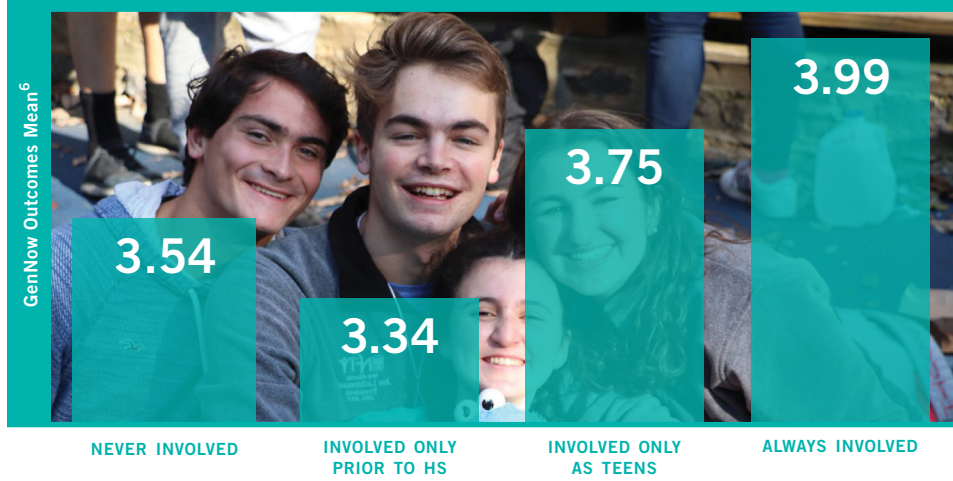


**Jewish Teens in  
All Facets of Life**

## Participation as a Teen Matters

We were able to compare teens engaged in Jewish activities in high school (including YSOs, day school, and camp) with other Jewish teens. We found significant differences between these groups on all the outcomes we measured, even when we controlled for background differences.

GenNow Outcome Mean by Jewish Involvement



Note: All apparent differences are significant at  $p < .05$

We saw that teens who had been engaged *before* but *not during* high school reported similar patterns of response across most (10) outcomes as those teens who had *never been involved* in Jewish educational activities at all. And on four outcomes<sup>7</sup>, teens who had been engaged only as children rated themselves *lower* than teens who had *never* been engaged (either before or during high school).

Our analysis showed that participation *as a teen* contributed more to the differences we see in outcome ratings compared to experiences *before* high school, as children.

Our data suggest that teens engaged in Jewish programs as teens, no matter their backgrounds, have a different relationship to being Jewish than teens who were never engaged or engaged only before high school. They rated themselves higher on all of the outcomes we measured.

## Parents and Family Life

### Love and Respect for Parents

American Jewish teens share that overall they have warm, close, and low-conflict relationships with their parents. More than that, they report genuinely enjoying and enthusiastically spending time with their parents and feel secure that their parents love and respect them. Teens appreciate the structure their parents create for them and appreciate the values their parents try to instill in them.



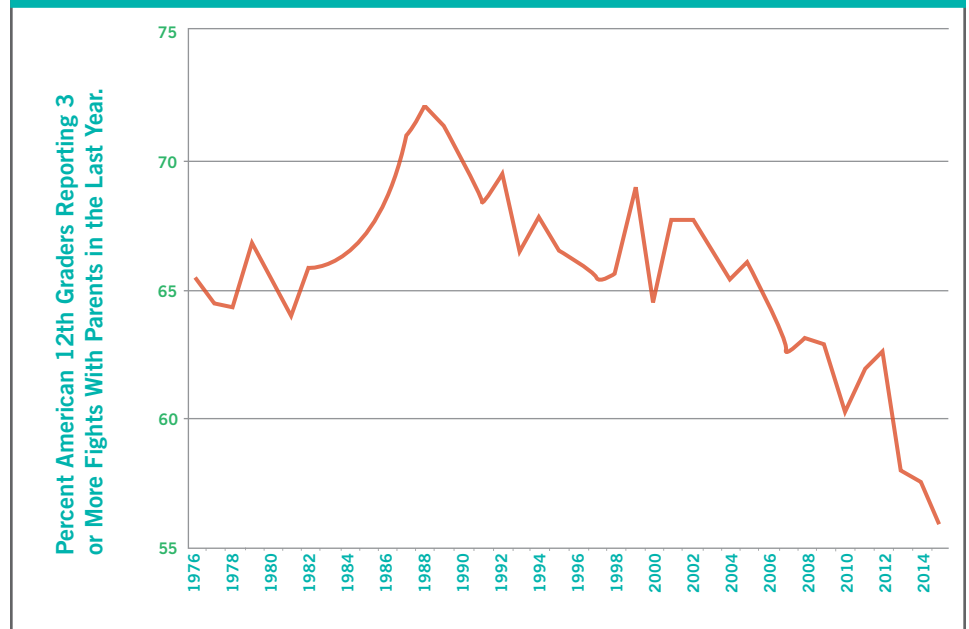
<sup>6</sup> The outcomes mean is based on all scaled items on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is “Strongly Disagree” and 5 is “Strongly Agree.” While the chart shows the overall trend, the text gives a more nuanced description of the specific findings and the differences among the outcomes.

<sup>7</sup> These four outcomes are: “Jewish teens have experienced learning that has been both challenging and valuable”; “Jewish teens learn about and positively experience Jewish holidays and Shabbat”; “Jewish teens develop the desire and commitment to be part of the Jewish people now and in the future”; “Jewish teens develop a positive relationship to the land, people, and State of Israel.”

For over a century our concept of adolescence has painted the teenage years as a period of “storm and strife.” More recent data on contemporary American teens show that rather than seeking independence from their parents, today’s teenagers are experiencing something akin to an extended childhood. They spend more time at home and are less likely to engage in some of the activities we might associate with being a teenager, like going to the mall with friends or having a driver’s license (Twenge, 2017).



Teens Are Now Less Likely to Fight With Their Parents



Adapted from Twenge (2017) from her online appendix p14 Figure B.16. Percentage of 12th graders who have gotten into three or more fights with their parents over the last year. *Monitoring the Future, 1976–2015*.

**Adam:** *I'd say [my relationship with my parents is] pretty perfect. They've given me the best opportunity I could ever ask for. They show respect. They correct me when I'm wrong. They discipline me when I'm wrong. But at the same time they've seem to have found the perfect balance, as I don't feel restrained at all.*

### Marking Jewish Moments With Family

In addition to educational experiences with professional staff and formal curricula that take place outside of the home, like day school, supplementary school, and camp, the majority of teens in our study reported marking important Jewish moments that are often celebrated with family: 90% of respondents shared that they had a Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony. Additionally, 84% reported frequent attendance in a Passover seder before high school.

Jewish holidays celebrated with family at home, particularly Chanukah and Passover, were often mentioned by teens in the interviews as positive associations they had of being Jewish. They offered accounts of family gatherings as warm, lively, and engaging. Teens are happy to participate in these celebrations, see them as highlights of being Jewish, and imagine continuing to make them a part of their lives going forward.



Grandparents also play an important role in the lives of teens, including in observing and celebrating certain holidays.

**Hunter:** *We do celebrate Jewish holidays at my grandparents' house for sure. We'll open presents a few nights out of Chanukah. But the big holidays, yes, we definitely do celebrate with our extended family. . . . [Holidays have] been such a big part of my childhood and adulthood. Just growing up, it's really benefited me for the best. And I think passing it down to my kids and grandkids is definitely a thing that I would love to keep going.*

### Family Dinner

But beyond special occasions most teens in our interviews mentioned again and again eating weeknight dinner together as a core activity they engaged in as a family, which they very much value and enjoy. A few teens even marked weeknight dinners as a *Jewish* activity that they did as a family—either because they explicitly discussed Jewish topics or because the very act of gathering over food to talk seemed to be a Jewish activity.

