



Funders and Partners



The [Jim Joseph Foundation](#) seeks to foster compelling, effective Jewish learning experiences for young Jews in the United States. Established in 2006, the Jim Joseph Foundation has awarded more than \$500 million in grants with the aspiration that all Jews, their families, and their friends will be inspired by Jewish learning experiences to lead connected, meaningful, and purpose-filled lives and make positive contributions to their communities and the world.



[Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah](#) helps Jews and fellow travelers apply Jewish wisdom to live better lives and shape a better world. In other words, we seek to help people apply particular Jewish wisdom to universal human questions.



The [Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation](#) (Schusterman) is a global organization that seeks to improve lives, strengthen communities and reduce inequality. Our philanthropic vision is grounded in a commitment to pursue justice, repair the world and treat all people with dignity and civility. We invest in efforts to improve public education in the United States, strengthen the Jewish people and Israel, and address the needs of marginalized individuals and communities.



For more than 100 years, [UJA-Federation](#) has brought New Yorkers together to solve some of the most pressing problems facing our community. Working with a network of hundreds of nonprofits—including The Jewish Education Project—UJA cares for Jews everywhere and New Yorkers of all backgrounds, responds to crises close to home and far away, and shapes our Jewish future, touching the lives of more than 4.5 million people each year.



The Jewish Education Project inspires and empowers educators to create transformative Jewish experiences, helping children, teens, and families thrive in today's highly complex and challenging world. In 2016, The Jewish Education Project wrote the report *Generation Now: Understanding and Engaging Jewish Teens Today*.



GENERATION NOW

Founded in 2008, Rosov Consulting is a professional services firm helping foundations, philanthropists, and nonprofits in the Jewish communal sector meet their goals, assess progress, and make well-informed decisions to enhance impact. Working at the nexus of the funder and grantee relationship, our expertise includes evaluation and applied research, strategy development, launching new philanthropic initiatives, and systems coaching. We utilize our range of life experiences and knowledge to best serve our clients.



YOUTH-SERVING ORGANIZATION PARTNERS





Dear Colleague

We are pleased to share with you our latest findings about American Jewish teens. Based on data collected from what we believe is the largest study of American Jewish teens ever conducted (with 17,576 teens participating), these findings deepen our understanding of what it means to be a Jewish teen in the United States today by showing the complexities of teen life. We hope that this report provides youth professionals and other stakeholders with constructive insights that enrich their capacity to work with Jewish teens.

We believe that the most important message that communities and organizations can take away from this study is that youth-serving organizations are awesome. Teens who participate in a youth-serving organization score higher on almost every outcome the researchers measured. The implications for this finding suggest an imperative to invest further in youth-serving organizations as a model for teen engagement, both to champion the invaluable work that YSOs are already doing, and to imagine new possibilities, including opportunities that appeal to teens who are underrepresented and not yet engaged.

Beyond the considerable amount we have learned about American Jewish teens themselves, who they are and what they care about—and about the way the youth-serving organizations matter in their lives—this project serves as a paradigm for collaboration among funders, researchers, and practitioners.

This study would not have been possible without the goodwill of the 14 participating youth-serving organizations that mobilized as a field to advance research that prioritizes the teen experience over organizational needs. These 14 organizations from across American Jewish communal life represent a huge breadth of ideologies and interests. Their openness to work together to elevate the field and to enrich teens' development beyond the walls of their own institutions is truly admirable—and indicates a continued, positive shift in organizational mind-set and approaches in Jewish teen engagement efforts today.

We offer sincere gratitude to the Jim Joseph Foundation, Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah, and the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation for their support in this long-term effort. Their vision and commitment enabled us to complete this complex and robust multi-year, multi-stage study, which we hope will serve as a model for Jewish communal and educational research in the future.

Throughout this entire process, we looked toward the team at Rosov Consulting for their expertise, unique skillset, and invaluable partnership to design the study, put it in the field, and make meaning of the data. We are forever grateful for their leadership and dedication to the work.

Finally, we at The Jewish Education Project would like to thank UJA-Federation for its ongoing support of our work to create transformational Jewish educational experiences for today's youth.

