37%). The threat of nuclear destruction, critical to the previous generation, barely registered. The Maccabi Teen Survey has gained in importance insofar as key findings have been replicated in community surveys (Jewish Community Centers of Greater Boston, 1996; Leinwand, 1996; Research and Planning Group, 1997). These studies present a remarkably consistent picture of young people who are very busy with academic and social activities

associated with school, stressed by issues of achievement and time allocation, and interested (although not always active) in community service and social change. They care about being Jewish, but often do not express that allegiance through ritual observance or organizational activity (JESNA, 1998).

Present Study

Although researchers have learned a great deal about American adolescents, and about Jewish adolescents specifically, the foregoing discussion has identified significant gaps in this knowledge. We do not know enough about the positive activities and aspirations of teenagers, about how they see their lives and where their lives are going. In particular, we do not know enough about their potential for spirituality and for involvement in a community based on religious affiliation. There is also more to be learned about Jewish teenagers with respect to the variables considered in national surveys of teenagers. The present Jewish Adolescent Study (JAS) begins to fill these gaps in the existing knowledge base about Jewish adolescents by placing Jewish identity and involvement in the broader context of teenagers' lives. Specifically:

- The survey instrument focuses on issues such as school, extracurricular activities, popularity, and college plans. Questions about specific Jewish variants of general themes are embedded into each section.
- The context of teenagers' lives is assessed both in terms of parent and peer influences. To examine the influence of the family environment, teenagers' responses are matched with those of their parents. This allows a direct assessment of the relationship between parent and child. A sociometric questionnaire gathering data on each adolescent's closest friends allows for detailed description of the peer networks of respondents.
- A population of recent *b'nei mitzvah* from twenty synagogues and three Jewish day schools was surveyed, allowing the assessment of institutional impact on the lives of Jewish teenagers.
- The inclusion of a Jewish day school over-sample makes it possible to compare the social and academic contexts of these schools with those of the public schools.
- The successful effort to obtain a high response rate ensures participation by teenagers of diverse levels of Jewish commitment.

As described in detail below, the JAS surveyed teenagers who, by virtue of having been a *bar/bat mitzvah* in a Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist or unaffiliated synagogue, had some formal Jewish education and some involvement in a Jewish institutional context. From that baseline, the study explores the degree to which interest and engagement in both formal and informal Jewish education are maintained. In addition, the survey allows evaluation of the degree to which other activities (curricular and extracurricular, including paid employment) supplant or reinforce Jewish

involvements. Beginning with basic demographic information about who these teenagers are and the households they come from, the JAS compares their attitudes and practices with those of their parents in the areas of Jewish education, observance, and endogamy. It examines the Jewish and non-Jewish peer networks formed by teenagers in neighborhoods of different Jewish population density. It describes the dating patterns and prospective mating choices of respondents against the background of parental and other environmental pressures toward inmarriage or mixed marriage. It asks what being Jewish means to these young people and how that relates to their larger search for meaning in life. Finally, the survey examines teenagers' private behaviors, in particular, their involvement with alcohol and drugs, as well as their sexual activity. Gender differences are noted where they are significant. The findings provide a comprehensive account of the inner and outer experiences of high school-age Jewish-American teenagers.

STUDY METHODS

Study Population

The JAS attempted to survey a representative sample of adolescents, post-*b'nai mitzvah*, age 13-17. The sample focuses on households with teenagers who have become *b'nei mitzvah* in Boston-area (Eastern Massachusetts) synagogues over the past five years. The greater Boston area was chosen both for convenience and for the diversity of communities it contained. The sampling strategy was designed to develop research whose findings can guide policymaking in communities nationwide. Although a national sample of Jewish youth could have met the criterion of representativeness, it would have treated the teenagers in isolation from the community contexts that shape Jewishness. It was decided, instead, to focus on a limited geographic area that encompassed a diversity of Jewish communities.

Although often characterized as a community with a distinct character, Jewish life in the greater Boston area is notable for its internal diversity. The study capitalized on this diversity by selecting regions for analysis according to the density of the Jewish population. The goal was not to produce a sample that represented the Boston Jewish community, but to maximize the variance within a large metropolitan area and allow the data to suggest community-level effects that occur in communities of different sizes across the country.

The greater Boston area afforded a number of advantages, along with the wealth of local knowledge that could be drawn on at each phase of the study. Using data from the 1990 U.S. Census 5% PUMS and the 1995 Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP) Demographic Study (Israel, 1997), towns and regions in the Eastern Massachusetts area were classified as having a high, moderate or low Jewish population density. Relying on these data, along with the advice of observers of Boston Jewish life, three areas were selected based on the density of the Jewish population. Within each region, lists of every boy and girl who had become a *bar* or *bat mitzvah* at local synagogues over the past five years were procured. Only synagogues with education programs were included in the study.² The regions were selected not only to maximize variation in the density of the Jewish population, but also to ensure that each would provide a sufficient number of Jewish adolescents for the study.