**Samantha:** *Then every night also, even if I have a ton of homework, we find the time to eat dinner together even if it's just a box of pizza, or something; we spend that 10 minutes together talking about each other's days and stuff like that.*

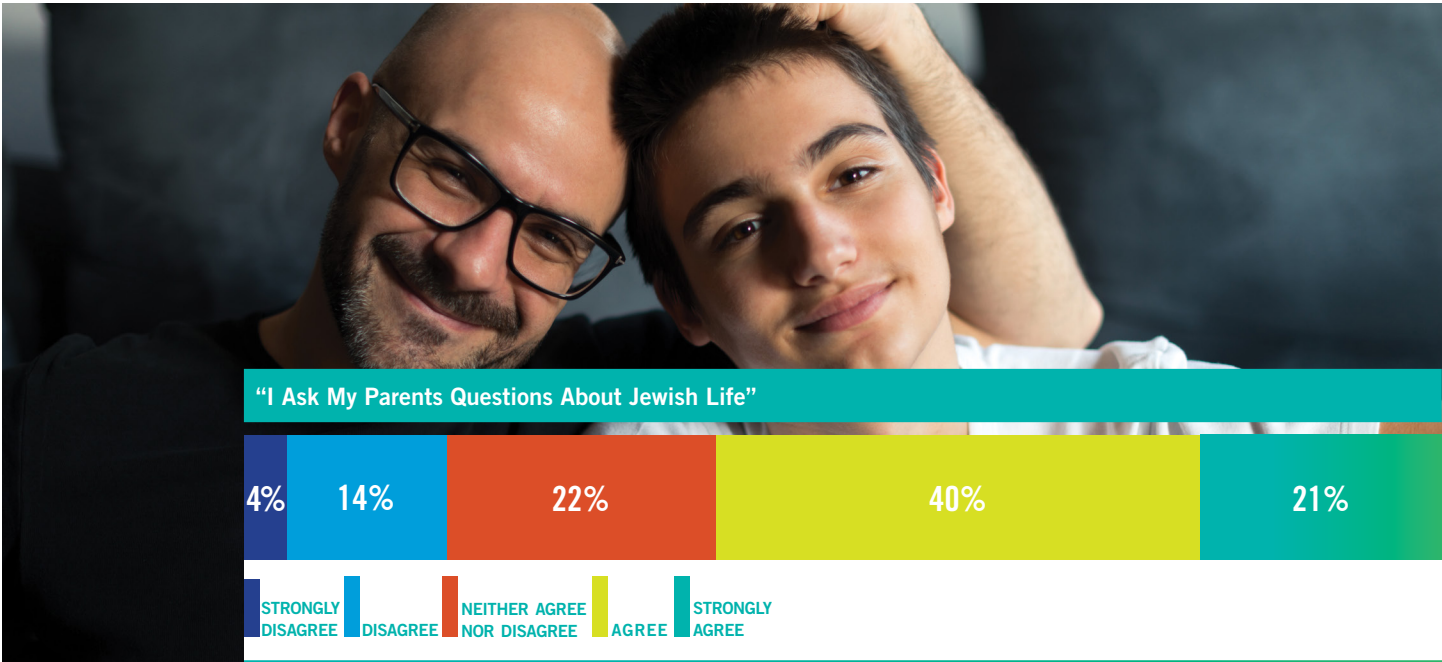
**Ethan:** *It's not like an explicitly Jewish activity, but we always had dinner together, and I think that was something that we thought of as a Jewish activity. We would always say blessings before meals. . . . We'd talk about Jewish things a lot. . . . My parents talk a lot about what Jewish values are, or what their Jewish values are, and making time for family was part of that. I think I see having dinner together as reflective of Jewish values.*

### Teens Talk to Their Parents, but Do They Talk About Being Jewish?

Another marker of teens' relationships with parents is that they seem to talk to one another about their day-to-day lives and events and trust their parents to guide them in how to view the world.

**Nate:** *Sometimes my dad and I read the same books. And we talk about them. That's really interesting. I read some columns that my parents [read] in the Wall Street Journal or that sort of thing, that I discuss with my parents. . . . Political discussions at the dinner table . . . are a pretty big part of our family.*

However, the teens in our study don't necessarily talk with their parents about being Jewish. In our survey, we asked teens specifically whether they asked their parents questions about *Jewish* life. This was one of our lowest scoring survey items.

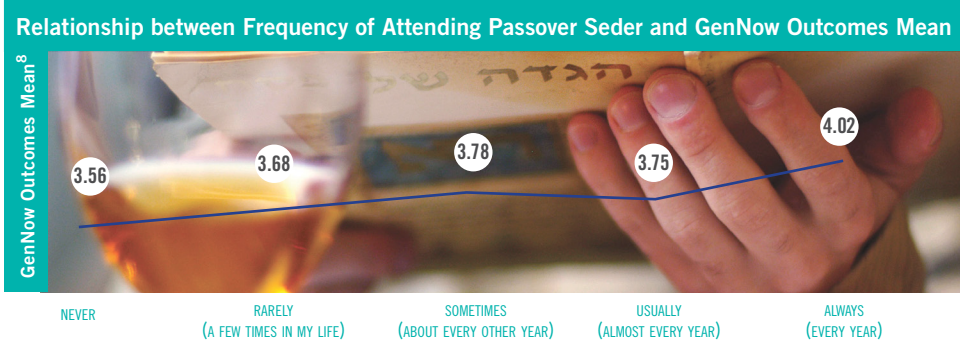


Jewish teens and their parents seem to know how to talk to one another. How can we help them find ways to center questions about being Jewish?

**Ava says the one thing she would change about her family's Jewish life is that she would want her parents to be more active in it:** *I would want my parents to be more involved in my Jewish education at temple, or just in general, because most of what I learned about being Jewish, religiously and just traditionally, was from Temple, and not really my parents.*

### The Family Seder

The strongest predictor of teens asking their parents questions about Jewish life was the frequency of attending a Passover seder as a child. In fact, having attended a Passover seder regularly predicted higher scores on 13 out of 14 outcomes, making it one of the background variables that was most consistently related to higher scores for teens on the outcomes we measured.

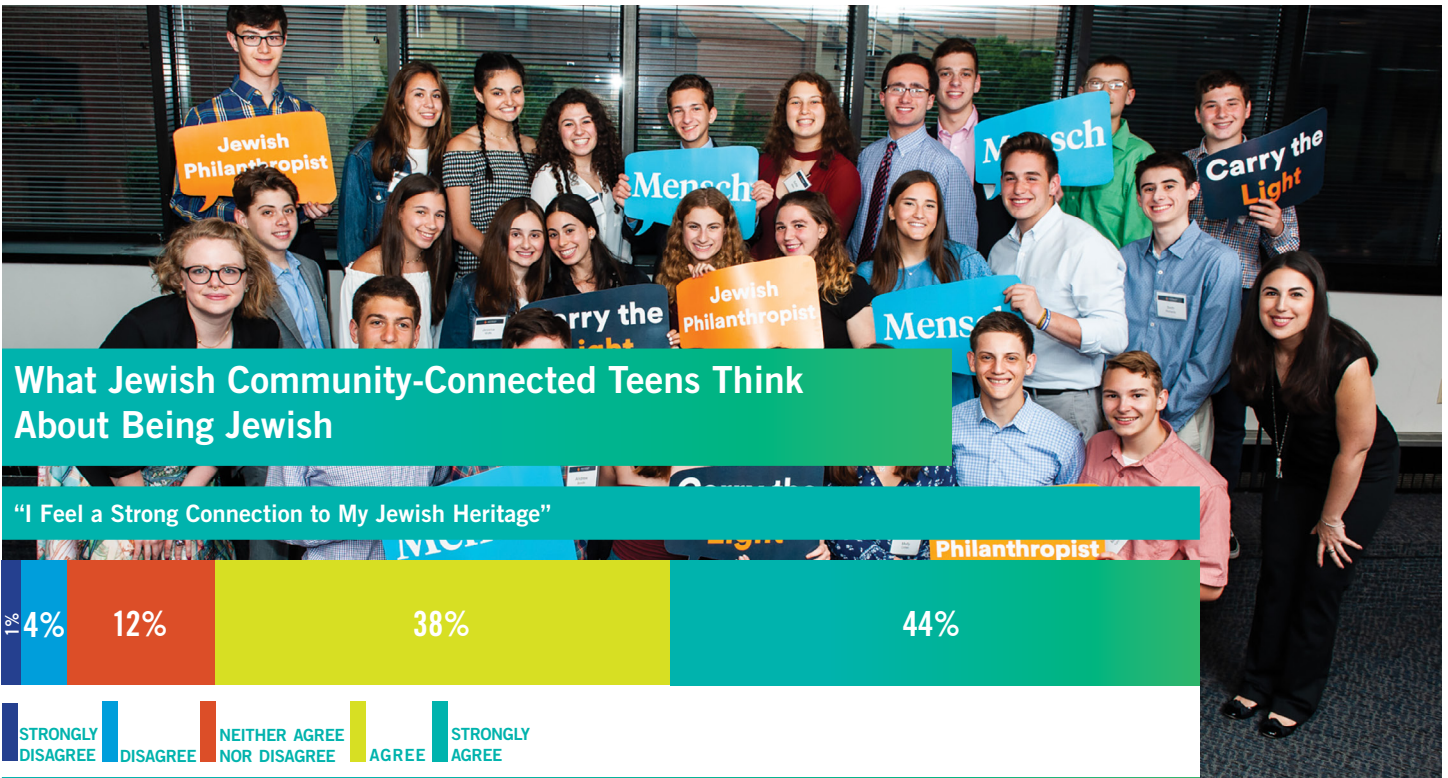


*Note: The relationship between GenNow outcomes mean and frequency of participation in a Passover Seder is significant at  $p < .05$ .*

<sup>8</sup> The outcomes mean is based on all scaled items on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is "Strongly Disagree" and 5 is "Strongly Agree." While the chart shows the overall trend, the text gives a more nuanced description of the specific findings and the differences among the outcomes.

