

Brandeis University

Steinhardt Social Research Institute

at the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies

It's Not Just Who Stands Under the *Chuppah*: Intermarriage and Engagement

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May 2008



Version 1.2 (May 2008)

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Steinhardt Social Research Institute

A publication of:

Steinhardt Social Research Institute
at the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen
Center for Modern Jewish Studies
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Partial support for development of this monograph was provided through a grant from the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ). The authors express their profound appreciation to Rabbi Daniel Frelander and Kathy Kahn of the URJ for encouraging this work and for their support and advice throughout. We also thank Emily Grotta and the URJ Department of Marketing and Communications for making their internal survey data available to us. At the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies and the Steinhardt Social Research Institute, we thank Deborah Grant for editing the report and Masha Sud Lokshin and Nina Robinson for preparing it for publication. The report benefited substantially from the comments of reviewers who shared reactions to earlier drafts. The reviewers included professors Sherry Israel, Charles Kadushin, Jeffrey Kress, Joel Perlmann, Uzi Rebhun, Amy Sales, Theodore Sasson, and Ephraim Tabory, along with Dru Greenwood and Rabbis David El-lenson and Shaul Levenson. We thank, as well, a number of anonymous reviewers and participants in various symposia (including a session at the 2007 URJ Biennial) where portions of this work were presented.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Jewish identity is in flux among American Jews, and accepted wisdom asserts that the root of the problem is intermarriage, leading to the dissolution of traditional, endogamous Jewish families. Contemporary narratives assume that the challenges facing the American Jewish community are centrally determined by the religious identity of the couple that “stands under the *chuppah*”—that marriages between Jews and non-Jews will have fundamentally different trajectories than those between two Jews. The goal of this report is to use systematic data to reframe discourse about intermarriage—to move away from a focus on the couple at the moment of marriage to a more textured and life-course understanding of the full array of factors that impact Jewish engagement.

Our analyses primarily focus on those who were raised as Reform Jews, the movement with the largest population and currently home to the greatest number of intermarried families. Several data sources are used to provide windows into Jewish experiences, identities, and connections. The Adult Sample and Reform Adult Sample are drawn from the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) 2000-01. These samples include individuals raised solely as Jews, whether or not they currently identify as Jews. The Reform Young Adult Sample includes data collected from applicants and participants of Taglit-Birthright Israel in the winter of 2006-07. This paper also considers data from surveys conducted by the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) of its lay leadership and most active members. Although not a representative sample of Reform Jews, this “Movement Core Adult Sample” provides insight into the dominant attitudes and practices among American Reform Jews.

Findings

Current Perspectives Limit Understanding of Intermarriage

Most attempts to capture the impact of intermarriage have examined differences in Jewish practices by comparing Jewish engagement measures between those who come from households that are either unmarried or intermarried. Yet even prior to marriage, those who intermarry have had less intense Jewish upbringings than those who marry other Jews. Analyses of experiences with Jewish home ritual, education, and social networks indicate that there are substantial differences in the ways in which adult children of unmarried and intermarried households were raised. However results also indicate that when exposed to similar levels of these critical Jewish experiences as children and adolescents, adults raised in unmarried and intermarried homes look very much alike.

Engagement

Jewish socialization in the form of Jewish education, experience of home ritual, and social networks plays a far more important role than having intermarried parents, in determining Jewish identity, behavior, or connections. It is not just who one’s parents are, but one’s experiences of Jewish living, education, and friendship that determine who will go on to live a richly Jewish life.

In general, contemporary youth being raised in the Reform movement are growing up with limited personal experience of their heritage or of homes filled with Jewish ritual and tradition. In addition, the Jewish education of most young Reform Jews is limited to the years before their bar or bat mitzvah and, by

the time they are in college, they are substantially disengaged from Jewish life.

Trajectories of Engagement are Open to Influence into the Young Adult Years

The report focuses on the experiences of Reform-raised young adults with Taglit-Birthright Israel, an educational initiative that provides trips to Israel for Diaspora Jews between the ages of 18 and 26. Both for children of inmarried and intermarried families, participation in Taglit-Birthright Israel is associated with increases in weekly involvement in Shabbat activities, connection to Israel, and the importance placed on marrying a Jew and raising Jewish children. Analyses suggest that even in the years of young adulthood there are opportunities to positively influence the Jewish trajectories of young Reform Jews.

Conclusion

The present report asserts that the fundamentally flawed narratives of intermarriage that have dominated discussion need to be replaced by an alternative account of engagement. The suggested new framework should focus on understanding the factors that motivate individuals and families, both inmarried and intermarried households alike, to participate actively in Jewish life. Although efforts specifically aimed at inviting and welcoming the intermarried into Jewish life continue to be important, our analysis of extant data suggests that it is engagement and not intermarriage that presents both the greatest challenge and the most promising arena for intervention for Reform Jews and Reform Judaism.

INTRODUCTION

More than fifteen years ago findings from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey were released indicating that 52% of current marriages among American Jews were to non-Jews (Kosmin et al., 1991). Since then, intermarriage has been at the forefront of intense debate in the American Jewish community. Although there is widespread agreement that intermarriage is reshaping American Jewry, there is profound disagreement about the implications of increased numbers of intermarried households. The dominant narrative among many analysts of the American Jewish community is that marriage between Jews and non-Jews is a virulent threat to Jewish continuity (Cohen, 2006; Fishman, 2004; Wertheimer, 2001). This assessment posits that intermarriage almost inevitably leads to lowered rates of Jewish identity and that the only viable strategy for Jewish survival is reinforcement of communal boundaries and advocacy of inmarriage (e.g., Wertheimer & Bayme, 2005). An alternative narrative treats intermarriage as a “fact” of contemporary life and contends that Jewish continuity is assured only if all are welcomed, diversity is celebrated, and barriers to participation in the community are reduced (Dorff & Olitzky, 2007; Mayer, 1991). Intermarriage is, according to this view, only problematic if we fail to engage non-Jews who are part of Jewish families.

Unfortunately, both of these current perspectives are overly simplistic and fail to adequately describe the more complex dynamic of intermarriage in contemporary American Jewry. These narratives share the fundamental assumption that the challenges facing the American Jewish community are centrally determined by the religious identity of the couple that “stands under the *chuppah*”—that marriages between Jews and

non-Jews will have fundamentally different trajectories than those between two Jews. This report challenges this assumption and looks beyond the “chuppah moment” to contextualize intermarriage in terms of a broader set of challenges. Our goal is to use systematic data not only to better understand intermarriage but more broadly to reframe discourse about those strategies with the greatest potential to address this particular challenge.

Our perspective is suggested by Rabbi Harold Schulweis (2003) in a Rosh Hashanah sermon:

The issue, from my point of view, is not intermarriage. That is the demographer’s ‘bogey-man’. To focus on intermarriage is to see the symptom and not the cause. The symptom is not the cause, and if you treat the symptom in isolation, you will mask the root of the malaise that eats away at our core. If we managed to stop all mixed marriage, you would not touch the lethal malaise that is tearing us apart.

Focusing solely under the chuppah limits perspective and undermines our ability to understand the broader challenge described by Schulweis. By the time Jews stand under the wedding canopy, their Jewish journey has already been profoundly shaped by the relationships, experiences, and environments of their developmental and young adult years. After they leave the chuppah, their journeys and, in turn, those of their children are influenced by multiple factors, not only the religious identity of their spouse.

The goal of this paper is to examine extant data about engagement with Jewish life and to

understand patterns applicable to those living in intermarried as well as inmarried households. Our premise is that the dynamics of engagement apply to both intermarried and inmarried families. The present analyses focus primarily on those who identify with Reform Judaism, the movement with the largest population. Since 1978, when the Reform movement's then-president, Rabbi Alexander Schindler, created an outreach initiative, the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) has been at the forefront of efforts to welcome the intermarried. The URJ is currently home to the greatest number of intermarried families. Data from several sources is used to provide multiple windows into Jewish lifespan experiences, identities, and connections.

To explore the engagement of adults whose parents were inmarried or intermarried, we use data from the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) 2000-01 (United Jewish Communities, 2003). The first sample drawn from this dataset is referred to as the "Adult Sample." This sample includes people raised solely as Jews within the non-Orthodox movements (Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform) as well as those raised "Just Jewish" or as "Secular/cultural Jews."¹ The second NJPS 2000-01 sample, referred to as the "Reform Adult Sample" is restricted to those people raised solely as Jews within the Reform movement. The average age of both of the adult samples is 50 years, allowing a view of the long-term impact of growing up with inmarried or intermarried parents. Most of those in the adult samples grew up at a time when intermarriage was relatively uncommon, and the Jewish community had not yet articulated responses to its challenges.

Analyses of data collected from contemporary young adult applicants and participants of

Taglit-Birthright Israel in the winter of 2006-07 are used to complement the adult samples. Taglit-Birthright Israel is an educational initiative that provides trips to Israel for Diaspora Jews between the ages of 18 and 26. Over 200,000 North American young adults have applied to Taglit-Birthright Israel since late 1999, and Reform-identified Jews represent the largest group of program applicants (nearly 40%). Information collected about those who apply represents the largest available dataset about Jewish young adults (see Saxe et al., 2007; Saxe & Chazan, forthcoming).² Our analyses focus on those applicants who indicate that they were raised in the Reform movement. This dataset will be referred to as the "Reform Young Adult Sample."