Sampling and Interview Procedures

In an effort to obtain the number of respondents needed to achieve sufficient statistical power, in 18 of the 20 participating congregations the entire population of *b'nei mitzvah* over the past five years was contacted. In the two largest congregations this population was sampled. To ensure adequate representation of Jewish day school (JDS) students, an over-sample of students from Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and

² The practical implication of this limitation was to eliminate several *minyanim* that do not have a paid Rabbi or formal education program.

community day schools was added. Because of insufficient participation (explained in the Methodological Appendix), respondents from Orthodox synagogues and day schools were excluded from the analysis.

During the Spring and Summer, 1999, telephone interviews were conducted with parents of the teenagers included in the sampling frame.³ The calls had three purposes: first, to determine the eligibility of the teenagers in the sampling frame; second, to obtain parental consent to the teens' participation; third, to obtain interview data from the parents. The interview, which lasted about twenty minutes, gathered information on parental and household demographics, Jewish practice, and opinions related to items on the adolescent questionnaire.

After parental consent was obtained, a 12-page, machine-readable questionnaire was mailed to the teenagers. Included with the instrument and cover letter was a \$10 cash incentive ("honorarium"), "a token of our appreciation." The questionnaire (see Survey Appendix) was divided into the following sections:

- How you spend your time
- Being Jewish
- Values
- School, work and future plans
- How you spend your summers
- Opinions and feelings
- You and your family
- Your friends
- Private behaviors
- Teen Israel trip
- Comments and follow-up

Through the use of the cash incentive and follow-up mailings, extremely high response rates were obtained (87% of parents and 82% of adolescents contacted). The final data set consisted of 1,284 adolescent respondents from 1,118 households. (For further detail see Methodological Appendix.)

³ The interviews were conducted by a New York-based opinion research company (Schulman, Ronca, Bucavallas [SRBI]).

STUDY FINDINGS

Our initial premise was that Jewish teenagers are, first of all, adolescents, trying to make it as American youth. The goal was to understand how they viewed their lives and to what extent their Jewish education and experiences affected their lives generally as well as their participation in the Jewish community. These data were collected in the wake of the Columbine High School tragedy, a dramatic manifestation of the difficulties of American adolescence that were in the forefront of the minds of teenagers and adults. How the context of American adolescence shapes the lives of young Jews is the focus of this report.

Understanding Jewish Lives in Context: An Example

Consider the following statistics: As Jewish teenagers enter high school, the number who, over the course of a year, read even one Jewish book or story for pleasure drops from 62% to 49%. For those inclined to draw conclusions about the state of Jewish life among American Jewish youth, this might be taken as evidence of the proposition that *bar/bat mitzvah* marks a graduation from Jewish involvement rather than the start of Jewish adulthood. Such a conclusion would be misleading, however, because it ignores the broader context in which Jewish pleasure reading occurs. Many high school students, it turns out, stop reading anything for pleasure on a regular basis, Jewish or not. Weekly pleasure reading drops from 49% in junior high to 33% the first years of high school. In their Jewish lives as in their broader lives, teenagers are teenagers and will behave as such.

Domains of Achievement and Sociability: School, Extracurricular activities, Work

Academics

School exerts a powerful, even dominating influence on teenagers' lives. The students surveyed in the JAS are no exception to the general rule that teenagers' lives are centered around school. Success in school is important to Jewish teenagers. Most have had positive experiences with schooling: When asked how often they enjoyed the past year in school, 41% responded "Often" or "Always," compared to only 21% who responded "Seldom" or "Never." The remainder said they "Sometimes" enjoyed it. They also take their schoolwork seriously. Three out of four respondents reported that they never or seldom failed to turn in their assignments. A similar proportion (72%) said they never played hooky, although this varied greatly by age. Whereas only 9% of middle school students ever skipped a day of school without permission, 47% of high school juniors and seniors had. But even they reported engaging in such behavior only infrequently.

The occasional liberties taken by older students do not mean that school becomes less important as teenagers get older. On the contrary, the ability to judge which rules to adhere to and which to break is a mark of growing confidence in their own ability to make responsible decisions. This confidence is warranted, as the teenagers we surveyed

generally met growing pressures and increasing responsibilities with a seriousness of purpose that would make their parents proud. The average amount of time girls devoted to homework rose from 10.5 hours per week in grades seven and eight to 14 hours in grades eleven and twelve (see Figure 1). For boys, the comparable figures were 8.8 and 11.6. These students had good reason to study hard: the correlation between hours spent on homework and grade point average rose steadily from correlation that is not different from zero ($r = .08$) to a peak in grade eleven ($r = .46$; see Figure 2). Thus, the relationship between time invested and grades returned was negligible in middle school, but a major factor in academic success precisely at the time when college applications loomed largest.