The Passover seder is, in its essence, a curriculum for multiple generations to talk together about what it means to be Jewish.

**Elizabeth:** *[When I think of being Jewish] I immediately just think of the holidays that we celebrate together. I think of going to my Bubbie's and Zayde's house and things like Passover and Chanukah and Rosh Hashanah and things that we celebrate it together, and I love the history aspect of it. . . . I think it's really interesting, that reading back on it and hearing about our ancestors and things like that and seeing what we've worked for.*



### Connected and Proud

The teens in our study shared that they felt a strong connection to their Jewish heritage. Of all the attitudes we measured in our survey, this was one of the items on which teens rated themselves highest. Being Jewish is something that teens feel good about and feel pride in and that matters to them. This generally positive attitude to being Jewish echoes a finding of the 2013 Pew study, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, which found that 94% of American Jewish adults agreed they are “proud to be Jewish.”

Teens are particularly proud of Jewish accomplishment throughout history, Jewish survival in challenging times, Jewish success in the secular sphere, and Jewish contributions to Western culture. To be Jewish means to be associated with the above features, which teens saw both as positive and special.

**Ben:** *I think like general resilience of the Jewish people is always inspiring and there's lots of stories of overcoming adversity and things like that that you can kind of point to throughout history that's inspiring. . . . I mean, like it's just when you can point to this tiny group of people that has accomplished so many things . . . when you're just a part of this very tiny group that has accomplished so much, like it's kind of a thing that you can just look back and say, "I'm a part of that," and yeah. . . . It feels like . . . I don't know, it just . . . I don't want to say good but yeah, like it feels like heartwarming to say that I am a part of something bigger than myself that has been so successful.*

Along with a strong connection to Jewish heritage and history, teens also feel that their Jewishness is a connection to one's family and one's own immediate ancestors, which is subtly and importantly different from an ethnic identification with other Jews.

**Ethan reflected on his experience at synagogue over the high holidays, noting,** *Yesterday I was sitting in services and I'm thinking, what does this mean to me? What is my purpose in being here? And it really doesn't mean that much to me, besides the fact to know my tradition, and heritage, and pass it on to my children. I can't say I was there for any reason. We asked Ethan why he might want to pass something down when he wasn't sure what it meant to him. He answered,* *Because it's meaningful to my parents and my grandparents, and they have passed it down to me. So when they're gone, and I don't pass it down, all their hard work of raising me Jewish, and everyone's hard work before them, of raising all these generations of Jews, and going to services, and appreciating the holidays, and eating matzah, and keeping Passover, and fasting on Yom Kippur, in my eyes, if one generation doesn't pass it down, that can kill a whole line of Jewish heritage. And why would you want to do that?*



Ethan sees himself as part of vertical line passing along a tradition he has inherited to his own children. He isn't sure what the content means to him personally, but he takes his task of passing it along seriously. For some teens, being Jewish is a connectedness from one generation to the next. It is who they come from. They link themselves to Jewish ancestors of the past and are proud to make that connection. This does not always translate into a bond of loyalty or obligation to other Jews living today.

When teens do talk about connections to other Jews in the present, they tend to use the word “community” over people or peoplehood. They tend to draw connections to Jews they know and have met face to face, rather than abstract notions of other Jews in distant places with whom they share an ethnic bond. The word community carries a sense of volition. It consists of those who participate and are present. It is less tied to ethnic or genealogical ideas about who is included.

**Sebastian:** *In my family, religion and community are synonymous. For example, last night as a precursor to Thanksgiving, we had dinner with some family friends and we all happen to be Jewish, but I don't think religion or God, or any of that, was brought up once. . . . We had an awesome time.*

**Talia:** *As a Jew, I would consider myself less a religious Jew and more a part of like the Jewish community.*

## Being Jewish Is About Family

In analyzing the survey data, we used a statistical procedure called a factor analysis. This is an analytic tool for understanding which concepts seem tied together in teen response patterns.

Fascinatingly, teens' survey responses suggest that items related to religious *beliefs* and *practices* are most closely tied to those related to *family*. This insight elucidates how feelings about family are linked to teens' attitudes about Judaism. There is a strong connection for teens between the practices and beliefs of Judaism and what happens in their own homes. These elements are intimately woven together in the hearts and minds of teenagers in our study.

Studies in the psychology of religion (Kirkpatrick, 1998, Ullman, 1989) suggest that our own religious expression can be rooted in how we feel about our parents and how closely we feel tied to them. This research highlights a possibility that for teens, being Jewish is not simply a religious or ethnic practice but also an expression of family bonds. Being Jewish is something teens connect to their parents, grandparents, and those who came before them. Being Jewish and planning to continue being Jewish as an adult is a way teens show their love for and connection to their family and honor their ancestors.

**Noah:** *Definitely for me first, with Judaism, definitely family because I feel like family holidays are . . . we always are able to meet up with each other during a Jewish holiday. We never miss a Jewish holiday and we never neglect one or skip it. We always celebrate a Jewish holiday and we never celebrate it by ourselves. We always celebrate it with family, at least one family member or multiple. But definitely family is the first big word.*

For many teens, being Jewish is something they do with their families. They often imagine that any Jewish practices they continue in the future will also be primarily family and home centered. Teens talk about wanting to keep these domestic holiday celebrations going into adulthood more than other elements of Jewish practice, like synagogue membership, for example.



**Emily:** *I'd love to maybe attend [services]. Belonging to a congregation sounds like a nice idea but also when I'm an adult it will probably be expensive and I'll be very busy too. So I don't know if it would be the best use of my time. But I would love to throw a Passover dinner party with my friends or go to my parents' house or something like that when I'm an adult. I'd still like to celebrate the holidays.*

## Jewish Teens in Sync With Their Parents' Religious Commitments

Despite perceptions of the teenage years as a period of experimentation and self-discovery, research on American teens in general has shown that most teens are not interested in spiritual seeking and charting new religious paths.<sup>9</sup>

In our study, some teens told stories of intensifying or decreasing religious interest in Judaism, but most teens describe their own religious commitments as being stable and in sync with their parents' own beliefs and practices.

### Spiritual Seeking?

Based on the data we collected, we did *not* find evidence of a trend among Jewish teens for spiritual seeking outside of Judaism—that is, experimentation with other religious traditions or New Age spirituality. In the interviews and open-ended responses on the survey, teens did not talk about looking for religious meaning outside of Judaism. Nor did we find teens describing themselves as spiritual but not religious; teens were more likely to say they were spiritual *and* religious. While teens can recount spiritual feelings and experiences, they rarely use “spiritual” as a category of identity to describe themselves.

Teens raised both Jewish and Christian did express a sense of openness to religion and the possibility that they would like to learn more about their inherited religions at some future point in their life.