The average age of respondents in the Reform Young Adult sample is 21 years of age. These individuals represent a generation whose experiences within the Reform movement were influenced by the adoption of patrilineal descent and the development of outreach efforts. Data from the Reform Young Adult Sample is used to assess early Jewish socialization and education experiences among contemporary young Reform Jews. In addition, data on the impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel is used to shed light on the potential of interventions to enhance the Jewish engagement of young adult Jews, regardless of their family background.

Finally, the paper makes use of data from a series of surveys conducted by the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) of its lay leadership and most active members.³ This sample is referred to as the "Movement Core Adult Sample." Although not a representative sample of Reform Jews, this dataset provides insight into the dominant attitudes and

practices among American Reform Jews, including the parents of those currently being raised in the Reform movement.

Individually, none of the data sets employed has wide enough scope to answer our questions about intermarriage and engagement. Together, these sources of data provide a multifaceted and multigenerational perspective on the factors that influence continued Jewish engagement.

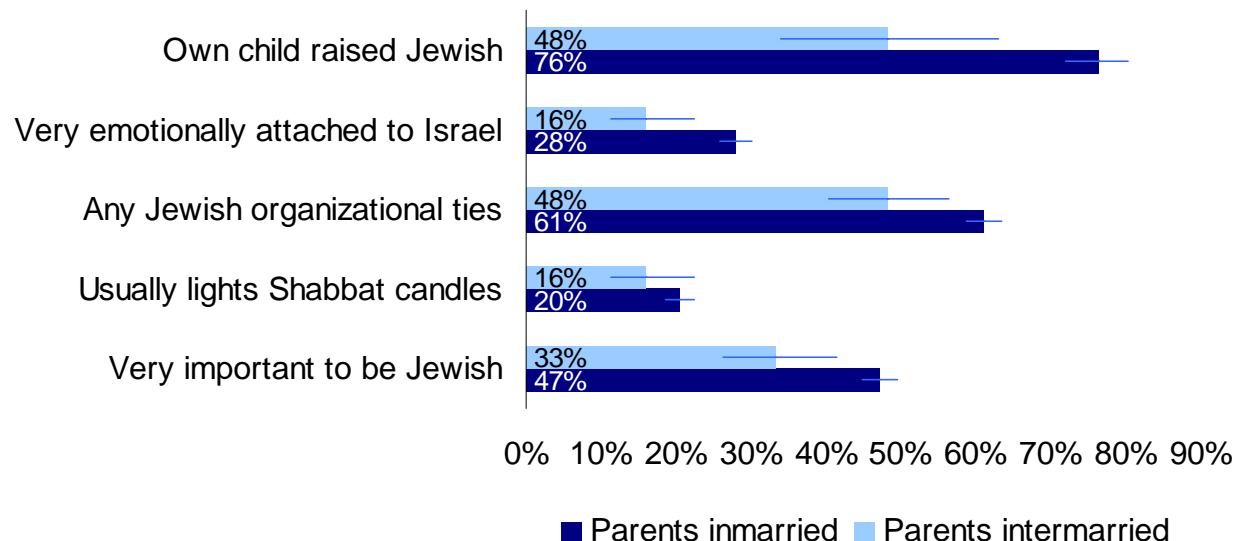
Limits of Current Narratives

Recent attempts to capture the impact of intermarriage have examined differences in Jewish practices by marriage status. Often, comparisons are made in Jewish engagement measures between those who come from households that are either inmarried or intermarried. Thus, for example, Cohen (2006) finds that Jews who are intermarried are less likely than inmarried peers either to affiliate with Jewish institutions or engage in Jewish ritual observance. Likewise, Fishman (2004) reports that compared with inmarried parents, intermarried Jews are substantially less likely to raise their children as Jews.

When applied to the Adult Sample this comparative strategy of analysis yields findings similar to those used to support the position that intermarriage is detrimental to Jewish identity (Figure 1). Adults, who were raised in intermarried households, appear to be clearly less likely to endorse a variety of aspects of Jewish identity and communal connection.

Analyses that examine Jewish attitudes and behavior solely in terms of whether one's parents are inmarried or intermarried are, however, potentially misleading. Sorting families solely by the religious identification of parents does not reveal what those households looked like in terms of religious practices and emphasis on Jewish education. Jews who intermarry have had less intense Jewish upbringings than those who marry other Jews: they have less Jewish education and come from households with fewer Jewish practices (Phillips, 1993; Phillips & Fishman, 2006). Thus, even prior to marriage, the Jewish parent in an intermarried home is already less likely than the average inmarried Jew to create a richly Jewish household or to support the social and educational experiences needed to instill a strong Jewish identity in children. These characteristics, which have substantial impact on the Jewish nature of the current home environment, are not the result of the intermarriage itself; in fact, they would likely be evident regardless of the marriage partner

Figure 1: Adult Sample-Selected Outcomes⁴

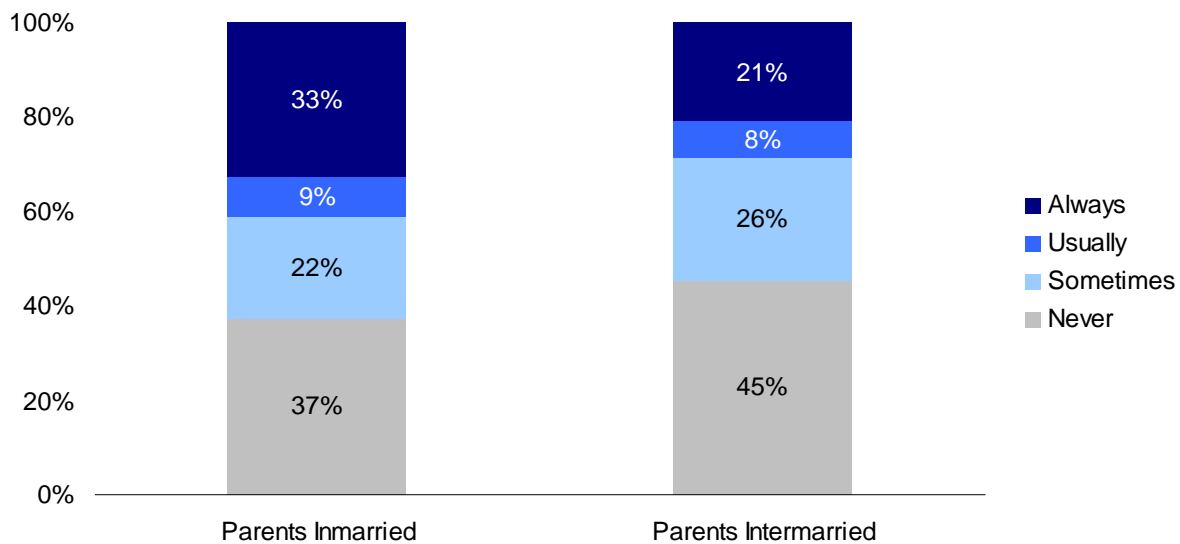


chosen. What is being passed on to children is the parent's own impoverished storehouse of Jewish traditions, knowledge, and memories. Regardless of whom they marry, these parents are unlikely to provide their children with Jewish experiences that they themselves did not have.

Analysis of the Adult Sample indicates that as compared to those brought up by inmarried parents, adult children of intermarriage were raised in homes where Shabbat candles were lit less frequently (see Figure 2). The proportion of those who received any Jewish education in grades one through seven is very similar for those from inmarried homes (78%) and those from intermarried homes (74%). However in

grades eight through twelve, slightly less than half of those with inmarried parents (44%) and as compared with a third of those with intermarried parents (33%) received any Jewish education. When they did receive Jewish education, those raised in intermarried homes attended for slightly fewer years. These adult children of intermarriage also reported having fewer close Jewish friends in high school. Only about one sixth (16%) of adult children of intermarriage said that the majority of their friends were Jewish. By comparison, two fifths (40%) of adults who grew up with two Jewish parents had friendship circles that were predominantly Jewish.