Figure 1

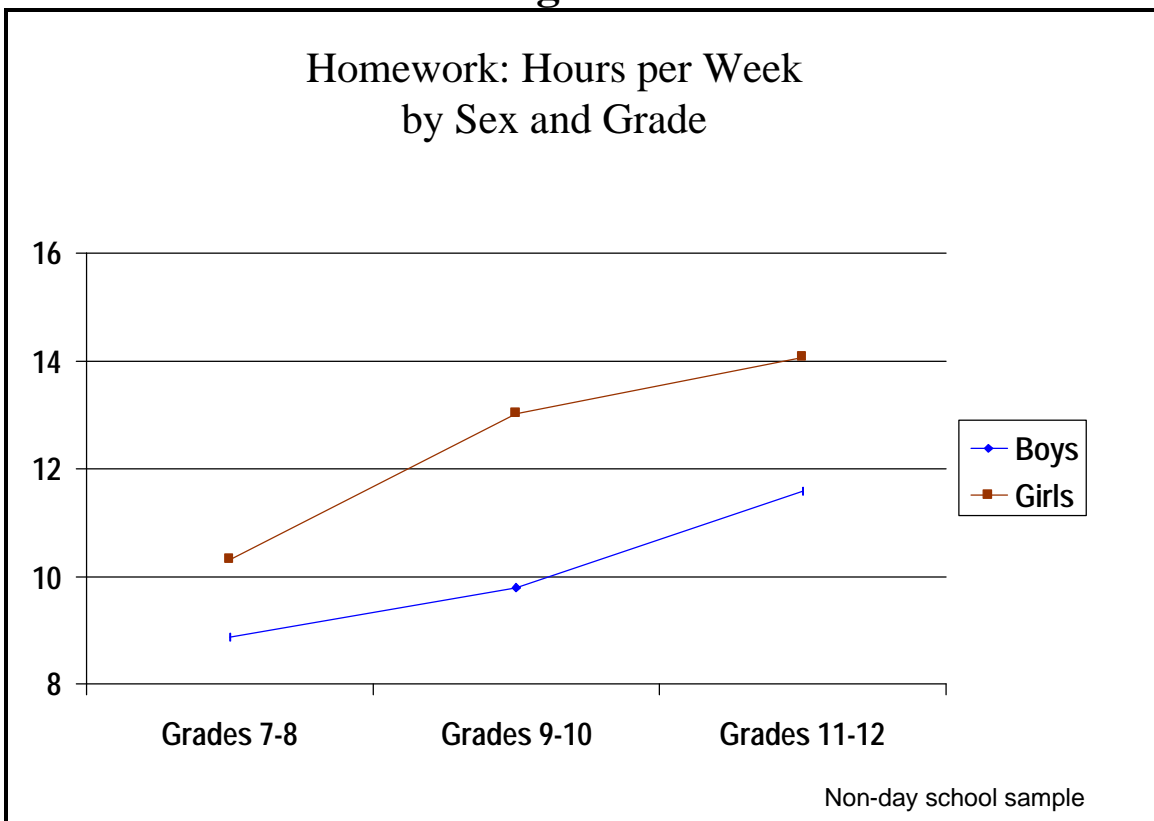
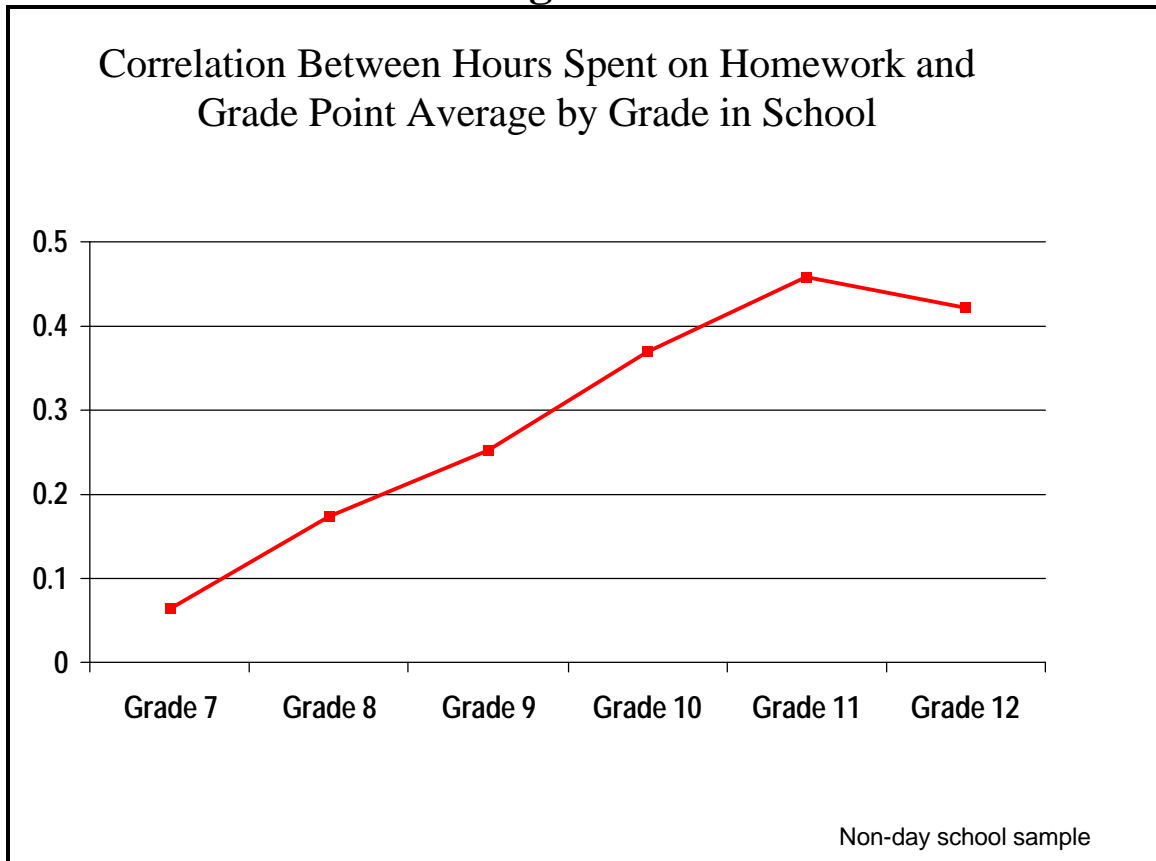