Thank you for your interest in this important work,

Robert Sherman
Chief Executive Officer
The Jewish Education Project

Craig Padover
Chairman of the Board
The Jewish Education Project

David Bryfman
Chief Innovation Officer
The Jewish Education Project



From the Advisory Committee

This report represents the opinions of 17,500 Jewish youth. While social science researchers know that sheer numbers are only part of the story, 17,500 is inarguably an extraordinary sample size (for comparison's sake, the 2013 Pew study was based on approximately 3,500 responses). To achieve these numbers, the researchers collaborated with 14 youth-serving organizations, each able to tailor a section of the survey to its own data needs. And while 14 may not appear to be as eye-popping as 17,500, those who have tried to get even two or three organizations to collaborate will find the number 14 to represent a major achievement. Before even looking at the results, we can see support for the idea that these organizations are appreciative of data about their participants, and that these participants, in turn, are eager to share their opinions.

The results themselves tell us much about Jewish youth and the organizations that serve them. As you read through, various findings will stand out as particularly comforting, confirming, challenging, and/or intriguing. Taken together, the findings contribute to an important thread within Jewish education and indeed within Judaism itself, a trend that is becoming ever-more central to the communal conversation. That conversation has been dominated by a perceived urgency to get youth “into” being Jewish for the sake of continuity, or to stem numerical decline. This study can be seen as supporting an alternate pathway, the importance of bringing Judaism into the lives of teens. At a time of increasing fragmentation, anxiety, depression, and stress, Judaism can offer, the study suggests, meaningful connections to peers and family as sources for personal growth and health.

The study raises questions for further exploration—for example, about the ways Jewish youth think about spirituality and its affordances within Judaism. We hope that this study is seen not as an end point (“we now know what we need to know about Jewish youth...”) but rather as the opening of a conversation. And, finally, we hope that this is part of a trend of providing opportunities for youth to have a voice in the communal dialogue. “We” should realize that “they” not only have important things to say about their lives, but also have ideas and insights to shape the experiences and organizations in which they participate.

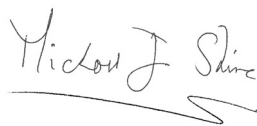
We end by acknowledging and admiring the enormous efforts on the part of the research team and the creativity, persistence, and wisdom shown in carrying a project of this scope to its successful completion. Yashar Kochachem, it has been an honor to be part of the conversation along the way.



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GenNow Outcomes

One important result of the Generation Now initiative has been the development of the GenNow Outcomes Framework. The 14 outcomes define the ways that Jewish teen education and engagement experiences can help teens flourish.

- 1 Jewish teens have a strong sense of self.
- 2 Jewish teens feel a sense of pride about being Jewish.
- 3 Jewish teens have learning experiences that are both challenging and valuable.
- 4 Jewish teens engage in learning that enables them to be more active participants in various Jewish communities.
- 5 Jewish teens learn about and positively experience Jewish holidays and Shabbat.
- 6 Jewish teens establish strong friendships.
- 7 Jewish teens develop strong and healthy relationships with their families.
- 8 Jewish teens develop significant relationships with mentors, role models, and educators.
- 9 Jewish teens are able to express their values and ethics in relation to Jewish principles and wisdom.
- 10 Jewish teens develop the capacity (skills and language) that allows them to grapple with and express their spiritual journeys.
- 11 Jewish teens feel connected to various communities.
- 12 Jewish teens develop the desire and commitment to be part of the Jewish people now and in the future.
- 13 Jewish teens develop a positive relationship to the land, people, and State of Israel.
- 14 Jewish teens are inspired and empowered to make a positive difference in the various communities and world in which they live.

An account of the methodology that led to the development of these 14 outcomes can be found in the Methodological Appendix. All of the research reports associated with the development and testing of these outcomes can be found at <http://JewishEdProject.org/GenerationNow>.



Flourishing as a Framework

This study is animated by the vision that all Jewish teens in America will see their Jewish heritage as a source of wisdom, inspiration, and strength as they grow and discover their place in the world.

We are excited to share with you data from 17,576 Jewish teens between the ages of 13 to 19 who took the time to share with us who they are and how being Jewish matters to them through participating in a national survey. Over 800 of these teens also wrote comments about how they think about being Jewish. Additionally, our understanding was augmented by in-depth interviews with over 30 Jewish teens.

We began this project more than four years ago by talking directly with Jewish teens. In a series of focus groups, we invited teens to speak with us about what it meant to them to be Jewish, what they think of their Jewish activities, who they are now and who they want to be, the kind of world they want to live in, and the role they want to play in making that world a reality. These conversations with 139 Jewish teens led to the creation of the GenNow outcomes, published in 2016 as *Generation Now: Understanding and Engaging Today's Teens*, which framed the current study you will learn about in this report.