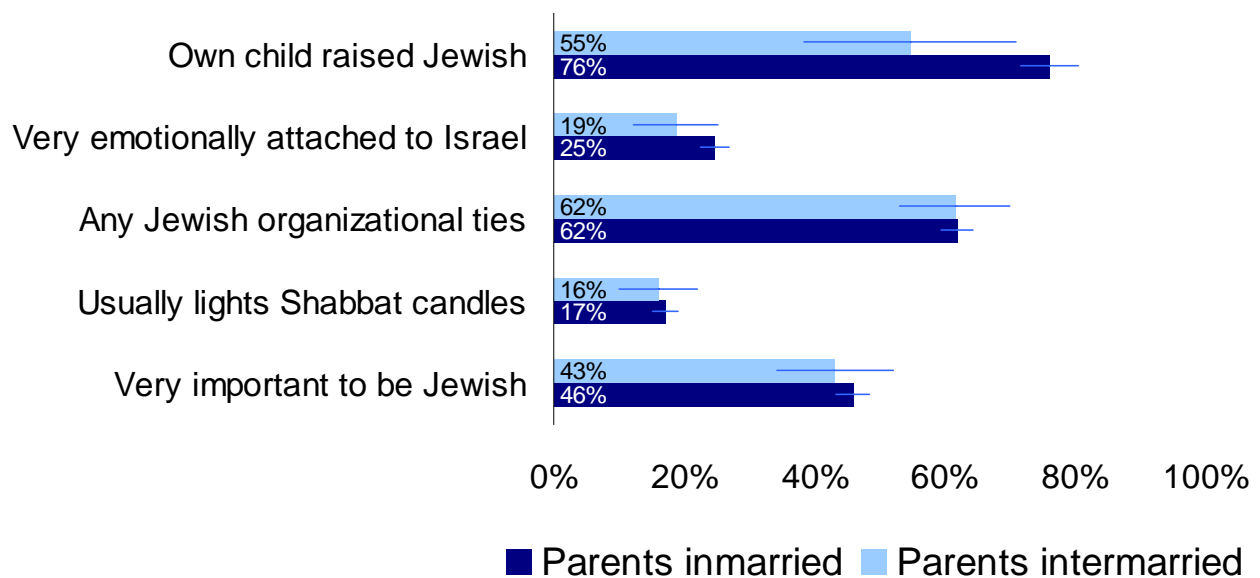
Figure 2: Adult Sample-Frequency of Lighting Shabbat Candles during Childhood



These analyses of experience with Jewish home ritual, education, and social networks indicate that there are differences in the way in which these adult children of inmarried and intermarried households were raised. Although there is considerable diversity in the way in which the children of intermarriages are brought up, overall, members of the Adult Sample with intermarried parents have less Jewish experience on a number of dimensions. If, however, one statistically controls for the effects of critical background variables, including the level of Jewish education, proportion of Jewish friends, and exposure to home ritual—creating a “what-if” scenario—a more refined picture emerges (Figure 3).⁵ With

these background variables accounted for, the results indicate that being the product of an intermarried home is not associated with significantly different outcomes than being raised in an inmarried home. It is childhood upbringing and socialization that primarily account for the differences seen in adult attitudes and identity, not whether both parents were Jewish. The exception is that adult children of intermarriage are significantly less likely to raise their own children as Jews compared with their peers who grew up in inmarried homes. From a continuity perspective, this is an important difference (see below).

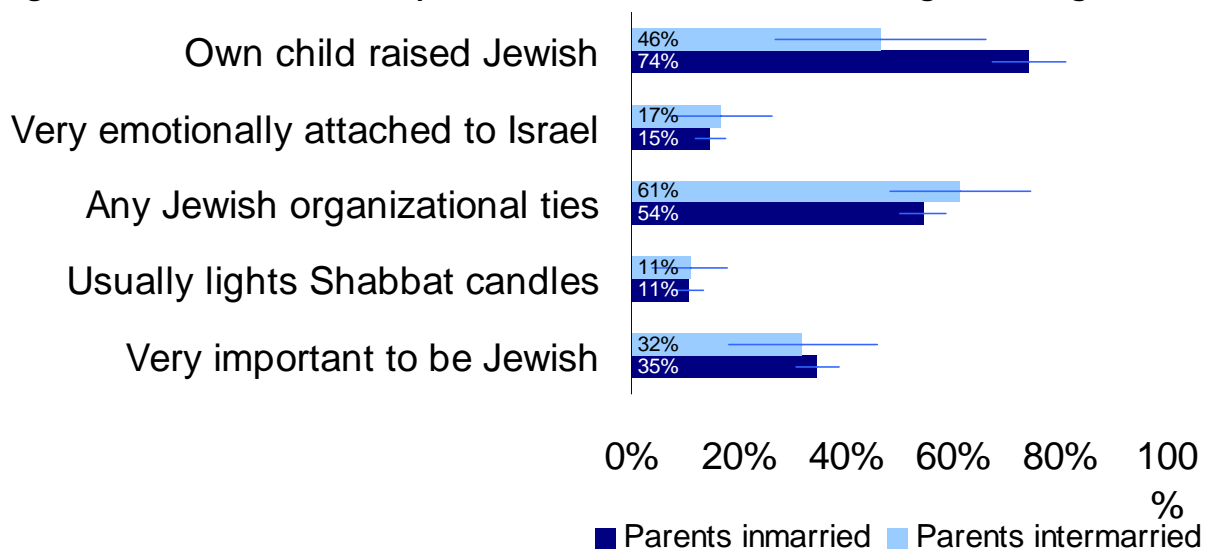
Figure 3: Adult Sample-Selected Outcomes Accounting for Background



Note: Values for estimates set to means of inmarried population.

Repeating the same analyses with the Reform Adult Sample, again controlling for background factors of Jewish education and socialization, reinforces the conclusion that, when exposed to similar levels of Jewish experience as children and adolescents, adults raised in inmarried and intermarried homes look very much alike (Figure 4). Focusing attention on the nature of the couple to the exclusion of other factors that potentially have the greatest impact on their inclination to make Jewish choices and to create a Jewish context for their family ignores critical information.

Figure 4: Reform Adult Sample-Selected Outcomes Accounting for Background



ENGAGEMENT: EXPANDING THE FOCUS

The analyses of the Adult Sample and the Reform Adult Sample suggest that intermarriage is not a monolithic determinant of Jewish identity, home life, and connections to Jewish institutions. Thus, for example, those who received the same level of Jewish education as children have almost indistinguishable behavior and attitudes, and their parents' marital status is unimportant. What, then, are the factors that play the most notable role in determining Jewish attitudes and behaviors for Reform Jews? To answer that question we use both the Reform Adult Sample and the Reform Young Adult Sample.

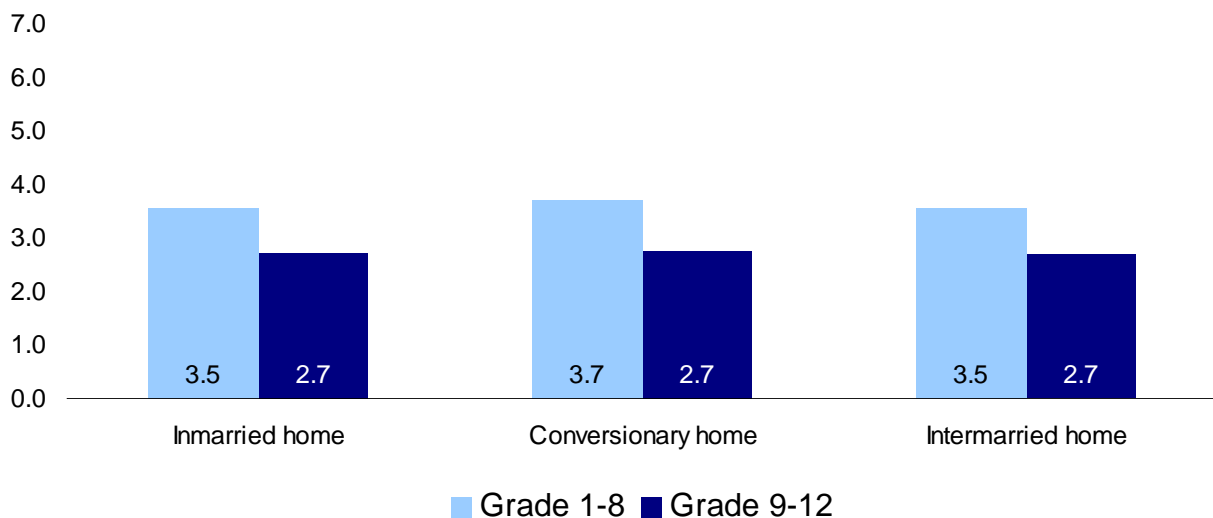
Jewish Education

Analysis of the Reform Adult Sample indicates that Jewish education is a significant predictor of adult ritual practice, membership in Jewish institutions such as synagogues and Jewish community centers, the importance attributed to being Jewish, and sense of attachment to Israel. The impact of Jewish education on

attitudes toward the salience of Jewish identity and toward Israel is nonlinear—every additional hour of Jewish education received has an exponentially greater impact than the hour that came before.