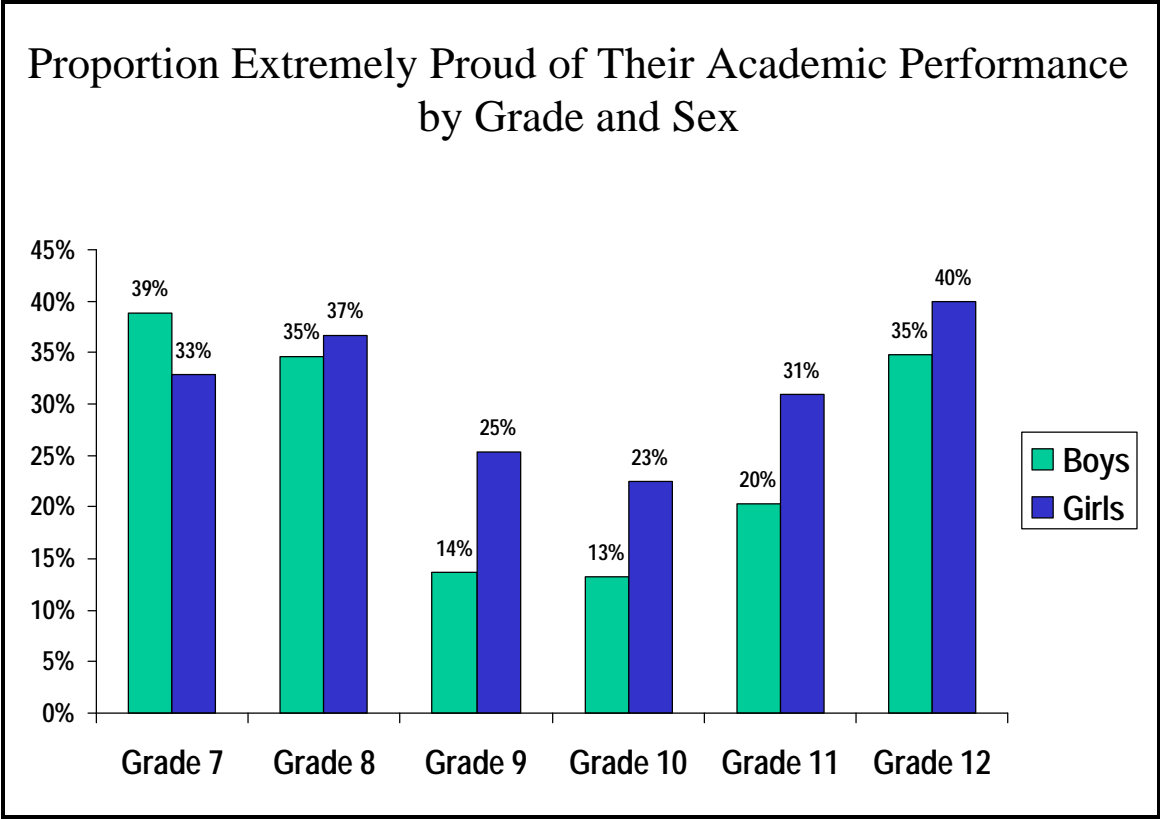
Figure 2



As the teenagers progressed through middle school and then high school, the objective increase in the institutions' academic demands was accompanied by a subjective perception of a much more competitive school environment. Whereas one out of four 7th and 8th graders reported "quite a bit" or "a great deal" of competition for grades in their school, that proportion was double (53%) for high school freshmen and sophomores, and almost triple (71%) for juniors and seniors. With the transition from a not-very-demanding middle school to a suddenly competitive high school environment where hard work would be rewarded and slackers left behind, academic self-esteem declined substantially.