**Sierra was raised both Jewish and Christian. She wants to learn more about religion and spirituality as she makes decisions about her own faith and practice. She intends to begin first by learning about her own inherited religions:** *I definitely don't see myself as religious. I sometimes see myself as spiritual. I don't know. I recently started trying to navigate that a little bit and think about it more. I haven't fully gone there yet but I've started thinking about it. I think my mom is super spiritual. . . . [In the future] I would probably try a whole bunch of different religions. I would go to church. I'd go to temple. I'd go to the religions that I have access to and if there was one I really enjoyed I would probably do that for a little while. And if not I would see what pieces of each one I liked and try to incorporate that into my life a little more.*

**Elizabeth imagines one day she will want to do more research about Judaism and Christianity, relying on the internet to help her make decisions:** *[I'll] definitely [go on] the internet obviously, just googling it and looking around on different sources, maybe some personal blogs of people who are religious and also some historical things and some factual information.*

A few teens told stories of increasing their commitment to Judaism over their lifespan. In two cases the changes were in tandem with their parents' religious change. In another two cases, the changes were motivated by the teens' own interest, with the teens seeking more Jewish connections on their own.

<sup>9</sup>The National Youth and Religion Study has found that, when relationships are positive, teens generally follow in the religious path set by their parents. Christian Smith, director of this longitudinal study, noted that while parents are often encouraged to outsource their teen's religious education to experts, parents are usually the biggest determinant of a teen's religiosity. He says, “No other conceivable causal influence . . . comes remotely close to matching the influence of parents on the religious faith and practices of youth.” As Smith puts it, “Parents set a kind of glass ceiling of religious commitment, above which their children rarely rise.”

**Claire:** About two years ago I wanted to become more religious so I went online. I found this synagogue near me and I went in and just met with the rabbi and then I started going. . . . I googled “Reform synagogue near me” and then my zip code. **Later in the interview, Claire shared her impetus to find a synagogue:** My younger sister has a very rare, very serious heart condition and one reason I wanted to become more religious is I’ve always prayed to God for her to be healthy and for her to be kept safe, and I felt like it would be more meaningful and more important doing that if I were more religious.

## Losing Their Religion?



Jews of No Religion by Generational Cohort		
Jewish Identity, by Generation	Jews by religion % ↓	Jews of no religion % ↓
Greatest (born 1914-1927)	93	7
Silent (born 1928-1945)	86	14
Boomer (born 1946-1964)	81	19
Gen X (born 1965-1980)	74	26
Millennial (born after 1980)	68	32

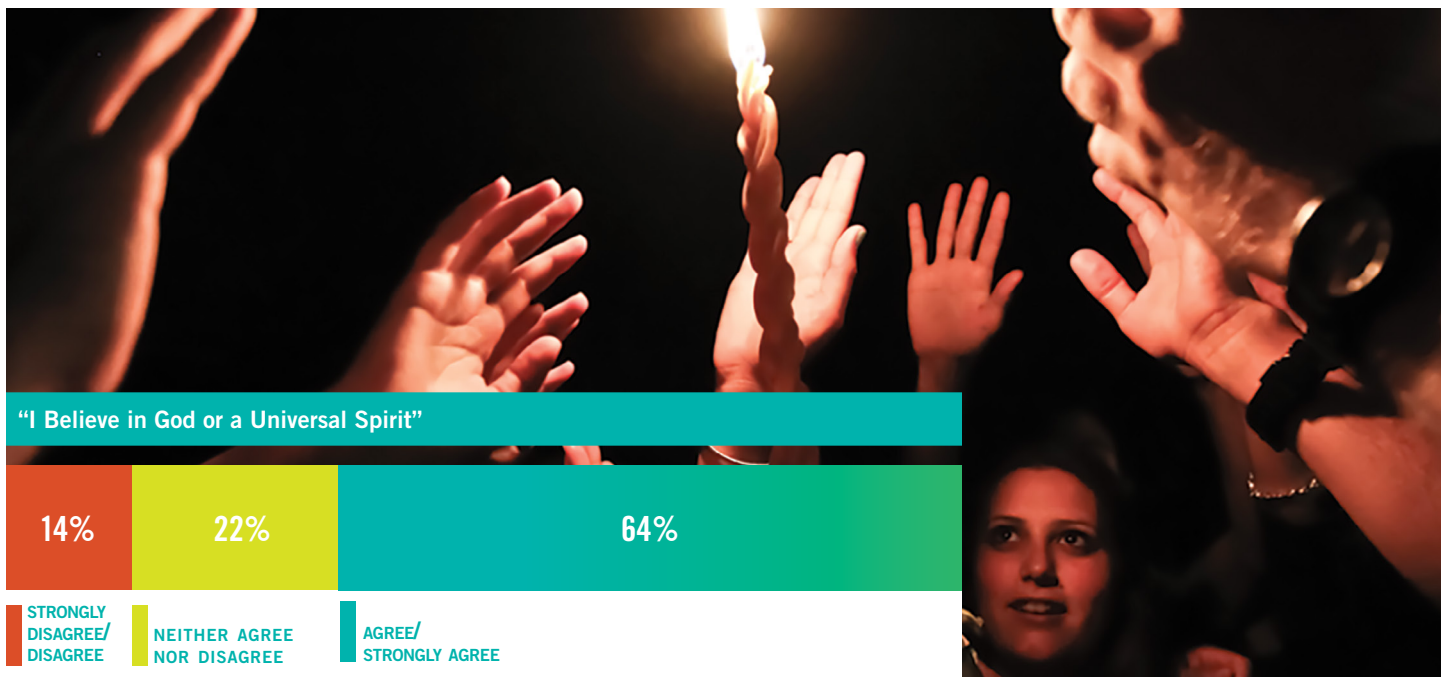
Adapted from Pew 2013, p. 7

The fastest growing religious group among adults in the United States today are “Religious Nones”—sometimes referred to as those with “No Religion” or, more specifically, those who profess no particular religious affiliation. Younger Americans are more likely to be Religious Nones than older Americans are. The 2013 Pew study found a similar pattern among American Jewish adults.

What we do know about today’s American teens in general (not only Jewish teens) is that they may be continuing this trend. According to analysis conducted by Jean Twenge, today’s teens are both less religious *and* less spiritual than earlier generations. She argues that this is not an artifact of being younger that they will age out of, but rather represents a profound cultural shift. There is very little data about what it means to today’s youth to have “No Religion.” Generally though, it’s important to understand that American “Religious Nones” are *not* without religious beliefs, moral frameworks, or any religious practices.

In our survey, we asked teens how they thought of themselves Jewishly. We provided six options: I am Jewish; I am Jewish culturally, but not religiously; sometimes I think of myself as Jewish, sometimes not; It’s complicated; I’m Jewish and something else; I’m not Jewish. The vast majority of teens, 75%, selected “I am Jewish.” The next most popular answer was “I’m Jewish culturally but not religiously,” which 16% of teens selected.

GenZ Now Teen Responses by Jewish Identity Option	
I’m Jewish	75%
I’m Jewish culturally, but not religiously	16%
Sometimes I think of myself as Jewish, sometimes not	3%
It’s complicated	3%
I’m Jewish and something else	2%
I’m not Jewish	1%



The majority of engaged teens who responded to our survey unequivocally identify as Jewish and also report belief in God. Still we find a sizable minority who might map on to an adult concept of Religious Nones: those who are “culturally, but not religiously Jewish” and those who are agnostic or atheists. We also heard from teens who were concerned that because they do not believe in God they could not consider themselves Jewish.<sup>10</sup>

**Survey respondent:** *I've recently started questioning my belief in God and I don't know if I'm considered Jewish because of it.*

This minority is substantial enough that it is worth paying attention to and respecting. How do we show teens that the concept of Jewish can hold many orientations to religious belief and practice?

### Relig-*ish*

Whether “cultural but not religious” teens or teen agnostics become adults of No Religion remains unknown. But our study led us to conclude that it would be a mistake to automatically assume that culturally Jewish, agnostic, or atheist teens have “No Religion.” Interestingly, we found that overall the Jewish teens we interviewed do not hold a negative impression of religion.

**Dylan doesn't think of himself as religious (he describes himself as a “realist”) but he's not opposed to religion:** *I think religion is good for people in the world because it gives people purpose so if you are lost in any way and you need something to pick you up I think that if you want to start believing in a religion that that will give your life purpose and meaning so it can help people get through tough times.*

According to the teens in our interviews, religious people believe in God, care about rules, and have religious values. Teens often had the expectation that to be religious one had to strictly meet *all* three categories *all* of the time. Many teens in our study were proud to call themselves religious.