Analyses of the Reform Young Adult Sample indicate that although almost all received some Jewish education in the elementary and middle school years, the duration of Jewish education was relatively brief (Figure 5)⁶. Participation declined precipitously during high school, with only 46% of the children of inmarried parents, 51% from conversionary households, and 40% of those with intermarried parents receiving any Jewish education. The minority who continued in high school Jewish education, regardless of whether they grew up in inmarried, intermarried, or conversionary homes, typically attended for almost three years, suggesting that those who start Jewish high school education are very likely to complete it (Figure 5).⁷

Figure 5: Reform Young Adult Sample-Average Years of Jewish Education



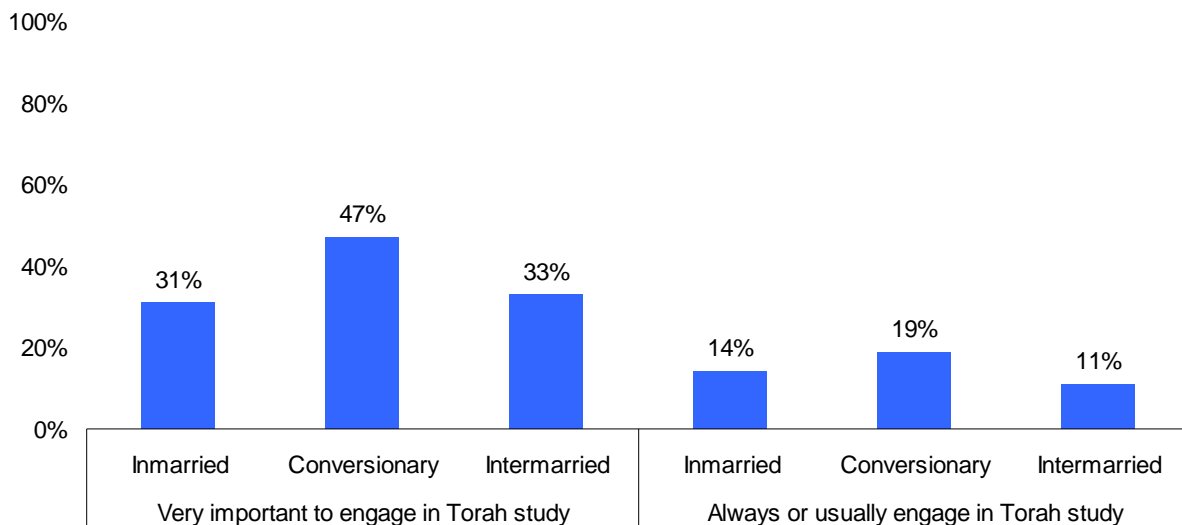
Interestingly, the gaps in average years of Jewish education observed in the Adult Sample between those raised in intermarried and inmarried households are less apparent among the Reform Young Adult Sample. In part, this may be a result of self-selection into the Taglit-Birthright Israel program. However, it is also likely that the Reform movement’s positive efforts to engage intermarried families—especially those where the mother is not Jewish—have led to greater educational involvement of children of intermarried homes than was the case for previous generations.

It should also be noted that overall levels of Jewish education are low across this entire group of Reform-raised young adults. The majority of Reform-identified adolescents, regardless of who their parents are, are

uninvolved post-*b’nai mitzvah*. The implications are severe, given that this stage of adolescence is the developmental period when critical thinking skills evolve. The problem is not just that they are missing out on an intellectually rich tradition of Jewish thought, but also that their Judaic knowledge becomes fixed at what some have called “pediatric Judaism” (cf. Schuster, 2003, p.41).

The lack of involvement of Reform-affiliated adolescents in Jewish education also seems to be in keeping with the attitudes and reported behavior of lay leaders in the movement. Responses of the Movement Core Adult Sample indicate that although most endorsed the importance of giving their children a Jewish education, fewer than one fifth engaged in regular Torah study and less than half felt that it was very important to do so (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Movement Core Adult Sample-Attitudes toward Torah Study



Home Ritual

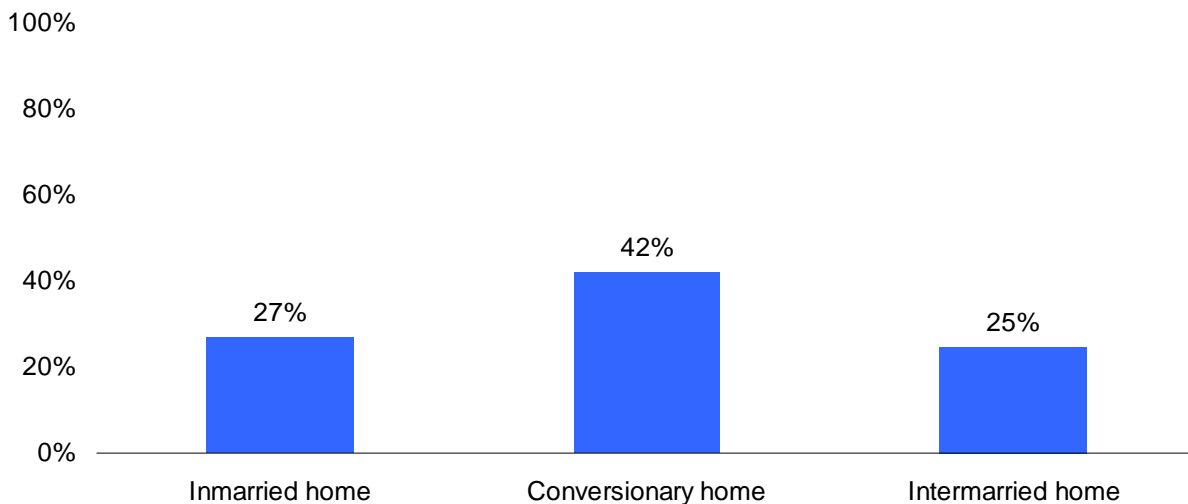
Not surprisingly, our analyses of Reform Adult Sample data indicate that the single most important predictor of adult observance of home ritual is what a respondent's family did while s/he was growing up. Being raised in a home where Shabbat candles were lit regularly was also associated with both greater subjective importance of Jewish identity and stronger attachment to Israel.

Among the Reform Young Adult Sample, most reported no regular experience of weekly home rituals, at least as measured by usually lighting Shabbat candles during their high school years (Figure 7). Echoing the observation that converts tend to have the highest levels of ritual observance (Medding et al., 1992), applicants raised in homes where one parent was a Jew by choice were by far the most likely to have a store of memories of weekly observance.

Most of the Reform Young Adult Sample grew up in families that belonged to a synagogue, but the fact of membership appears not to translate into ongoing experience of Jewish home ritual or into synagogue attendance. Even at age ten or eleven (when the child is studying for bar/bat mitzvah), only about half attended synagogue at least once a month, with no differences between those from in- and intermarried homes. By contrast, annual rituals were widely observed and more than nine tenths of these young adults, regardless of whether they came from inmarried, intermarried or conversionary homes, participated in Passover seders and celebrated Chanukah.

Data from the Movement Core Adult Sample indicate that with the exception of those living in conversionary homes most respondents do not believe it is very important to celebrate Shabbat in their homes (Figure 8). It should be noted that these respondents are not being

Figure 7: Reform Young Adult Sample-Family Regularly Lit Shabbat Candles during High School



asked if they engage in any specific rituals but whether they do anything to make Shabbat a distinct or special day. Compared with their in- and intermarried peers, the emphasis placed on celebrating Shabbat among adults in conversionary families is striking.

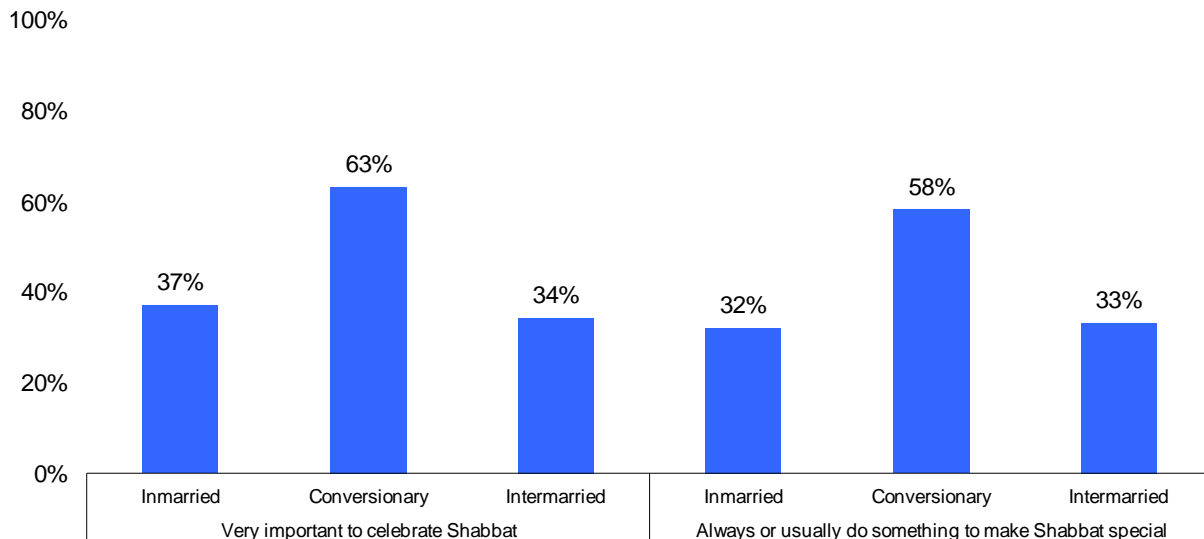
Life at home sets the norms and expectations for Jewish living and in this respect the upbringing of Reform Jews, regardless of whether they are being raised in inmarried or intermarried homes, appears to be deficient. In the typical Reform household, Jewish experience is episodic and is rooted in the annual observance of Passover, the High Holidays, and Chanukah. Week to week, children being raised in these homes encounter few family rituals and traditions to remind them of their Jewish identity. The notable exception to this scenario is found in the experience of those being raised in homes where one of the parents is a Jew by choice.

Social Networks

Among the Reform Adult Sample, the greatest influence on feeling a strong degree of attachment to Israel was one’s social network in high school. Next to gender (with women being more likely than men to say that being Jewish is very important to them), the Jewish density of the high school social network was the strongest predictor of the importance attributed to being Jewish. Those who grew up with more densely Jewish social networks are also more likely as adults to engage in ritual practice, to join Jewish organizations, and to raise their children as Jews.