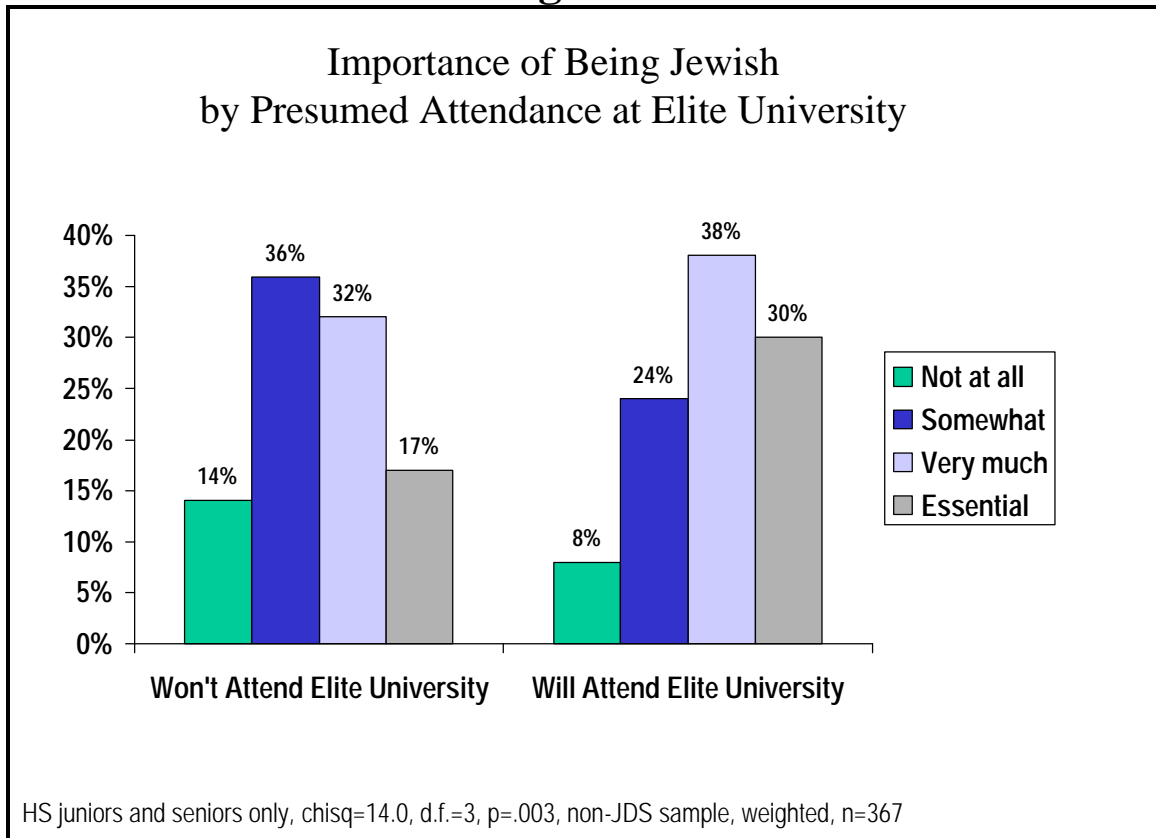
Consistent with a series of important sex differences among adolescents, the shock of academic demands hit boys harder than girls (see Figure 3). The percentage of boys who said they were extremely proud of their academic performance plummeted from 35% in grade eight to only 14% in the freshman year of high school. For girls, the drop was still significant but less pronounced, from 37% to 25%. Only by the end of senior year, after colleges had sent out their acceptance letters, did the pride in achievement again reach its eighth-grade levels. This rebound is not surprising in view of the quality of respondents' college enrollments; more than 70% of graduating seniors reported that they would be attending an Ivy League or other elite university.

Figure 3



Among those who aspired to an elite university, those for whom being Jewish was “extremely” or “very” important were disproportionately represented (see Figure 4). A relationship between Jewish commitment and social class has been documented among adults. Intermarriage is more common among the less affluent (DellaPergola, 1991). The cost of Jewish living (which can include, for example, synagogue dues, Federation donations, day school and summer camp tuition, and a premium paid for kosher meat) may make moderate- and low-income households feel that the Jewish community is neither affordable nor welcoming (Woocher, 1997). The finding of higher Jewish commitment among teenagers with high secular ambitions suggests that reproduction of class bias within the Jewish community is already evident in the late high school years. Patterns of extracurricular activity reinforce this notion (see below, *Extracurricular Activities*). From the perspective of Jewish educators, the phenomenon is both encouraging and discouraging: Contrary to concerns about competition for Jewish teenagers’ attention, the best and the brightest are more likely, not less, to engage themselves Jewishly. On the other hand, these findings can be read as evidence of a failure to engage teenagers irrespective of their success in the secular world.