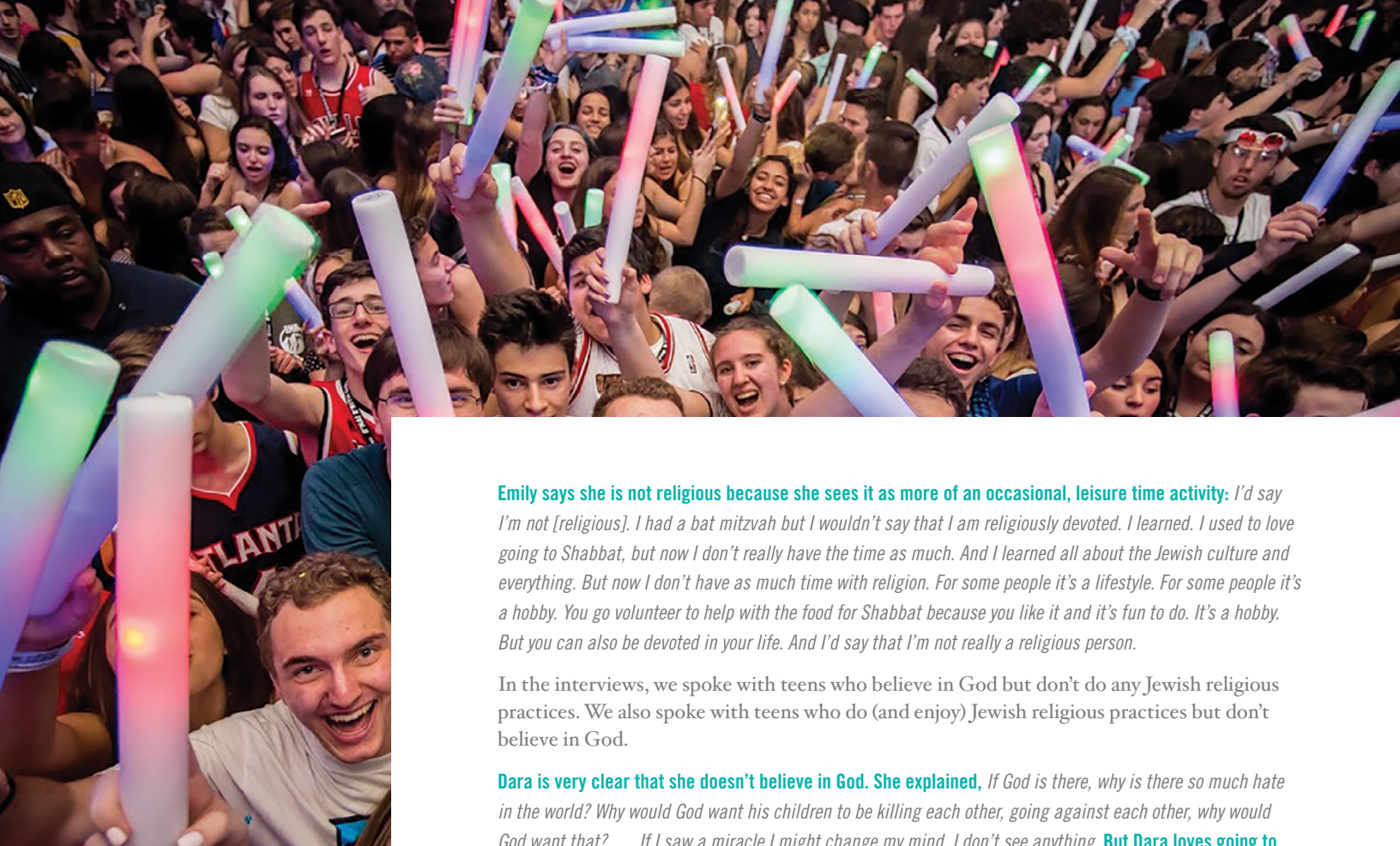
However, in the interviews and in the survey responses, we learned that teens sometimes hesitated to label themselves religious. They recognized that Judaism played an important role in their life and they enjoyed some elements of Jewish religious practice *sometimes*. But they didn't see themselves as measuring up to what they believed were the rigorous criteria for being religious.

For many teens in our study, the word “religious” seems to mean that one is orthodox (in the technical sense, meaning their beliefs are in line with their religion's professed creed) and orthopraxis (meaning they strictly adhere to all religious practices). Teens often demurred that they are not “religious” even as they talked about elements of religious Judaism they valued.

### Denominations “Don't Make Sense”

*We did not include a question in our survey that asked teens which Jewish denomination they were raised in or identified with. When testing the survey instrument in an earlier pilot study, we found that many teens did not relate to this question or found the categories to be confusing.*

<sup>10</sup> Different survey instruments ask about belief in God in different ways, which can make direct comparisons tricky. By way of providing some context for understanding our teens' responses, we offer some data from other national surveys. A Gallup 2016 survey found 89% of American adults believe in God or a higher power. The National Study of Youth and Religion Wave 2 showed a decline in belief in God among teens from 84% (2002/2003) to 78% (2005). PEW's 2013 study of American Jews reported that 68% of American NET Jewish adults between 18-49 believe in God.



**Emily says she is not religious because she sees it as more of an occasional, leisure time activity:** *I'd say I'm not [religious]. I had a bat mitzvah but I wouldn't say that I am religiously devoted. I learned. I used to love going to Shabbat, but now I don't really have the time as much. And I learned all about the Jewish culture and everything. But now I don't have as much time with religion. For some people it's a lifestyle. For some people it's a hobby. You go volunteer to help with the food for Shabbat because you like it and it's fun to do. It's a hobby. But you can also be devoted in your life. And I'd say that I'm not really a religious person.*

In the interviews, we spoke with teens who believe in God but don't do any Jewish religious practices. We also spoke with teens who do (and enjoy) Jewish religious practices but don't believe in God.

**Dara is very clear that she doesn't believe in God. She explained,** *If God is there, why is there so much hate in the world? Why would God want his children to be killing each other, going against each other, why would God want that? . . . If I saw a miracle I might change my mind. I don't see anything.* **But Dara loves going to synagogue. She is taken with the music, the aesthetics, and the community.** *I love our cantor, she has a very beautiful voice. I enjoy the music . . . the candle holders that we have are so big and so pretty. I love looking at them, it's a little weird but I just love looking at the candle holders. I'm not gonna lie. The people there are really friendly, a couple of my friends go there. I don't go there just because they're going. I just like the environment because it's really happy.*

We heard from dozens of teens who wanted to explain to us how they were *both* religious *and* not religious. We heard from teens who claimed that they sometimes approached Jewish activities with a cultural lens and sometimes with a religious lens.

**Survey Respondent:** *I'm Jewish as my culture and my heritage. I do Jewish religious things, like going to shul and celebrating Shabbat, but I don't believe much of the religious aspects.*

We have come to think of these Jewish teens as **relig-ish**, representing a more flexible approach to what Americans often imagine is a strict bifurcation between the religious and the secular. Many American Jewish teens appreciate some facets of Judaism as a religion but simultaneously hold a-religious or “cultural” perspectives as well. Teens were not only able to acknowledge how religion played a role in their life *sometimes* and in *some* ways, but also wanted those tensions expressed on the record.

## **Jewish Culture Is Something to Celebrate**

The Pew study of American Jews found that the majority of American Jewish adults believe that being Jewish is mainly a matter of culture or ancestry. Teens in our study, in both the interviews and the over 800 write-in comments on the survey, used many words like *blood, ethnicity, people, heritage, history, community, culture, and tradition* to describe what it meant to be Jewish. But certainly a key concept teens used was “Jewish culture.”

American Jewish teens are enthusiastic about Jewish culture. Unlike religion, God, or Israel, when it comes to Jewish culture there is everything to celebrate and little to feel ambivalent about. The term *Jewish culture* captures all of the good stuff about being Jewish and none of the confusing stuff.

For teens, Jewish culture is not related to “high culture” like literature or film festivals. Most teens frame being Jewish as one big dance number from *Fiddler on the Roof*. They use it to mark celebration, liveliness, joy, food, talk, family, friends, sociability, community, a shared sense of history, a talent for survival and success, a sensibility of questioning and curiosity, and values that support being a good person.

Importantly, *culture* is an active word to teens. It’s not something that marks who they come from, something that they have passively received, or expectations others have of them. Jewish culture is something that teens themselves do, in their lives actively and willingly.