Contemporary young Jews are part of an ethnically and religiously diverse generation (Eck, 2001; Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008) and are unlikely to live in predominantly Jewish neighborhoods. As noted above, these teenagers are unlikely to continue their Jewish education through high school, a setting ripe with opportunities for

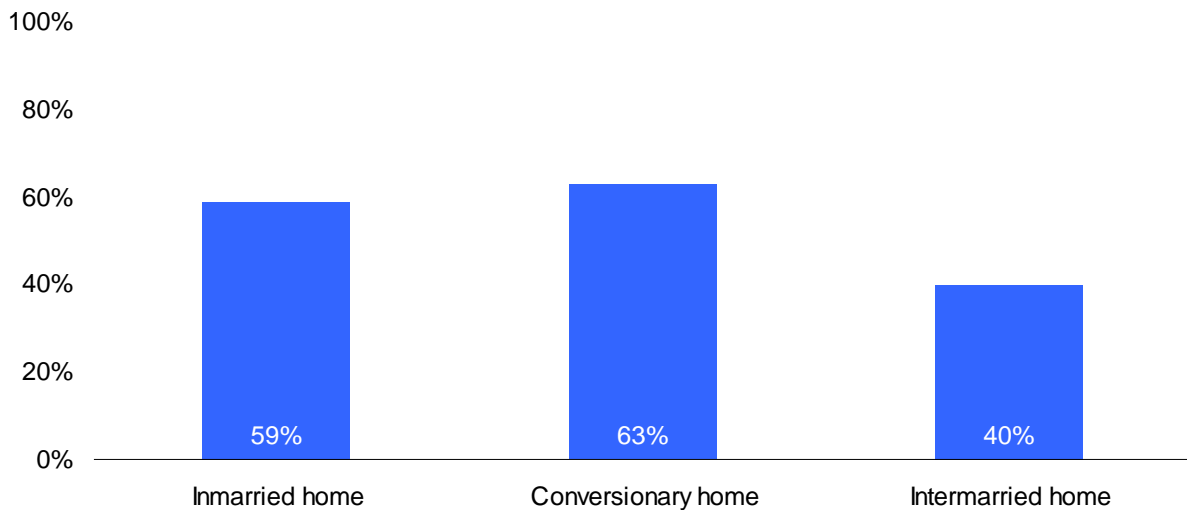
Figure 8: Movement Core Adult Sample-Attitudes toward Celebrating Shabbat



social connections. For many Jewish teenagers, the two settings with the greatest potential to foster strong Jewish social connections are youth groups and camps. Data from another survey of college-age Jews indicate that, among those raised in the Reform movement, 58% have participated in Jewish youth groups some time during their high school years (Chertok et al., 2007). Among the Reform Young Adult Sample

about the same percentage of those from inmarried and conversionary families reported that they have ever attended summer camps, while less than half of the children of intermarried households had done so (Figure 9). In many ways, young Reform Jews are left to their own devices during the emerging adult years (age 18-25) with the expectation they will reconnect with the organized Jewish community when it is time to marry and have

Figure 9: Reform Young Adult Sample-Percentage Ever Attended Jewish Summer Camp

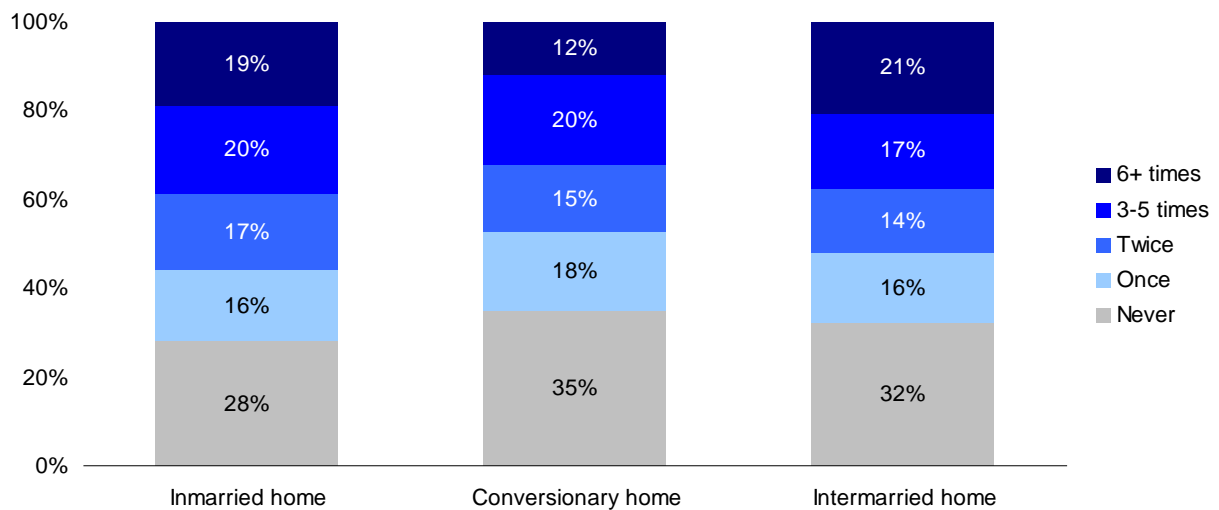


children. A large-scale study of Jewish participation in Jewish campus life (Sales & Saxe, 2006) indicates that Reform Jews are less engaged than any other denominational group on campus. Data from the present Reform Young Adult Sample reaffirm these findings and indicate that the majority of Jewish students who were raised in Reform households have little or no involvement in Jewish campus organizations (Figure 10).

Social comparison is the psychological process through which individuals compare themselves with others to judge their own behavior, abilities, and reactions (Festinger, 1954). When unsure of what is appropriate or of how well they are doing, individuals compare themselves to similar others. High school

students surround themselves with similar peers and explore activities as a part of this group. In addition to making new experiences more fun, these social referents give teens confidence that an activity is appropriate or expected for “someone like them.” Having Jewish friends growing up and especially in high school may help make Jewish identity and home ritual normative. Jewish summer camps, youth movements, and campus organizations provide environments in which to enact Jewish values and practice Jewish behaviors with peers. Without opportunities for social comparison with a group of Jewish friends, teens and young adults may come to believe that acting out one’s Jewish identity is potentially uncomfortable and isolating.

Figure 10: Reform Young Adult Sample-Attendance at Hillel Activities

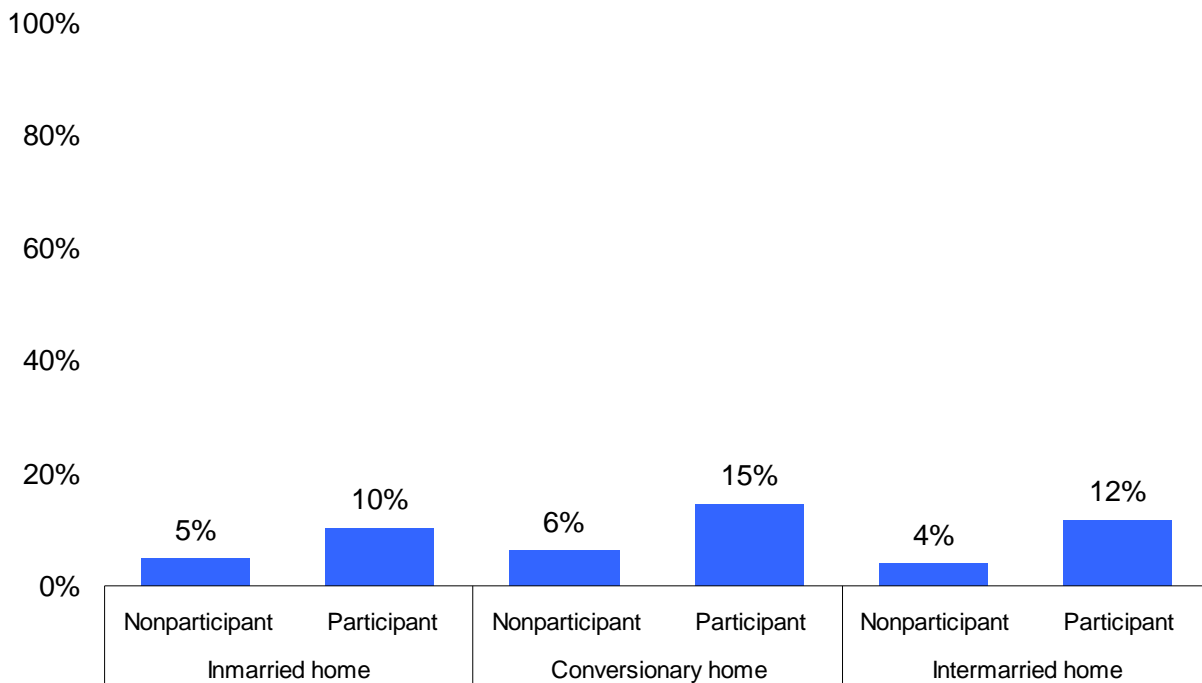


CHANGING TRAJECTORIES OF ENGAGEMENT

The analyses above indicate that Jewish behaviors, connections, and identity are strongly influenced by Jewish experiences in childhood and adolescence. The findings also make clear that those raised in the Reform movement enter their young adult years with a limited storehouse of Jewish home ritual, education, and peer connections. Is this lack of Jewish experience an immutable determinant of adult identity or are there still opportunities beyond the high school years to build the Jewish “capital” of young Reform Jews? To answer this question we make use of data from applicants and participants of Taglit-Birthright Israel within the Reform Young Adult Sample.