Figure 4



Both the academic demands and the peer culture of high school encouraged students to treat their schoolwork seriously. This was likely reinforced by the looming challenge of college applications. Although the pressures to succeed had deleterious consequences for self-esteem, the teenagers generally took their academic responsibilities seriously, reaped the benefits of their hard work in terms of acceptance to colleges they deemed prestigious, and still managed to enjoy themselves in the process. In short, these teenagers generally manifested a pro-scholastic attitude and were rewarded for it.

This positive orientation towards education is noted in order to make clear that the generally negative experience with Jewish supplementary schooling cannot be attributed to a fundamental antagonism towards things scholastic. As indicated by the survey findings, the Hebrew school experience typically was a discouraging one—a finding that showed little variation across the nineteen synagogues in the study.⁴ Respondents were asked to compare their Hebrew school experience at age 11 or 12 with their public

⁴ Variance components tests revealed that the synagogues accounted for 10% of the variance in reported boredom in religious school, and 1% or less of the variance in enjoyment of religious school, failure to complete its assignments and frequency of skipping a day without permission.

school⁵ experience at the same age. More than half of the adolescents surveyed reported that they seldom or never enjoyed Hebrew school. Two-thirds always or often felt bored, compared with one-third in public school. One-quarter said they regularly failed to turn in their Hebrew school assignments, three times the percentage in public schools and Jewish day schools. In short, supplementary schooling was neither fun, interesting, nor taken seriously by many of the children who ultimately became *b'nei mitzvah*.

These negative attitudes were more pronounced among boys than girls (see Figure 5). Given the statement, "I have enjoyed my Jewish schooling," 46% of boys disagreed while only 30% agreed. The girls who took a position on the question split evenly between agreement and disagreement. With the statement, "My Bar Mitzvah was basically my graduation from Jewish school," 47% of boys agreed while 43% disagreed; among girls, 34% agreed while 52% disagreed. The statement, "After my Bar Mitzvah, I wanted to get more involved in Jewish life," yielded disagreement from 42% of boys, agreement from only 25%. Among girls, 37% were neutral while the remainder split evenly between agreement and disagreement.

Actual participation in formal Jewish education showed a decline consistent with these attitudes (although an even steeper decline might have been predicted), with the same gender differences persisting. Weekly participation declined steadily from 60% in 7th grade to 22% in 11th grade. Girls participated in greater proportions than boys in every grade except 9th (see Figure 6).

⁵ For stylistic purposes, we refer here to public schools. The reader, however, should be aware that these do include non-sectarian and Catholic private schools. Twelve percent of the respondents are currently enrolled in such schools.