As we learned from our 2016 study, Jewish teens today want to form meaningful relationships with others, understand where they fit into the world, and be active participants in shaping a better future. As they seek greater independence, they still look to trusted adults for guidance and structure. The questions in our survey were designed to measure aspects of the GenNow outcomes, taking into account what Jewish teens say they need to grow and develop into their best selves. The 14 outcomes relate not only to more traditional Jewish communal concerns like Israel and Jewish peoplehood (which Jewish teens do think about) but also to how Jewish activities deepen friendships, expose teens to provocative new ideas, and equip teens to be changemakers in the world.

The term “Generation Now” reminds us that Jewish adolescents should be treated as a generation with the capacity to bring about personal, communal, and global change, not only in the distant future as the adults they might grow up to be but also as the teens they are now.

Importantly, our research is not framed around a “deficit-model.” It won’t tell you what’s wrong with American Jewish teens. We are not interested in measuring teens against normative checklists that dictate what a good Jew should do or feel. Rather we operate from a framework of thriving, which considers what conditions people need for optimal development. Thriving is not about seeking simple personal gratification; thriving is about deepening connections, fostering well-being, and developing a capacity to give back. These are all things teens want for themselves. This study helps us understand how Jewish teens see their Jewish activities helping them grow in the directions in which they tell us they want to go.

This study was designed primarily to learn about teens who have participated in Jewish youth-serving organizations; as such, we collaborated with 14 organizations representing diverse ideologies and approaches to Jewish life in the United States today. Our findings also give professionals and other stakeholders who work with Jewish teens in other settings new insights into the work they do and how it matters. Rather than only being able to measure how many teens show up for an activity, Jewish professionals can begin to consider opportunities for their programs to enable teens to flourish. The 14 outcomes are meant to help guide and inform a wide range of professionals who work with Jewish teens. Organizations will choose to emphasize some more than others.

We begin this report by sharing findings that are specific to the work Jewish youth-serving organizations (YSOs) do with teens.¹ We then shift to reflecting on what we have learned about the Jewish teens in our study more broadly.

Thriving

Jewish wisdom, and by extension Jewish education and engagement, has the capacity to empower Jews to thrive in this world. It can do so by a) giving Jews the capacity to be the best possible versions of themselves; b) connecting Jews to things that matter in their lives including transcendent powers, significant relationships in their lives, and to the communities in which they exist; and c) providing Jews with the tools to bring about a more equitable and just world.

David Bryfman, Ph.D.

Chief Innovation Officer

The Jewish Education Project

Author of *Generation Now:*

Understanding and Engaging Jewish Teens Today, 2016

¹ We use the term “youth-serving organization” (YSO) instead of the more commonly used terms “youth group” or “youth movement” to remind us that the mission of these organizations is to benefit youth, not simply gather them.

About the Jewish Teens in Our Study

Our survey was designed in collaboration with 14 Jewish youth-serving organizations (YSOs) in North America. The questions we asked were crafted to understand how the work YSOs do can help today's teens thrive. Each of the participating YSOs helped us contact their teens and encouraged them to participate in the survey. By design, most of our respondents were teens who participated, at least a little, in one of these YSOs.

Ultimately we heard from over 17,500 Jewish teens between the ages of 13 and 19 living in the United States or Canada. We were able to learn a great deal about these teens, specifically about their attitudes toward Jewish life and Jewish activities. Much of the information we share in this report reflects the core population of our survey respondents: teens who are engaged in Jewish youth group activities. However, our sample includes a number of teens who never participated in any of the formal Jewish activities we asked about. We also conducted over 30 in-depth interviews with a diverse group of Jewish teens. In the interviews, we specifically cast a wider net and created a sample that offered perspectives less likely to be included among the survey respondents, in particular: teens from interfaith families, teens not engaged in a YSO, and teens who did not attend a Jewish day school or Hebrew school.

It's important to understand that our study primarily included teens who have some connection to Jewish communal institutions and programs. *This means that this report is better suited not to make claims about every U.S. teen today with some Jewish ancestry, but rather about American Jewish teens who have had a connection to, or interaction with, a Jewish institution or program—even if only enough to get on a mailing list.* Many of the teens we spoke with see themselves at the center of thick, densely woven webs of Jewish connectedness. Others have fewer or weaker ties to other Jews and Jewish communal organizations.²

In this report we first focus on teens in [Jewish youth-serving organizations](#). Then we share more broadly about [Jewish community-connected teens](#).

