

# GenZ Now: Understanding and Connecting with Jewish Teens Today

## Implications for Practice and Questions for Consideration

*This section of the report was co-authored by David Bryfman, Arielle Levites, and Susan Wachsstock.*

**1 From Surviving to Thriving** This research is predicated on a belief that Jewish education should primarily be about thriving and not just surviving. It is built on the premise that Jewish wisdom, values, and tradition can enable our youth to become the best versions of themselves—significant contributors to their communities who also help make the world a better place. There are many in the Jewish community who are grounded in a defensive posture that view Judaism merely as a vehicle for Jewish continuity, without consideration for one’s development both as an individual and citizen of the world. What would it take to ensure that all stakeholders realize that Jewish education is a powerful tool for the development of communities of meaning, connection, and justice that matter in the world—and that this new orientation is the key to Jewish thriving in 2019 and beyond?

**2 Becoming Teen Focused, Not Organization Focused** Teens today are growing up in do-it-yourself environments and expect to have some agency in designing their own experiences and navigating multiple possibilities. Jewish community-connected teens benefit from—and want exposure to—different ideas and expressions of how to be Jewish. This notion suggests that an important way to serve teens is to encourage them to explore other outlooks, organizations, and opportunities. Such a viewpoint will require organizations to shift from equating success purely with numbers in attendance; they need to move to a model of success built on teen thriving. How can Jewish institutions promote their own vision but also make room for teen exploration within Jewish tradition?

**3 Offering Teens a Full Spectrum of Jewish Ideas and Expression** Teens connected to the Jewish community want to seek meaning within Jewish tradition. How can we ensure that we offer them access to the depth and breadth of Jewish expression? In some cases, there are already robust offerings that teens might not know about. In other cases, there may be a need to create new programs. There already exist many organizations that center on a religious approach to being Jewish. What teen-centered programs exist that allow teens to explore Jewish *spiritual* beliefs and practices? What programs for teens make *secular* Jewish culture the centerpiece of the curriculum?

**4 Designing for More Kinds of Thriving** In our survey, we saw fewer teens from interfaith families than expected given national studies of Jewish adults. We also found fewer teens who described themselves as gender-fluid or nonbinary than national studies of American teens in general. Welcoming diverse teens may not be enough if the programs they are invited to join were not designed with them in mind. What can we offer Jewish-and-something-else teens and gender nonconforming teens so they know that there are Jewish spaces designed for them to flourish? What would it look like to see Jewish activities that assume the participation of diverse teens and their friends and family members, including those who are not Jewish?

**5 Reimagining the Role of Parents and Family** With some exceptions, there is no real corpus of curricula or best practices for working with parents and families of Jewish teens. What we know about teens today suggests it may be worthwhile revisiting this opportunity. Today’s teens feel warmly about their parents, enjoy celebrating Jewish holidays with their families, and are more likely to see their lives as following in their parents’ footsteps than as rebelling against them. How can we help parents and teens share with one another what being a Jewish family means to them? Additionally, research suggests that parents are impacted by their children’s engagement with Jewish activities (Pomson and Schnoor, 2008). When parents know about and see what their children are doing and learning, it can change their own narratives about their Jewishness—whether this is true of parents of adolescents remains to be seen. How can we help teens share their experiences in Jewish activities with their families? Can we build stronger communities for parents of Jewish teens? What new ideas for family engagement in the teen years have not yet been explored?



**6 Teens Seeking Support From Trusted Adults** Stress is nearly ubiquitous in teen culture. What would it mean for organizations to see teen well-being as central to their mandate, perhaps even the primary goal of their mission? What competing goals receive priority over this value and why? If teen well-being is a core goal, how do our organizations need to re-imagine what we do? Many of the teens we spoke with are ambitious and motivated. How can we help our teens learn how to manage stress and cope with setbacks? As adults we must realize that teen well-being reflects the larger society adults have designed for them. How can we help teens frame for themselves alternative models of what success looks like in a life shaped by Jewish values? How can we help them build a world in which flourishing is in reach for all people? What would it take to equip youth educators with the knowledge and capacities to be able to identify and support Jewish teens in need, so that they can identify early warning signs of mental illness and direct teens to appropriate venues to seek professional treatment? How do we create a culture that helps those who work with teens become the trusted adults who teens need, working together to support teen flourishing?



**7 Using Social Media: For Good and Bad** We are all familiar with the negative aspects of social media and adolescents, be it cyber-bullying, sexting, or video game addiction. But we are also witnessing unprecedented positive opportunities through social media and technology, including the development of support groups for teens, exploration of different identities, and the mobilization of tens of thousands of teens to literally try to change the world. Professionals who work with teens should be better trained to advise teens on the potential pitfalls of social media and simultaneously be equipped with the skills and knowledge to empower teens to continue to leverage this technology for the good. How can we push the boundaries of our online presence to creatively connect with teens, build communities, and reach teens in new ways?

**8 Israel Education Spaces Allowing Every Question** Jewish community-connected teens are interested in and have questions about Israel. They want trusted adults to help them navigate these questions in educational spaces where every question is allowed. They do not want to feel that adults hide information from them. They do not want to learn about Israel in highly polarized climates of political debate. How can organizations create opportunities for open conversations about Israel in educational environments that center on teen learning, not politics?

**9 Enabling Travel to Israel for More Teens** Jewish community-connected teens know Israel has something to do with them and would like to travel to Israel one day. Traveling to Israel as part of an organized group is a peak experience for Jewish teens and predicts higher scores on a number of outcomes, including the social-emotional. Today, teens are exposed to multiple perspectives on Israel and are formulating their own opinions and beliefs about Israel. Teens value travel to Israel because it connects them to Jewish history and to Israeli people and culture; for them, such travel stands out as a highlight of their own Jewish narrative. How can we enable more Jewish teens to travel to Israel?

**10 Investing in YSOs** For many years the Jewish community has invested heavily in different interventions that have been said to “work” in terms of developing teens into particular kinds of Jewish adults. The most common examples have been in the settings of Jewish day schools, summer camps, and to a lesser extent the Israel experience for teens. Our research shows that YSOs work. Teens in YSOs rate themselves higher on almost every GenNow outcome we measured. And teens tell us their YSO activities and relationships matter to them and to who they are today. Yet YSOs have generally not garnered the same level of community support and enthusiasm as other programs for teens. What would it take for the Jewish community to invest significantly in a YSO infrastructure that offers diverse teens a full spectrum of Jewish ideas and opportunities?

**Looking Ahead to Further Research** *This research project has galvanized 14 Jewish youth-serving organizations to advance a common agenda and improve their collective and specific practices. And yet, this research also proved to be a case of the more you know, the more you realize you need to know. What further research can be developed and conducted that will continue to support and advance the work of YSOs and all others who engage Jewish teens?*