Since late 1999, Taglit-Birthright Israel has brought more than 160,000 Diaspora young adults, of whom more than 70% are from North America, to Israel for a ten-day educational experience. Evaluative data from Taglit-Birthright Israel suggest that it has the potential to change the trajectory of Jewish engagement for participants, regardless of their level of Jewish education, Jewish experiences, and whether or not their parents are both Jewish. Systematic evaluations of the impact of the program indicate that it has significant, positive effects across a variety of dimensions of Jewish engagement (Saxe et al., 2002; Saxe et al., 2007; Saxe & Chazan, forthcoming).

Figure 11: Likelihood of Lighting Shabbat Candles

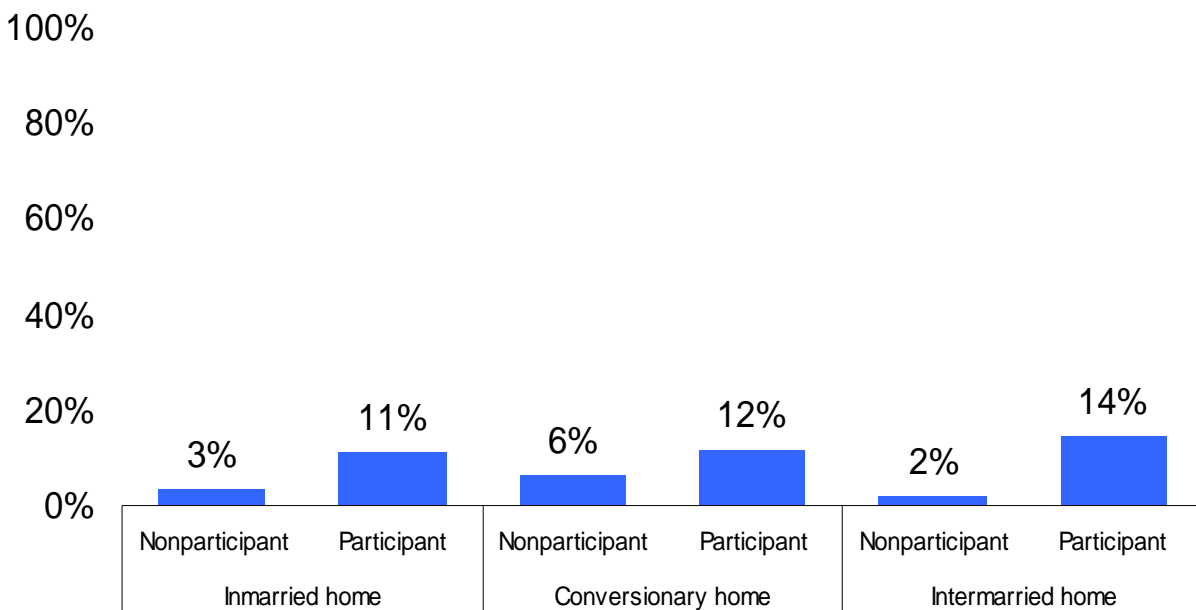


Note: Percentage indicating “Usually” or Always.” Values for estimates set to mean of parental marriage type.

To examine Taglit-Birthright Israel’s impact, outcomes of individuals who applied to go on the trip but did not end up going are compared with outcomes of those who applied and did participate. Across multiple cohorts of Taglit-Birthright Israel, there are almost no differences between the demographics of these two groups, suggesting that no systematic bias is at work in terms of which applicants actually participate.

There are a variety of measures of impact, but consider one measure of religious engagement: participants’ weekly connection to Shabbat. Taglit-Birthright Israel participants from both inmarried and intermarried homes report greater frequency of lighting Shabbat candles (Figure 11) or taking part in a special meal on Shabbat (Figure 12) than do non-participants.

Figure 12: Likelihood of Special Meal on Shabbat



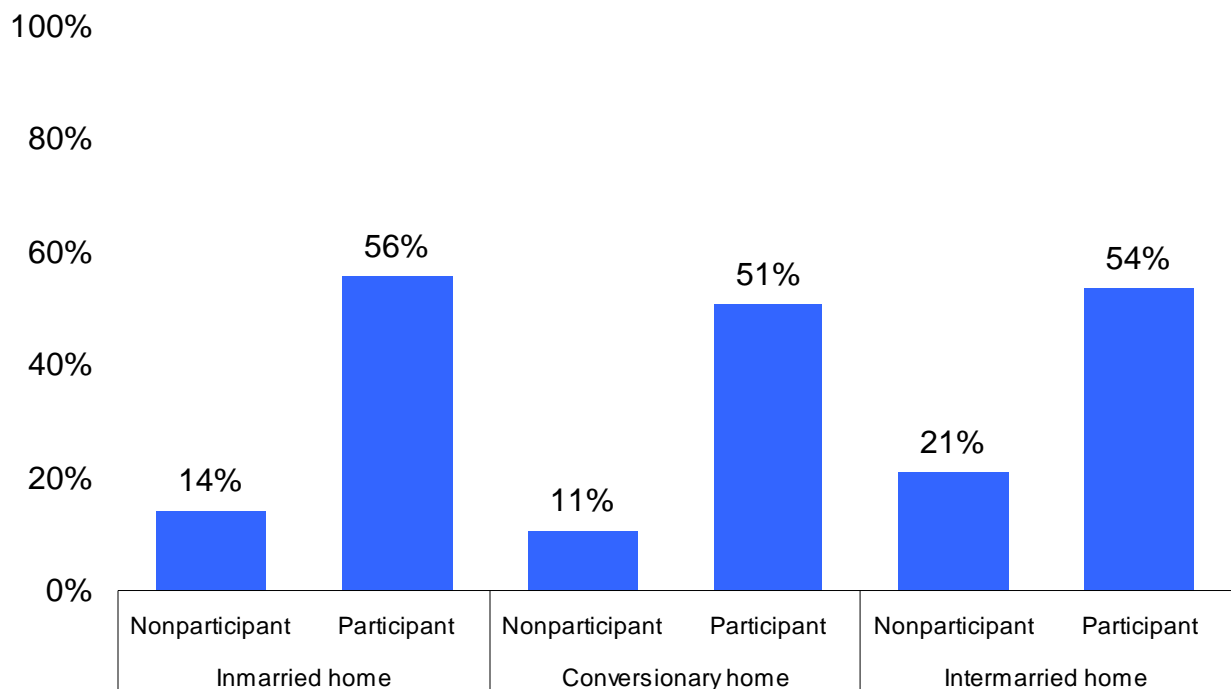
Note: Percentage indicating “Usually” or “Always”.

Most dramatically for those raised as Reform Jews, participation in Taglit-Birthright Israel is associated with significant increases in the sense of connection to Israel (Figure 13). Whether they are from inmarried or intermarried homes, participants raised in the Reform movement leave their Birthright Israel experience with an emotional connection to the land and people of Israel that they did not have before.

The present analyses of the Adult Sample and the Reform Adult Sample found that even when background factors such as Jewish

education, home ritual experience, and Jewish density of social network were accounted for, having intermarried parents still had a negative impact on the likelihood of raising the next generation of children as Jewish. This is not an insignificant concern with respect to Jewish continuity. It is important to note, however, that even prior to participation in Taglit-Birthright Israel, most of the Reform Young Adult Sample, and especially those raised in conversionary homes, believed that it was very important to raise Jewish children. Even given this high baseline, Taglit-Birthright Israel substantially increases this

Figure 13: Connection to Israel



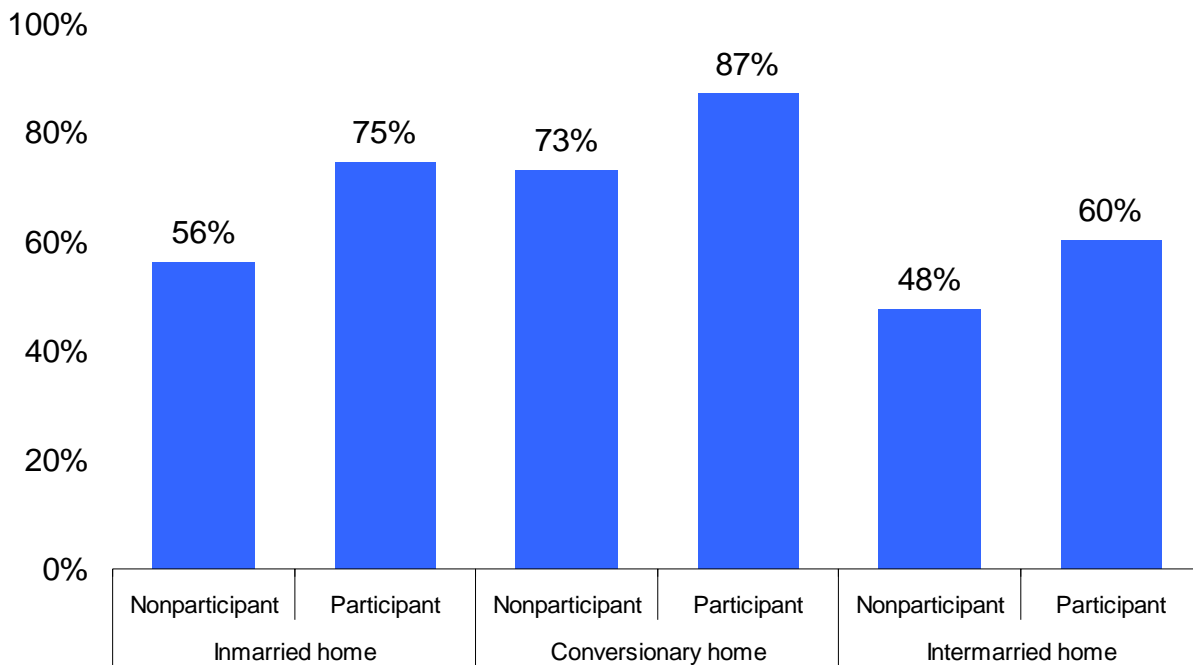
intention. More than half of participants, both from inmarried and intermarried homes, report that they believe it is very important to raise their future children as Jews (Figure 14).