Key Findings Related to Jewish Youth-Serving Organizations and Teens

- 1. Involvement in a Jewish Youth-Serving Organization Is Related to Positive Teen Outcomes.**
Teens who reported participating in a YSO since seventh grade, compared to non-participating teens, rated themselves higher on almost all GenNow outcomes, even when controlling for earlier Jewish educational experiences. Participation in a YSO contributes not only to teens connecting to being Jewish but also to their feeling good about themselves, deepening relationships with family, friends, and mentors, and feeling empowered to make change in the world.
- 2. Teens Get More from More Youth-Serving Organizations.**
A little more than half the teens in the survey reported participating in more than one YSO, as opposed to being “loyal” to just one organization. Participation in multiple YSOs, instead of only one, predicted higher ratings on almost all GenNow outcomes.
- 3. Jewish Content Lifts All Boats.**
We asked teens to tell us whether the activities they participated in contained “Jewish stuff.” We found that reporting “Jewish stuff” in activities predicted higher ratings across *all* the GenNow outcomes, including the social-emotional ones. This finding was one of the strongest and most consistent predictors in our study.
- 4. Youth-Serving Organizations Could Attract More Diverse Jewish Teens.**
The portrait we have of teens engaged in Jewish activities does not match the portrait we have of American Jewish families on the whole. Notably there are far fewer teens who describe their families as interfaith or who describe themselves as having a diverse background than we may have expected. There were also fewer teens who describe themselves as gender fluid or nonbinary than in the general American teen population. We see this opportunity to attract more diverse teens as an area of tremendous growth for the YSOs (and the Jewish community as a whole).

² For information about our sample frame and survey respondents, please refer to the Methodological Appendix.



Key Findings About Jewish Community-Connected Teens

- 1. Participation as a Teen Matters.** For some, the Bar or Bat Mitzvah is a graduation from Jewish educational experiences. This study shows that teens who reported involvement in Jewish activities as teens (including youth-serving organizations, day school, or camp) reported higher scores on all the GenNow outcomes, compared to those who did not participate, even when controlling for earlier Jewish educational experiences. Teens who began to participate in Jewish activities as teens rated themselves higher than teens who were involved in Jewish educational programs as children but stopped participating as teens.
- 2. Jewish Teens Like Their Parents and Value Their Perspectives.** The teens in our study enjoy spending time with their family and often looked to their parents to help them make sense of the world. This finding is consistent with data about teens in general, which shows far less conflict and more positive relationships between adolescents and their parents than in past generations.
- 3. Being Jewish Is Often About Family.** Jewish beliefs and practices are closely linked with family in the hearts and minds of teens. Being Jewish is not simply a religious or ethnic practice but also an expression of family bonds.
- 4. Relig-ish?** Americans increasingly describe themselves as having “no religion.” In our data, a sizable minority of Jewish teens shared that they are atheist, agnostic, or Jewish culturally but not religiously. But even many “no religion” teens are interested in engaging with Judaism at certain points in their life.
- 5. Jewish Culture Is Something to Celebrate.** The most commonly used word by teens to express what it means to be Jewish is “culture.” The concept of Jewish culture captures the elements of being Jewish that teens feel good about and leaves out those elements that they object to or are confused by. Jewish culture is an active word for teens. It’s not something that they are given but something that they do.
- 6. Jewish Teens Share the Troubles and Concerns of Other American Adolescents.** Teens in our study believe adolescents need help with social-emotional issues. In particular, they named coping with anxiety, academic pressure, self-esteem issues, and failure as the biggest needs of their peers.
- 7. Jewish Teens See Positives and Negatives to Social Media.** Teens acknowledge that social media can cause them stress, but many also believe it can help them cope with stress, connect with friends, and organize for change.
- 8. Anti-Semitism and the American Jewish Teen.** Many of the teens we interviewed report anti-Semitic experiences but do not feel personally threatened or see it as a primary lens to understand their experience in the United States today.
- 9. Open to Israel.** Jewish community-connected teens are interested in Israel and believe that as Jews they have a special connection to the land and country. They want to ask trusted adults questions about Israel, and teens who have not traveled there hope to do so one day.
- 10. Travel to Israel Is a Teen Peak Experience.** Travel to Israel as part of an organized group predicted higher ratings on most outcomes, including social-emotional outcomes. Teens who have visited Israel describe it as a peak experience. Teens who have not been to Israel would like to go.