Figure 5

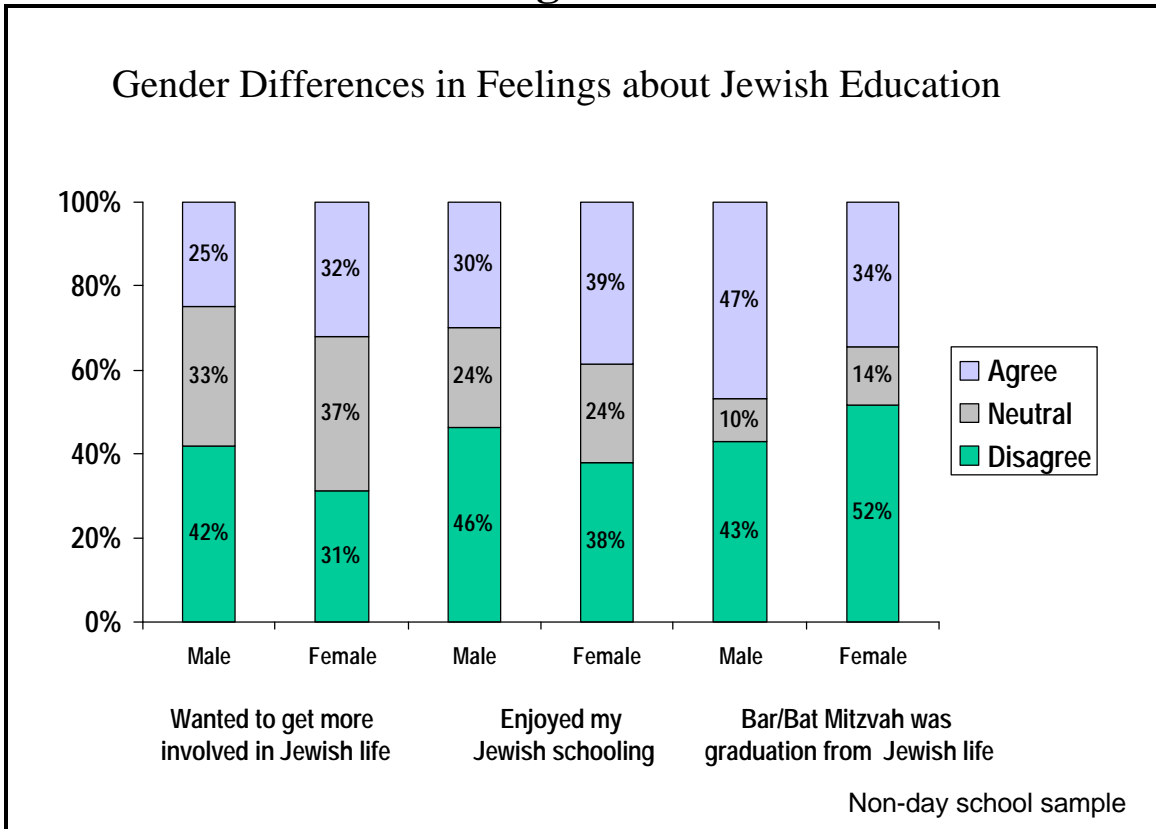
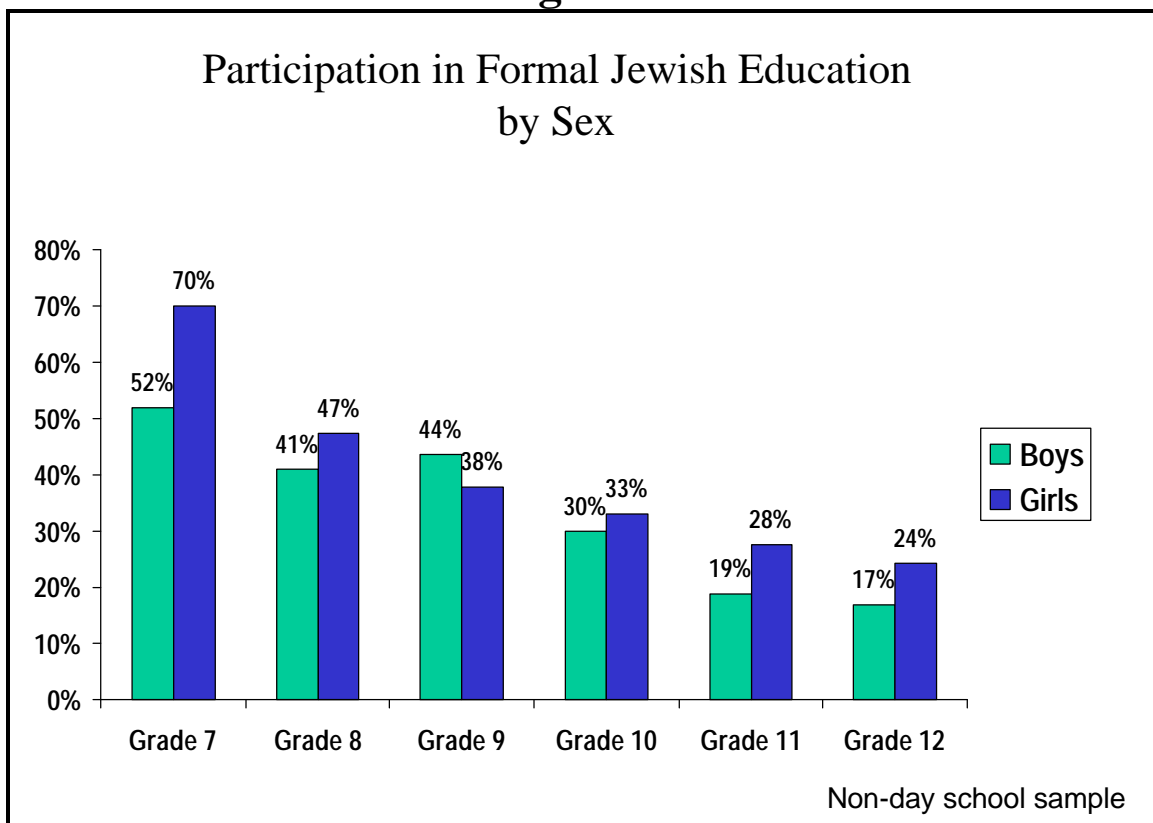
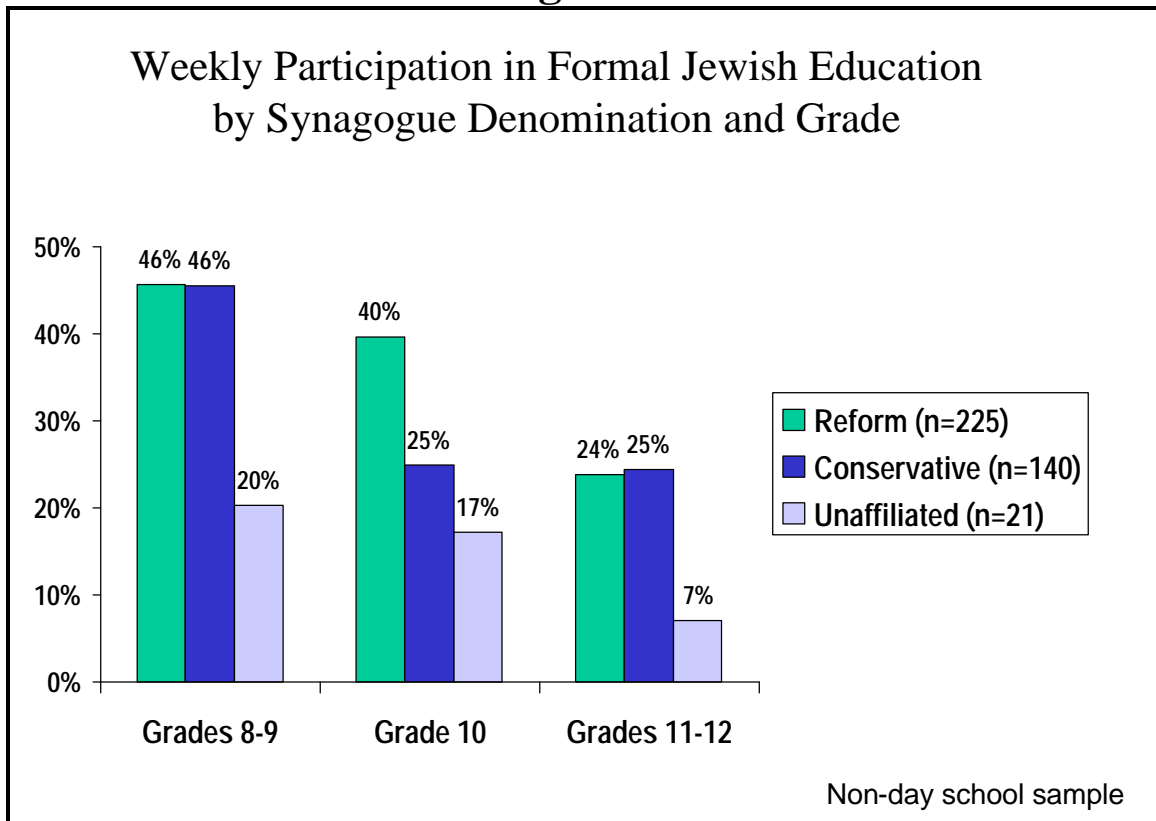


