

## **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 7<sup>th</sup> grade, just over half did so in 12<sup>th</sup> 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 7<sup>th</sup> grade to 22% in 11<sup>th</sup> 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 10<sup>th</sup> 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 7<sup>th</sup> grade and 12<sup>th</sup> 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.