## The Challenges of Teen Life Today

### Jewish Teens Share the Struggles of Other Teens in Today’s America

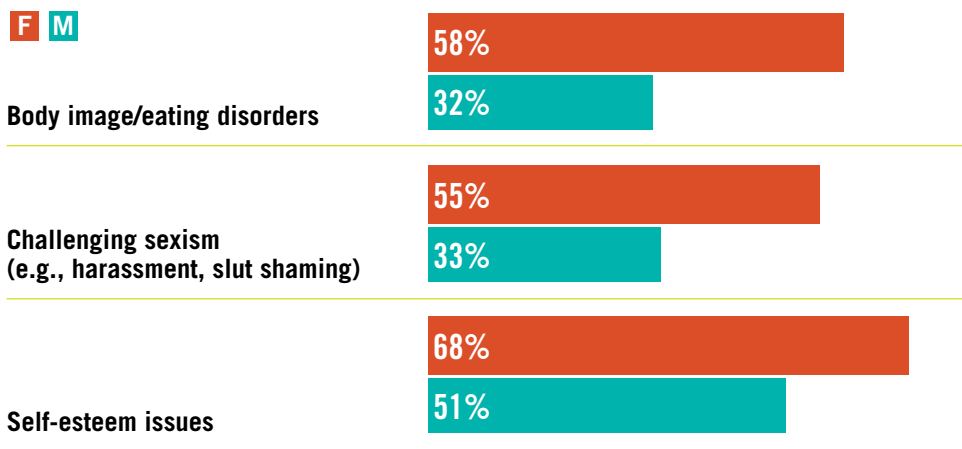
Teens in America today report unprecedented levels of stress. National organizations like the American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics both claim our nation is currently experiencing an epidemic of teen anxiety and depression.

Jewish teens agree that emotional well-being is a major concern for today’s adolescents. We asked a subset of the teens in our survey which problems the teens they know need help with. Overwhelmingly they told us that teens in their circles need help primarily 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.

“Teens I Know Need Help With”	Top Five Responses
Managing anxiety or depression	69%
Coping with academic pressure	64%
Self-esteem issues	61%
Dealing with failure, setbacks, and disappointments	55%
Learning how to speak to others face-to-face	51%



### “Teens I know need help with.” Greatest gender disparities.



School pressure was frequently mentioned in the interviews. The pressure to get grades for college was part of their larger school culture, and many seemed to believe that their grades in high school have tremendous, irrevocable life consequences.

**Ashley explained,** *People have told me that high school, these four years, are the most important time to work your hardest because they kind of affect the rest of your life. Well, not the rest of your life but they affect where you wanna go to school, and what your options are gonna be. And I know that I want to be a doctor and I have to really keep my grades up if I wanna do that.*

Teens sometimes see the college admissions race as an all or nothing endeavor that will set their life path forever. They see their future adult success as hinging on their high school academic performance. Feeling stress is now part of growing up for teens and, while felt as individuals, may reflect anxieties in the larger American society.

**Adam:** *Everyone wants to be the best. All the students always strive for A's, everybody needs to be the best with honors. It can just be very demoralizing sometimes. Like you'll get a 91 on a test, you'll be like, "Wow. I'm above average." But then you realize you are the average, when you get that kind of a grade.*

Not every Jewish teen sees their high school years as a direct path to college. **Megan, a student in a vocational program, gave insight into the struggles of Jewish teens for whom college might be financially out of reach. She explained that among her friends it wasn't simply a question of getting into college (she takes AP classes and gets good grades) but of whether college was ultimately a good financial risk at all, because it's so expensive, people are nervous about wanting to go (to college) if they're not a million percent sure what they want to go for. They're worried about wasting a ton of money about that.**



## Social Media, Technology, and Jewish Teens

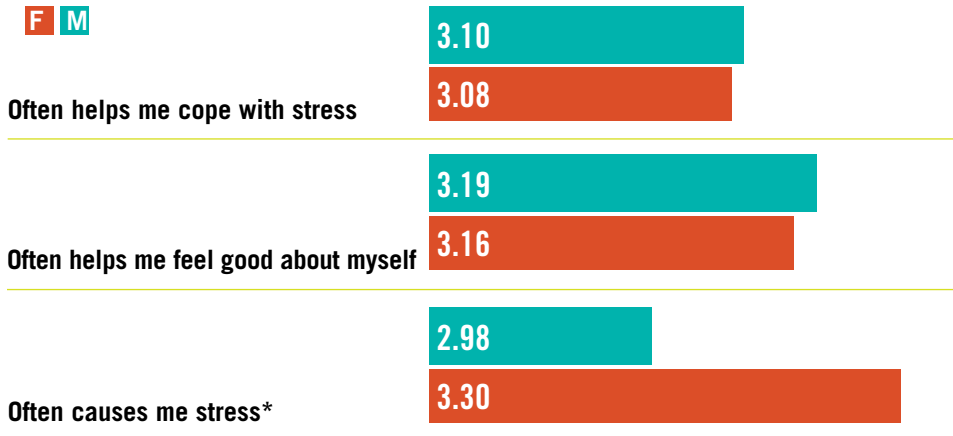
American teens spend a lot of time online. According to a recent Pew study (2018), 45% of American teens say they are online “almost constantly.” It’s probably not surprising that Jewish teens do the same. While there is a great deal of data that suggests the negative impact of social media on teens (Palfrey and Gasser, 2016), we also heard from teens about how technology enhanced their lives and relationships. In the interviews, girls spoke primarily about using their online time to engage with friends over social media—particularly Snapchat and Instagram. Boys talked about gaming and watching YouTube videos. Being on their devices was among some teens’ favorite activities—especially for boys for whom video gaming was an important source of entertainment and relaxation, a kind of oasis in their day. Typically, teens were online for a few hours a day, often while doing other things as well. **Matt explained,** *It helps me relax a lot. When I'm playing video games, [it] helps me destress after a long day, so I feel like it's positive mostly.*

We asked a subset of the survey participants to share whether they thought social media caused them stress or helped them cope with stress. The results were mixed, which falls in line with similar studies of American teens. Jewish teens see social media as having the capacity for positive and negative influence in their lives.

Teens today are the first iPhone natives. They are at the forefront of an enormous social experiment as society tries to understand how to harness the power of these new technologies. The teens we spoke with were generally very self-aware about their own online habits and alert to some of the possible dangers. They could articulate not only why they enjoyed going online but also make the counterargument for how it might negatively impact their well-being. The biggest critique teens had about their own online time was that it was a waste of time and created unrealistic expectations.

Social media was also an opportunity for teens to strengthen Jewish connections. Many specifically mentioned that they relied on social media to help them stay in touch with friends they made through Jewish YSOs, camps, and teen tours. Some of these friends were on different continents, some in a nearby town.

## “Social Media Causes/Helps Me Cope With Stress.” By Gender



Note: \*Difference on this item is statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

**Talia was a very enthusiastic social media user. She explained how she used Snapchat to stay in touch with Jewish friends she had made through an international Jewish teen program, I use social media tons. My parents will tell you that I am always on Snapchat. . . . I like talking to people who live in Tennessee and in Ohio and in Florida and on the East Coast and on the West Coast and in like Bulgaria and Argentina and all over the world because I have access to this app that will let me talk to whoever I want, whenever I want. In gaining unlimited connections to her Jewish YSO friends, Talia feels a sense of power and possibility. Talia decided it would cause her stress to *not* be on social media.**

**Sarah-Rosalind grew up in a small town with few Jewish people. When she came out as gay she felt doubly isolated. As a teen she found Tumblr, which connected her with other gay and minority teens: [Tumblr]’s kind of the chosen gathering place of people who didn’t have friends in middle school. . . . Yeah, so, a lot of the same kinds of people as me end up on there, and end up forming the same kind of Jewish communities that I’m familiar with, the same kind of gay communities that I’m familiar with.**

**Maayan is not a fan of social media but she saw how it enabled her to do the communal organizing she was passionate about: I organized a March For Our Lives [in my state] last year. Communicating with everyone on social media was very instrumental to making it happen . . . [to] be able to share something with them like a March For Our Lives event or something like that. I think that it definitely has benefits, and I’ve seen that, but I’m not obsessed.**

## Anti-Semitism in the Eyes of Jewish Community-Connected Teens

A subset of the teens who took the survey were asked about problems they thought teens they know need help with. Forty-five percent of teens selected anti-Semitism as a problem for today’s teens, ranking it as the twelfth most frequently observed problem out of 18 options provided.