Although many of these young adults are still years away from becoming parents, it is clear that their intention is to pass on to their children the positive sense of Jewish identity and peoplehood that they have experienced on Taglit-Birthright Israel.

Both for children of inmarried and intermarried families, participation in Taglit-

Birthright Israel is also associated with increases in the importance placed on marrying a Jew (Figure 15). Previous research (Saxe, Kadushin, Hecht, Rosen, Phillips, & Kelner, 2004) has found that this is a “sleeper effect” with differences between participants and non-participants increasing over time, so it is likely that the long-term effect of participation in Taglit-Birthright Israel will be even greater than is shown here. At the same time it is important to note that these increases are set against extremely low baselines—only a small percentage of

Figure 14: Importance of Raising Jewish Children

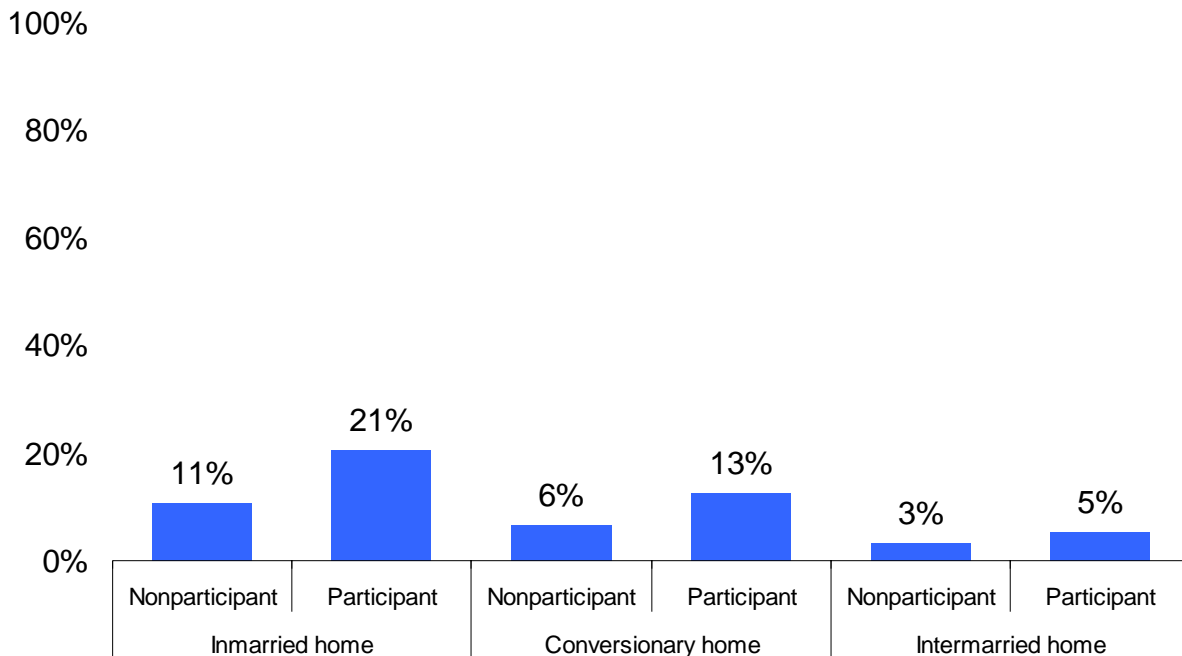


individuals raised as Reform Jews, regardless of whether they grew up in inmarried or intermarried homes, view marrying a Jew as particularly important.

The impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel demonstrates that even in the years of young adulthood there are opportunities to positively influence the Jewish trajectories of young Reform Jews. Gaps in Jewish knowledge and a limited storehouse of Jewish memories are not insurmountable barriers to choosing to be engaged in meaningful Jewish life. Our research on Taglit-Birthright Israel as well as

on other efforts to engage young adults in Jewish life, such as Jewish service programs (Chertok, Samuel, & Saxe, 2006), make clear that successful strategies “weave together multiple strands of emotional, intellectual, and hands-on experience that entice young Jews to cast their life stories in Jewish terms” (Saxe & Chertok, 2007). The proliferation of *minyanim* and other alternative settings for Jewish worship among Jewish young adults suggest that young Jewish adults “are looking for ‘redemptive, transformative experiences that give rhythm to their days and weeks and give meaning to their lives’” (Banerjee, 2007).

Figure 15: Importance of Marrying a Jew



Note: Percentage “Very Important.”

FROM INTERMARRIAGE TO ENGAGEMENT

Communal narratives provide language to frame the experience of being a contemporary American Jew and help us assess policy options. However, narratives can also serve to limit attention to some factors while ignoring others. The goal of this report was to reframe discourse about intermarriage—to move away from a simplistic focus on the couple at the moment of marriage to a more textured and life-course understanding of the full array of factors that impact Jewish engagement. Three interconnected conclusions about engagement have emerged from this analysis of the data. The first key message is that having intermarried parents, in and of itself, is not the key determinant of Jewish identity, behavior, or connections. Jewish socialization in the form of Jewish education, home ritual, and social networks plays a far more important role. When the background characteristics of those whose parents married endogenously or exogenously are accounted for, it becomes clear that it is not just who one's parents are, but one's experiences of Jewish living, education, and friendship that determine who will go on to live a richly Jewish life.

The second message in the data is that contemporary youth being raised in the Reform movement are growing up with limited personal experience of their heritage. The home can be an incubator for Jewish identity and observance, but the disconcerting fact is that most Reform Jews, including young adults, have little to no experience of a home filled with Jewish ritual or tradition. For many who were raised as Reform Jews, the message of their parents is that Jewish life is something to be taken out on a few occasions throughout the year but set back in storage the rest of the time. In addition, the Jewish education of most young Reform Jews is limited to the years before their bar or bat

mitzvah and, by the time they are in college, they are substantially disengaged from Jewish life (see Sales & Saxe, 2006). “After their *bar or bat mitzvah* celebration, the Jewish involvement of many young Reform Jews becomes limited to Yom Kippur fasting and Pesach feasting which serve as important soul-searching and family-bonding experiences, but are inadequate to make Judaism personally meaningful or help build a sense of Jewish peoplehood” (Saxe & Chertok, 2007). With little Jewish education past their early teens and few experiences of the weekly rhythms and rituals of Jewish home life, these young adults may be hesitant in the future to engage in Jewish learning or observance because they do not feel they meet an imagined minimum threshold of Jewish knowledge (Osherson, 2001; Sales & Saxe, 2006).

That a broad swath of Reform-identified young adults, even those with limited Jewish backgrounds and intermarried parents, can exhibit substantial attitude and behavior change as a result of Taglit-Birthright Israel suggests our third message, that Jewish identity is malleable even into the young adult years. The message is not as some have asserted (Wertheimer & Bayme, 2005) that inmarriage or, if that fails, conversion are the only means of ensuring Jewish continuity. The demonstrated impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel represents one example of the potential for influence that has not been considered by those who think deterministically about intermarriage.

Having inmarried parents does not guarantee active engagement among Reform Jews, nor is having intermarried parents a definitive predictor of non-engagement. Our conclusion is that it is the absence of Jewish engagement across the lifespan that constitutes the

“malaise” of modern Jewish life referred to by Rabbi Schulweis. Although efforts specifically aimed at inviting and welcoming the intermarried into Jewish life continue to be important, it is engagement and not intermarriage that presents both the greatest challenge and the most promising arena for intervention for Reform Jews and Reform Judaism. To appreciate fully the contours of this problem, the public conversation needs to be expanded beyond intermarriage. The flawed narratives of intermarriage that have dominated discussion need to be replaced by an alternative account of engagement. The new debate should focus on understanding and influencing the factors that motivate individuals and families, both unmarried and intermarried households alike, to participate actively in Jewish life. In a similar vein, a qualitative study of the experiences of intermarried families in Reform congregations found it difficult to distinguish between a synagogue’s ability to engage all congregants from its ability to reach those who were intermarried (Chertok, Rosen, Sales, & Saxe, 2001). The most effective congregations observed were those that developed ways to invite and encourage all congregant families to integrate the Jewish life symbolized by the marriage canopy into their homes, their lives, and the lives of their children.

