

the Jewish community is too supportive of Israel than not supportive enough. On the ten campuses with the most Jewish respondents, 12% of non-Jewish students said the Jewish community is too supportive of Israel, compared to 2% who said it's not supportive enough.

Conclusions

This report showcases that for all the challenges in understanding today's Jewish college students and connecting to them, there are real opportunities. Today's Jewish college students – from many different kinds of backgrounds – are saying that they care about their Jewish identity, they want to explore their Jewish religion and culture while in college, and to the extent that they've been to Jewish programs, they've found joy and comfort there. Community-building is never easy, but despite the challenges, Jewish organizations that are seeking to make an impact on college campuses are pushing at an open door.

Students who encounter Jewish organizational life on campus tend to give it high marks. They go to a Hillel program or other Jewish event, and most of them encounter an atmosphere they find positive and welcoming.

At the same time, the students from more engaged Jewish backgrounds want something *more*, and the students from less engaged Jewish backgrounds want something *different*.

The students who come from engaged backgrounds care a lot about their Jewish identity. They want to explore that identity more in college. They want a range of programs. Many of them who already know a Jewish mentor on campus want an even stronger relationship with a Jewish mentor on campus. The students are happy with Jewish life on campus, *and* they want more.

Many of the students, particularly those with stronger Jewish backgrounds, have free time that they could be dedicating to developing their personal and communal relationship with Judaism. Right now, they are mostly spending their free time informally socializing. For students who are seeking deeper relationships and intellectual growth, there is a vacuum to be filled. Jewish programs and leaders may be able to fill that vacuum.

“I feel like my school overwhelmingly supports Palestine, and so I’m hesitant to say my beliefs. My school has developed a culture and doesn’t like it or take kindly when someone expresses an opinion that is not part of the norm. It’s not a symptom of anything uniquely Jewish, it’s just that my school has a culture and likes it when people stay in line, and it just so happens that the school culture supports Palestine.”

UC SANTA CRUZ
MALE

“I always kept Shabbat to the best of my ability while I grew up, and I looked at it as somewhat of a burden and a hindrance because I couldn’t do any schoolwork. But my first weekend on campus, I had a crazy week and a ton of work. And the second Shabbat started, I sat down, I let out a sigh and I realized that for the next 25 hours, I could take a mental health break. And I got a whole newfound appreciation and respect for it.”

SUNY BINGHAMTON
MALE

The large group of students who come from less traditional backgrounds and do not regularly, if at all, participate in Jewish life on campus seem to want something different than is being offered to them. If they have attended a Jewish program, they have mostly liked it, but most of them hardly ever attend such programs. While Jewish identity is interesting to them and somewhat important in their minds, they have not given Jewish activities a priority in their lives.

Could a different kind of program draw them in? A program that isn’t dominated by students who are “more Jewish” than them? A program that doesn’t assume background knowledge or existing social networks?

Perhaps, less traditional students have such different backgrounds from more traditional Jewish students – limited educational and cultural knowledge, Jewish rituals blended with other religions – that these students need entirely different programs and mentors than the ones who serve the more traditional students. While campus organizations strive to integrate communities and create connections – and some programs appear to do an excellent job at this – they must balance that goal with serving the needs of different kinds of students in different ways. A campus organization that tries to meet the needs of traditional students who want *more* and the needs of non-traditional students who want *different* may be asking too much, given the life experiences of the students from these different backgrounds.

No matter the background of Jewish students, the campus climate around Israel is proving to be toxic. A surprisingly high percentage of Jewish students interviewed in this study feel their Jewish identity and activities carry a social burden for them. A quarter of them feel they are judged if they go to Jewish programs. Half of them feel they pay a social cost if they support a Jewish state in the land of Israel. Even without these political issues, it is challenging to convey to students the value of Jewish life. But with the political issues, the barrier to engagement seems higher, particularly for students already on the fence about whether or not to participate.