In the interviews few teens mentioned anti-Semitism as a pressing personal problem. Many teens, however, reported behavior in which they felt negatively singled out for being Jewish. They generally registered these anti-Semitic comments as a nuisance or even as confusing and unsettling rather than as threatening or scary.





Ashley mentioned a boy in her school who made comments she characterized as “jokes” about her being Jewish. For example, he said when they were discussing math homework, *Shut up, you’re Jewish.* Ashley never felt this pattern of interaction warranted getting a teacher involved. She didn’t want the drama. And while she described the behavior as *annoying and aggravating*, she clarified that *it doesn’t feel like he’s actually targeting me.*

Adam was wary of a pattern he had observed in which he saw Jews as focused on their own suffering. He shared that, *Like it’s true that Jews have suffered a lot throughout history. And so, it’s very easy for us to kind of . . . use that to play the victim a lot. And I’m not a big fan of playing the victim.* Later in his interview he spoke about a boy in his middle school who *got up in my face because I’m Jewish.* Adam mentioned twice that *it wasn’t that big of a deal but also that at the time I was kind of shaken by it.*

Ben: *The one that sticks out is a kid at my high school, like in school. . . . I told the kid to stop and that was it. And there wasn’t. . . . I haven’t personally experienced violence or horrible anti-Semitic tirades or anything. . . . I was kind of disgusted, like obviously. Yeah, like I said, it wasn’t like a scarring memory or anything. It kind of was a moment and then it passed and that was kind of it.*

Only three teens from our interviews believed they had been personally impacted by anti-Semitism.

Our interviews took place between September and November of 2018, with the tragedy at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh occurring when we were halfway through the interview process. All of the teens we interviewed after the massacre in Pittsburgh had heard about the synagogue shooting. But they formed different conclusions about what it meant for contemporary society and for American Jews. Some saw it as a particularly Jewish tragedy that illustrated that anti-Semitism was a serious and lethal threat in the United States today. Others saw it as primarily reflecting other problems in the United States that were not related specifically to Jews or anti-Semitism, including the rise of political extremism and gun violence.

**Sarah-Rosalind, who had experienced anti-Semitism in her high school, saw the events in Pittsburgh primarily through the lens of anti-Semitism around the world:** *I think that it was definitely a wake-up call for people who had never thought they even needed an alarm clock before. . . . I saw a lot of people on the onlines, who were like, “Oh, [expletive], Jews need allies, too?” And I was like, “You’re just realizing this?” . . . Where was that from the non-Jewish people, when [Jewish] people were getting murdered in Europe in the past four years? Where were they when, a few years ago, everyone was leaving France because of the straight-up pogroms? Like, it’s really reasonable to panic at there being a pogrom here, but it’s not unfamiliar, and it’s not unexpected.*

Some teens offered that while they believed anti-Semitism exists, they feel just as, if not more, threatened as high school students as they do as Jews in America. That is, they see the events in Pittsburgh, while tragic, as no more dangerous or disturbing to them personally than school shootings.

**Annabelle believes that the shooting in Pittsburgh feels the same for her as other mass shootings in the United States. She rejects the idea that she should care more because the people killed were targeted as Jews:** *The big thing for me is gun control. . . . It keeps happening [gun violence]. It has to stop happening. It’s crazy. . . . I don’t feel super differently about [Pittsburgh] than I did about like Marjory Stoneman Douglas, or anything like that. Like, yes I’m a Jew, it’s a shul, but I’m also a high school student, and that was a school. I also have gay friends, and the [alluding to Pulse nightclub]. . . . Like each one of these has a group where it resonates more, so . . . really the big thing is gun control. I don’t think that we are supposed to care about this one [shooting] more than any of the others, because we’re Jewish. I think it resonates more, but that’s a bit of a problem that you care more for somebody like you than you do for a group that you don’t necessarily have as*

much of a connection to. It has been treated a little bit differently. I don't really know what changes by being a Jew . . . Jewish students are both Jews and students, to me if I were a teacher in a Jewish school, I would be approaching Pittsburgh in the exact same way that I did with Marjory Stoneman Douglas, or any of the others. Like I don't really see the huge difference. They're all horrible, and I think they're all equally horrible regardless of how many people it kills, or what gun they used, or who the people were. It's all the same thing. Yeah.

## Jewish Community–Connected Teens and Israel

### Open to Israel

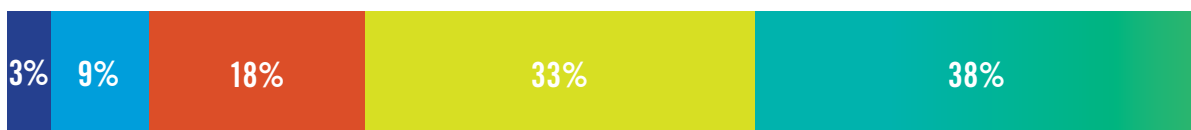
Pew's 2013 study of American Jews found that younger American Jewish adults report weaker ties to Israel than older adults do. We do not make intergenerational comparisons, but we found that the teens in our study had a positive orientation to Israel. The majority of the teens in our study feel connected to Israel. In the interviews, teens saw a link between being Jewish and the land and State of Israel. They believe that Israel has something to do with them.

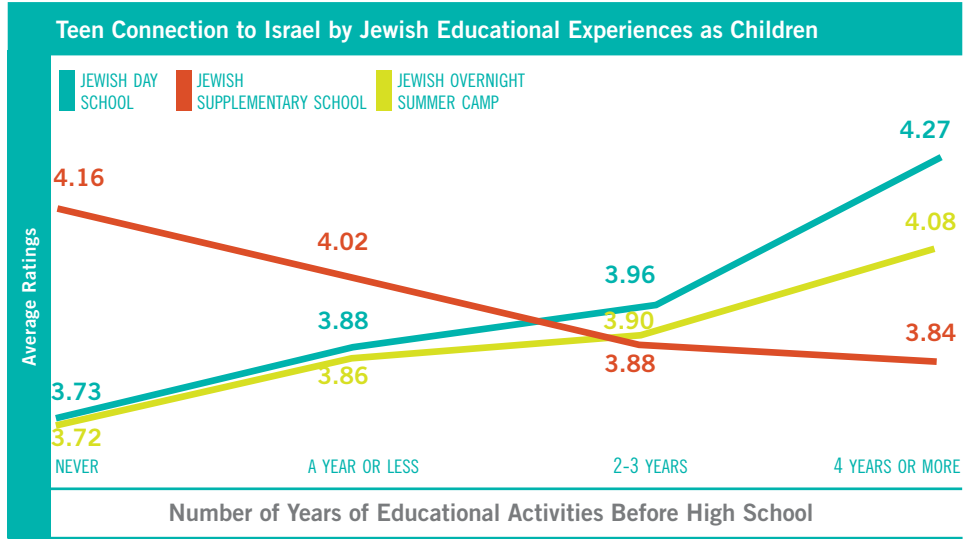
Teens often had questions about Israel and they wanted to trust educators to guide them in accessing information. They wanted to learn and grow in an environment where it was safe to ask questions and make mistakes, not in highly charged political conversations. Traveling to Israel made a difference in a teen's life. It gave that teen a connection to Israel beyond political debate and it enriched his or her own sense of what it could mean to be Jewish.

### Connections to Israel

The majority of the teens in this study agree that they feel not just a connection, but a *strong* connection, to Israel. The intensity of teens' connections toward Israel varied; in the interviews some expressed mildly positive feelings, some strongly positive feelings, but only one teen we spoke with held a perspective we assessed as overall negative in tone. Some teens saw themselves as defenders of Israel, some as concerned friends, others as mildly curious observers. For many teens Israel was not a central concern or facet of being Jewish, but they still believed that Israel matters to being Jewish. They were inclined to see the Israel-Palestine conflict through a lens that foregrounded the Israeli experience.

### "I Feel a Strong Connection to Israel"





Note: There is a significant positive relationship between years in camp and years in Jewish day school (before high school) and teens' connection to Israel,  $p < .001$ ; there is a significant negative relationship between years of attending supplementary school (before HS),  $p < .001$ .

**Hunter:** I feel good [about Israel]. So, personally . . . I've never been nor have I learned much about it. I definitely plan on going to Israel at some point. It's not like I'm the most strong or passionate person about Israel. But it is nice to know, to have that sense of a homeland.