Figure 6



Enrollment in post-*bar/bat mitzvah* Jewish schooling can be viewed as a function of both supply (programs offered) and demand (teenagers' and parents' desires). Demand characteristics alone do not account for the decline in enrollment in formal Jewish education, as is evidenced by differential rates of enrollment among the denominations. From rates above 45% in grades 8 and 9, participation by Conservative youth dropped by about 20% in 10th grade (see Figure 7). The members of Reform congregations staved off a similar dip in participation for an additional year, probably because the normative status of Confirmation ceremonies in the Reform movement serves as an inducement to maintain enrollment until that point. This does not necessarily mean that the solution would be to postpone Confirmation (or better yet, *bar mitzvah*) until the end of twelfth grade. Decisions regarding the structuring of high school Jewish educational programs are not only the result of institutional history, but reflect an ongoing adaptation to what local policy-makers believe the market will bear. Postponing Confirmation may reduce its appeal as an achievable target for teenagers, and attrition may result in any case. Nevertheless, to the extent that the supply of formal Jewish education dries up following certain ceremonial attainments, it is worth exploring ways in which supply actually structures demand and helps cause the very problem educators would like to solve.

Figure 7



Other factors that influence enrollment in post-*bar/bat mitzvah* Jewish education will be discussed in the section on parental influence.

The drop in Jewish school enrollment is a primary factor accounting for what appears to be an overall trend of disengagement in Jewish life (see Figure 8). An index of Jewish involvement was created to measure participation in at least one of five Jewish educational, volunteer or recreational activities.⁶ Whereas nearly all adolescent respondents participated in one or more such activities in 7th grade, just over half did so in 12th grade. Such a rough measure, however, fails to capture the nuanced shift in patterns of participation away from the juvenile roles of student and camper, toward the more adult-like roles of tourist and worker, as will be described later (see *When Schoolwork Disappears*, below).

⁶ The index consisted of the following activities: Formal Jewish education once a month or more; Volunteer work for a Jewish organization once every few months or more; Jewish youth group participation at least once during the year; Jewish summer camp, Israel experience, or work/study program during Summer 1999; or membership in and use of a JCC at least once during the year.

Figure 8

**Index of Jewish Participation
by Grade**