ENDNOTES

1. In 2021, College Pulse, sponsored by Hillel and the ADL, asked questions to Jewish college students about campus climate issues. That survey asked different questions than are asked here. The closest parallel is between an ADL-Hillel item that asked if students “felt the need to hide your Jewish identity from others on campus” and one of the questions here that asked if students agreed that, “In order to fit in on my campus, I feel the need to hide that I am Jewish.” Fifteen percent of the Jewish students said yes to the ADL-Hillel item, which is nearly identical to the 17% who answered affirmatively to the question here. For more see: “The ADL-Hillel Campus Antisemitism Survey: 2021,” October 20, 2021.
2. Amy Sales and Leonard Saxe, *Particularism in the University: Realities and Opportunities for Jewish Life on Campus*, Avi Chai, 2006.
3. Michele F. Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.
4. Springtide Research Institute, *The State of Religion and Young People 2021*, 2021.
5. Alexander Astin, et al., *The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose*. Higher Education Research Institute, 2007.
6. Sales and Saxe (2006).
7. Eitan Hersh and Laura Royden, “The Young American Left and Attitudes about Israel,” *Contemporary Jewry* 2022.
8. Dov Waxman, “Young American Jews and Israel: Beyond Birthright and BDS,” *Israel Studies*, 2017.
9. Annette Koren, Leonard Saxe, and Eric Fleisch, “Jewish Life on Campus: From Backwater to Battleground,” in *American Jewish Year Book 2015* (Eds. Arnold Dashefsky and Ira M. Sheskin), Springer, 2015; Astin, et al., 2007.
10. Graham Wright, et al., “Trends in Jewish Young Adult Experiences and Perceptions of Antisemitism in America from 2017 to 2019,” *Contemporary Jewry*, 2021; Leonard Saxe, et al., “Hotspots of Antisemitism and Anti-Israel Sentiment on US College Campuses,” Steinhardt Social Research Institute, 2016; Graham Wright, et al., “The Limits of Hostility: Students Report on Antisemitism and Anti-Israel Sentiment at Four US Universities,” Steinhardt Social Research Institute, 2017; Leonard Saxe, et al., “Antisemitism and the College Camous: Perceptions and Realities,” Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 2015; Sales and Saxe, 2006; Mark I. Rosen, et al., “The Hertog Study: Chabad on Campus,” Hertog Foundation, 2016.
11. College Pulse, “Free Expression on College Campuses,” Knight Foundation Report, May 2019; Anti-Defamation League, “The ADL-Hillel Campus Antisemitism Survey: 2021,” 2021.
12. In its 2020 Portrait of American Jews, Pew found that 40% of Jews identify as having no religion.
13. See, e.g., Richard Reeves and Ember Smith, “The Male College Crisis is not just in Enrollment, but Completion,” *Brookings*, October 8, 2021.
14. See p.175, Pew Research Center, “Jewish Americans in 2020,” 2021. Note, the term “Jews of Color” is used in this report, as it is the preferred terminology of the Jim Joseph Foundation and Schusterman Family Philanthropies.
15. See p. 196, Pew Research Center, “Jewish Americans in 2020,” 2021.
16. Adapted from a question asked in *Atlantic* 57, “Unlocking the Future of Jewish Engagement,” 2020.
17. Adapted from a question asked in Rosov Consulting, “GenZ Now: Understanding and Connecting with Jewish Teens Today,” 2019.
18. I use a principal component analysis to create this scale. To create the scale, I make the following adjustments to the five variables discussed above. The first variable is coded 1-5 by category. The second variable is a count, 0-11. For the third variable, denomination, I recode respondents as 1 if they have a denomination and 0 if they are “just Jewish” or other. For the parent/guardian question, I recode respondents as 0 if they have no Jewish guardians, 0.5 if they have one Jewish guardian, and 1 if they have two Jewish guardians. Other religious practices are coded 1 if no other religion was practiced and 0 if another religion was practiced. The five variables load onto one factor (Eigenvalue = 2.7). The next factor would have eigenvalue of 0.8.
19. Margolis, 2018.
20. Again, I use principal component analysis to make this scale. The first measure is implemented as a count. The second measure takes values 1-4 from not all important to very important. The third measure takes value of 1 if respondents said very/somewhat positive and equals 0 otherwise. The fourth measure is a count, 0-4, of the number of the four Jewish items were important to the respondent. The variables load onto one factor with eigenvalue 2.3. The next factor would have eigenvalue 0.8.
21. These racial categories exclude categories of American Indian (N = 17), native Hawaiian (N=7), as well as individuals who identified their race as Other (N=54). The “Other” category is complicated by the fact that some individuals who identify their race as “Jewish” on surveys would select Other from the list of available choices on the College Pulse question.
22. Tobin Belzer, et al, “Beyond the Count: Perspectives and Lived Experiences of Jews of Color,” *Jews of Color Initiative*, 2021.
23. Pew Research Center, “Where Americans Find Meaning in Life,” 2018.
24. See also: Pew Research Center, 2021.
25. This builds off a study that found that students who held leadership roles in their campus Jewish communities came mostly from traditional, Orthodox, and Conservative backgrounds. See Sales and Saxe, 2006.
26. See Rosov Consulting, “Year 2 Evaluation Findings,” *New York Teen Initiative and New York Incubator of Intensive Summer Experiences for Jewish Teens*, 2017.