In his presidential sermon at the 2007 Biennial of the Union for Reform Judaism, Eric Yoffie urged members of the Reform movement to reinvent the Jewish content of their lives and, specifically, to embrace a personal connection to Shabbat:

It will mean instead approaching Shabbat with the creativity that has always distinguished Reform Judaism. It will mean emphasizing the ‘Thou

shalts’ of Shabbat—candles and Kiddush, rest and study, prayer and community—rather than the ‘Thou shalt not.’ It will mean expanding our understanding of rest, and defining in new ways what is, and is not, work. It will mean providing Reform Jews with the support of a loving community so that they can feel commanded without feeling coerced. (Yoffie, 2007)

This call for Reform Jews to engage meaningfully in Jewish life is the essence of our understanding of the dilemma of contemporary Jewry. The active engagement of homes containing one adult convert may contain an important message for the engagement of all Reform Jews. Adults in these households place more importance on celebrating Shabbat and studying text; as well, the young adult children of these families are more likely to have experienced Jewish ritual and tradition in their homes. The behavior and attitudes of those who have become Jewish through conversion and of their children suggest that the critical factor is not denomination or unmarried versus intermarried status. Instead it may be the act of “choosing” that brings Judaism to life for these individuals and their families and encourages them to bring the rhythms and traditions of Jewish life into their family life.

Social scientific evidence makes clear that Jewish identity is in flux among American Jews. Accepted wisdom has been that the root of the problem for American Jewry is intermarriage and the dissolution of traditional, endogamous Jewish families. Our conclusion is different. Whether or not the identity of the next generation is strengthened depends on our ability to educate and transmit Judaism. It depends less on whom young Jews

marry than their capacity to find meaning in Judaism and the ability of parents to be role models in this endeavor. As Rabbi David Ellenson, President of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, reminds us the Reform movement “must have the courage and conviction to acknowledge that an emphasis upon a ‘Judaism of meaning,’ as opposed to a ‘Judaism of boundaries and borders,’ is what is needed in our day” (Ellenson, 2007).

NOTES

¹Children of intermarried families who were raised partly Jewish or in another religion are unlikely to engage in Jewish behavior, even after other factors are controlled for (Phillips & Chertok, 2004).

²Taglit-Birthright Israel potentially screens out the applicants with the most intensive Jewish upbringing by accepting only those who have not participated in an extensive peer trip to Israel. Those with the most tenuous Jewish connections may not apply to the program at all. The impact of the first concern is minimal at best. Even at their peak in popularity, few American Jews went on peer trips to Israel as children or young adults. Analysis of the characteristics of Taglit-Birthright Israel applicants (Saxe et al., 2007) show that, on average, applicants do appear to have received greater levels of Jewish socialization than Jewish young adults as a whole. In addition, young adults from intermarried homes appear to be underrepresented, although present in sufficient numbers for detailed analysis. However, while it is true that the average Taglit-Birthright Israel applicant is more Jewishly connected than Jewish young adults as a whole, the overall range of applicants covers the gamut from those with the most minimal backgrounds to those with the most intense.

³The Union for Reform Judaism conducted an on-line survey in fall 2007. Invitations to participate in the survey were sent to several groups including (1) a list of "national leaders at the local level", including board members, clergy, officers, and committee chairs, (2) subscribers to *Ten Minutes of Torah*, and (3) registrants to the 2007 URJ Biennial. Lists were de-duplicated so that each individual e-mail address received only one invitation to participate in the survey. The data shared by URJ included 11,790 respondents. The data set used in our analyses excluded clergy and those who were not affiliated with the Reform movement.

⁴The lines on bars on Figure 1 and on some following figures indicate confidence intervals. Confidence intervals describe the likelihood of finding the same result if the survey were repeated, with different random samples. A confidence interval of .05 indicates that were this to be done, the true value would fall within the confidence interval 95% of the time. Non-overlapping confidence intervals indicate results that are significantly different at least at the .05 level.

⁵The statistical model adjusts for the differences in the backgrounds of in- and intermarried Jews to extract only the differences in outcomes due to intermarriage and not other factors. It is as if one were to find a sample containing only people with the same level of Jewish education, age, and so on and then look at the differences between the children of in- and intermarried families.

⁶The proportion receiving any Jewish education in the Reform Young Adult Sample was 94% for those with inmarried parents, 96% for those with conversionary married parents, and 88% for those with intermarried parents.

⁷The term "conversionary home" is used to indicate that at least one parent has formally converted to Judaism.

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APPENDIX

Variables in National Jewish Population Survey 2000-0

Very important to be Jewish	recode of q142a_a (very important = 1, else = 0)
Usually lights Shabbat candles	recode of q131a_x (always or usually = 1, else = 0); zero imputed for respondents received Persons of Jewish Background instrument
Any Jewish organizational ties	1 if member of a synagogue (q121_x), JCC (including life membership) (q252_a), member of other Jewish organization (q252_a), contributed to Jewish federation (q267_x), contributed to other Jewish organization (q274_x)
	0 if otherwise
Very emotionally attached to Israel	recode of q142a_a (very = 1, else = 0)
Raising Jewish child	Child raised Jewish by religion (kq010_1) or if no religion and child raised Jew (kq012a) and child must be child of respondent (biological, step, or adopted).
Female	recode of q005_a (0 = male, 1 = female)
Age	recode of q007ab_a (omits DK/RF)
Square of age	
Degree	recode of q030_a1 (0 = less than high school, 1 = high school, 2 = associate/junior college, 3 = college, 4 = graduate/professional school)
Hours of Jewish education	Following Himmelfarb (1977), the sum of 120 * Years of Sunday school (q170a_a and q173a_a), 320 * years of Hebrew school (q170b_a
Square of hours of Jewish education	
Childhood Shabbat candles	recode of q165a_a (0 = never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = usually, 3 = always)
H.S. social network	sum of recode of q180_a (0 = no or few Jewish friends, 1 = about half Jewish friends, 2 = most of all Jewish friends) and recode of q181_a (0 = All/most dates not Jewish, 1 = About half dates Jewish, 2 = most/all dates Jewish). If no dates, index is two times recode of q180_a.
Parental intermarriage	0 if mother and father Jewish or half/part Jewish
	1 if mother or father Jewish or half/part Jewish and other spouse not Jewish (q011a_a and q011b_a)

Variables in Taglit-Birthright Israel Study

Any Jewish education in elementary school	1 if attended full-time Jewish day school, part-time Hebrew school that met several times a week, or part-time Hebrew school that met once a week in grades 1 to 8
	0 if did not attend any
Any Jewish education in high school	1 if attended full-time Jewish day school, part-time Hebrew school that met several times a week, or part-time Hebrew school that met once a week in grades 9 to 12
	0 if did not attend any
H.S. Shabbat candles	1 if someone in home regularly lit Shabbat candles in high school years
	0 if otherwise
Attended Jewish summer camp	1 if attended or attended and worked at an overnight camp that had Shabbat services and/or a Jewish educational program
	0 if otherwise
Participated in Taglit/Birthright Israel	1 if landed in Israel
	0 if otherwise
Pretrip lighting Shabbat candles	1 if never lit Shabbat candles over past year
	2 if sometimes
	3 if usually
	4 if always
Posttrip lighting Shabbat candles	1 if usually/always lit Shabbat candles in past three months (nonparticipants) or since return from Israel (participants)
	0 if otherwise
Pretrip Shabbat meal	1 if never had/attended a special meal on Shabbat
	2 if sometimes
	3 if usually
	4 if always

Posttrip lighting Shabbat candles	1 if usually/always lit Shabbat candles in past three months (nonparticipants) or since return from Israel (participants)
	0 if otherwise
Pretrip Shabbat meal	1 if never had/attended a special meal on Shabbat
	2 if sometimes
	3 if usually
	4 if always
Posttrip Shabbat meal	1 if usually always had/attended a special meal on Shabbat in past three months (nonparticipants) or since return from Israel
	0 if otherwise
Pretrip connection to Israel	1 if not at all to “To what extent do you...feel a connection to Israel”
	2 if a little
	3 if somewhat
	4 if very much
Posttrip connection to Israel	1 if very much to “To what extent do you...feel a connection to Israel”
	0 if otherwise
Pretrip raising Jewish children	1 if not important to “How important is each of the following personally in your life? ... Raising your children Jewish?”
	2 if a little important
	3 if somewhat important
	4 if very important.
Posttrip raising Jewish children	1 if very important to “How important is each of the following personally in your life? ... Raising your children Jewish?”
	0 if otherwise

Pretrip marrying a Jew	1 if not important to “How important is each of the following personally in your life? ... Marrying someone Jewish?”
	2 if a little important
	3 if somewhat important
	4 if very important.
Posttrip marrying a Jew	1 if very important to “How important is each of the following personally in your life? ... Marrying someone Jewish?”
	0 if otherwise
Parents intermarried	1 if mother or father currently Jewish and other parent not currently Jewish
	0 if otherwise
Parents conversionary marriage	1 if mother or father not raised Jewish and currently Jewish and other parent currently Jewish
	0 if otherwise
Parents inmarried	1 if mother and father raised Jewish and currently Jewish
	0 if otherwise



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