**Ava:** I get frustrated a lot, because I think a lot of people are uneducated and they just blame Israel for putting rockets in Gaza and the West Bank. The other day, I don't know if you saw, there was like 400 rockets launched into Israel by Gaza. It's not a one-sided conflict. And a lot of people say it's all Israel.

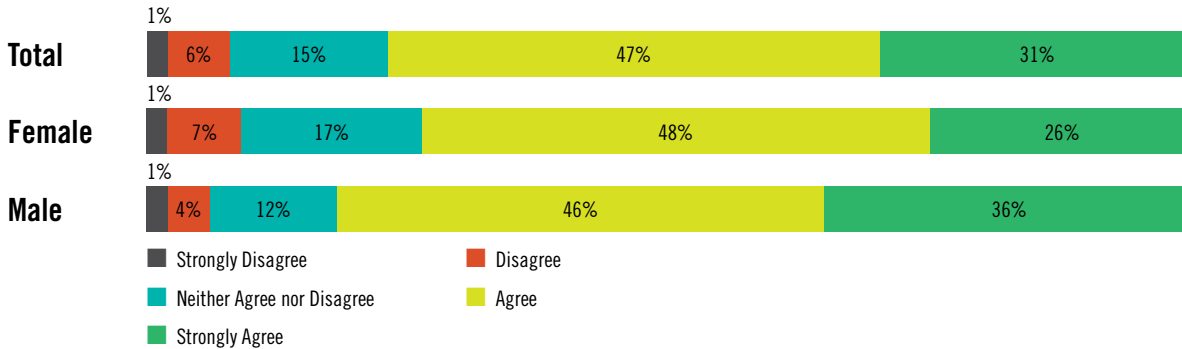
**Nate:** I don't think Israel has always made the right decisions. I think they've made a lot of mistakes. But, at the same time I think it's really hard to see the country of Israel as like the villain in this situation. Not that necessarily Palestine is the villain. I think Hamas is clearly the villain.

### How Confident Are Jewish Teens in Their Knowledge About Israel?

In the interviews teens were often hesitant to assert their own knowledge about Israel. Some teens (often those with relatively robust knowledge about Israeli history) suggested that they did not have enough information to form a strong opinion about the conflict. This item was the only one in the survey where female respondents rated themselves lower than male respondents.

Many teens were aware that there was conflict associated with Israel but generally seemed comfortable either leaning toward Israel or being an outright unflinching supporter of Israel. **For example, Emily, one of the youngest teens in the study, knew there was a conflict between Israel and "Pakistan" (sic) but she didn't know much about it and still had overall sympathy for the Israeli perspective:** [Israel] came up on the news last year about conflicts between Pakistan [sic] and Israel. I honestly thought, I heard about it and we discussed it in my history class. I was thinking that maybe the way the Israelis was treating the Pakistanis wasn't the best thing ever because it seemed a little bit like segregation. . . . I'm still totally interested in going [to Israel]. I think that the way they handled that wasn't the best, but I don't think it's a bad country. I don't think Israel is a bad country. I think that it's dealing with a very delicate issue right now in that. The U.S. definitely has done worse though.

## “I Know About Israel’s Achievements and Challenges”



## Connected With Questions

While a minority of teens voiced political opinions they saw as out of sync with the current Israeli government, most teens, even those who raised critiques, shared a sense of connection to Israel. They could have concerns and still feel connection.

Annabelle switched from a Jewish day school to a public school for high school. She was surprised to learn there was another perspective on the Israel-Palestine conflict; through asking questions and engaging with students who held different viewpoints she came to change her own opinions. She has critiques of the Israeli government but still feels connected to Israel the country. In making that distinction she references a trip she took to Israel as part of an organized group that helped her distinguish between Israel the place and people and Israel the government. **But Annabelle wondered why her Jewish education did not offer her more information about the ongoing conflict. Particularly she noted the absence of any exposure to the Palestinian narrative:** *I got to ninth grade and nobody at my school likes Israel, because of the whole Palestinian thing. I just felt stupid. I was like, “Why has nobody ever taught me this?” I’ve been learning about Israel for years, but I’ve never heard anything about the other perspective. . . . I don’t think Israel’s an awful country. I’m definitely more pro-Israel than a lot of people are, but it’s like, you just, you hear the stuff and you can’t ignore it.*

Annabelle doesn’t understand how her Israel education, which was so robust in so many ways, failed to present her with all the information she felt she needed for the conversations she would have in high school. Now Annabelle works alone to integrate the new material into her old understandings. In struggling to integrate new information into her own narrative about Israel, Annabelle relies on her personal experience of traveling to Israel as a young teen. *I’m not super in favor of their [Israel’s] politics, but I just like it there [in Israel]. I’ve only been for two weeks. I went on my like eighth grade Israel trip that a bunch of Jewish schools do, and it’s just a nice place. Like, the people were super friendly, and the food is great, and the weather’s perfect, and there’s a bunch of stuff to do, and there’s all this history. I like Israel as a place. . . . I don’t think I know enough to really argue for one side or the other. I’m kind of in the middle, and I’m okay with being in the middle.*

Often teens with the most robust Israel education voiced the most questions about Israel. **Dara is planning on going to Israel with her eighth grade class trip later this year. She describes herself as someone who wants to defend her homeland. She is a student in a Jewish day school but makes use of her interview time to ask her interviewer questions she feels she can’t ask at her school.** *They don’t really like us to talk about politics. Some of the kids in my school do; they do get in trouble for it which I don’t think is right, but they do. It’s not really mentioned. I would love to talk about it with someone but we’re not allowed to. Dara is looking for someone who can answer her questions about Israel, all of which are rooted in concerns she has about what the country is like and none of which are related to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Dara wants to know if migrant workers’ children are being deported, if the country is overrun with cats (I heard there’s a ton of cats, like an abnormal amount of cats in Israel.), and whether a girl in Israel can have a Bat Mitzvah.*

Here, Dara’s questions are not about “the conflict” but about human rights, religious pluralism, and the day-to-day experience of being in Israel. Her questions are good questions. They reveal how much Dara already knows about Israel, far beyond what you might see in a five-minute news segment. Dara doesn’t feel she has a trusted adult who will answer her questions, so she asked her interviewer—a stranger.

## Teen Travel to Israel



Note: Difference is significant at  $p < .05$

The strongest predictor of teens rating themselves highly on the Israel-related outcome was having attended an organized trip with a group. This was an even stronger predictor than speaking Hebrew at home. But beyond the Israel-related outcome, travel to Israel with a group was a predictor of higher scores on 12 out of the 14 GenNow outcomes, including those related to social-emotional domains. Travel to Israel seems to generate teen responses related to world politics (which often dominate communal concerns) and related to what it means to be Jewish in a way that feels generative and exciting to teens. Teens who have been to Israel often described it as a peak Jewish moment in their life that can transform how they think about being Jewish.

**David:** *When I went to the Kotel in eighth grade, that was the most connected I ever felt. I broke down in tears. I didn't expect it at all. . . . I went there and I was like "Wow, I feel it." That really sparked my decision to go to Jewish high school.*

**Hiro explained that his dad signed him up for an Israel trip the summer before his junior year of high school. He hadn't wanted to go but the trip changed his attitude about being Jewish:** *It started off with the amazement of people and what people can do, seeing these thousand of years old buildings and remnants of the past and seeing all these people gathered together, united from one core value that they hold to themselves with being Jewish. . . . Right now Israel has every single one of its neighbors trying to kill it, or at least wanting to and somehow we survived. That was the biggest point that really questioned my atheistic beliefs. It turned it from thinking there is no God, then to how can there be no God if we're still around?*

Teens who haven't been to Israel are interested overall in going, often at the encouragement of their parents. But their travel plans can be fuzzy.

**Ashley:** *Well, my mom's always wanted to go so we might go. I know that me and my friends wanna go when we turn 18. Or is it 18 or 21 with Birthright? . . . It's just lighthearted talking, but they're not serious plans but I definitely wanna go. . . . [Israel] doesn't come up a lot. It doesn't come up a lot in school or sometimes I hear about it on the news. But it doesn't come up very often . . . whenever I hear about it I'm like, "Oh, we need to go there." And I always wanna go and then I think about it for a while and how I wanna go.*

<sup>11</sup> The outcomes mean is based on all scaled items on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is “Strongly Disagree” and 5 is “Strongly Agree.” While the chart shows the overall trend, the text gives a more nuanced description of the specific findings and the differences among the outcomes.