

LEADERSHIP LEARNING JOURNEYS: LESSONS OF EXPERIENCE

The Center for Creative Leadership has been studying the meaningful inflection points in the developmental journeys of leaders since the publication in 1988 of the landmark study, *The Lessons of Experience: How Successful Executives Develop on the Job*. The study found that successful executives had developed their leadership primarily by learning from five categories of experiences, namely, challenging assignments, developmental relationships, adverse situations, training programs, and personal experiences. In the 30 years since the original research was published, additional studies have extended the Lessons of Experience (LoE) research to understand how leadership learning journeys progress among diverse leader demographics and in a wider range of cultural contexts.


This study draws upon the interpretive framework of the LoE research tradition and extends it to consider how leadership is developed among American Jewish leaders. The five categories defined in the LoE literature tend to be tightly interwoven. This study and earlier research help us understand each type of experience on its own and also identify what elements contribute to making it a more effective means of leadership learning, but it is important to remember that these experiences are connected. For example, what makes developmental relationships especially significant to leadership learning is often the fact that they provide support to leaders while they take on challenging assignments or face adverse situations.

The following sections describe how young Jewish leaders develop, first through preprofessional experiences and later through key career passages – the contexts, events, or experiences that are often inflection points in the professional and developmental trajectories of Jewish leaders.

Preprofessional Journeys

In our interviews with Jewish leaders, the stories we heard about their leadership learning journeys were often interrelated with stories about their Jewish journeys and life journeys more generally. Some interviewees explicitly distinguished these categories by saying, for example, “I think that for me there’s two different pieces. There’s kind of a Jewish journey and a leader journey, and I think they potentially overlap.” This reveals something significant, because Jewish leaders draw upon their Jewish journeys to enliven the work and inspire the values of Jewish organizations through their own expressions of Jewish authenticity. Therefore any effort to support and encourage leadership journeys for Jewish educators will necessarily depend upon similar support for the Jewish journeys of tomorrow’s education leaders.

“And I think that you can grow in that; I’m willing to take someone who’s early on that journey. I do believe that leaders can learn their content area. But if I was hiring a manager of a Starbucks, [I wouldn’t want] someone who occasionally has a cup of coffee; I want someone who loves coffee. I want a caffeine addict – for whom this is part of their identity. Because it’s really hard to authentically sell something that you don’t live and breathe.”

A close-up photograph of a desk. In the foreground, a hand is writing in a spiral notebook with a pencil. The notebook has some faint handwriting and a small illustration. To the left, there's a small white cloth bag containing several colorful beads. In the background, a wooden pencil holder contains several pens and pencils. The overall scene is warm and focused on learning or writing.

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Any effort to support and encourage leadership journeys for Jewish educators will necessarily depend upon similar support for the Jewish journeys of tomorrow's education leaders.

To consider it in the framework of the Lessons of Experience (LoE) literature, Jewish journeys were by far the most common types of personal experiences related in the interviews. Of the five categories of experiences discussed in previous LoE studies, personal experiences were the least frequently mentioned. In the interviews we conducted, however, personal experiences, especially in the form of Jewish journeys, were often highlighted as critical inflection points in the interviewee's life and leadership development journey. In another departure from the pattern of earlier LoE studies, in which leadership learning was mostly discussed within professional contexts, a large proportion of the personal experiences described in our interviews occurred either in the interviewee's youth or preprofessional years.

When we asked Jewish leaders what events and circumstances in their lives contributed most to their leadership journeys, many responded by describing how important it was for them to develop a strong Jewish identity at a young age. Overwhelmingly, what they described were immersive experiences characterized by sustained engagement over a long period of time. In many cases, these same experiences also provided opportunities for early leadership learning through developmental relationships or challenging assignments through roles in which they were given responsibility for leading a group or project.

Parents and Family

Some interviewees described growing up in a family culture that is deeply invested in Judaism, where Jewish holidays and other practices were observed.

"I'll give parents credit. I didn't go to long-term – I never really went to Israel. I was not really involved in a youth group. I did a summer camp a couple times, but it wasn't very instrumental. I didn't do any of the things that the data says you're supposed to do in order to become Jewishly-involved. I didn't do any of those things, but my parents, that was very important, right, Judaism was important to us as a family. I grew up in a small town where there wasn't a lot of Jews, but they made Judaism important to us. They created Jewish experiences in our home with pride and with joy."

One interviewee even described her strong sense of Jewish identity as "inherited" from her parents and connected it directly with intentional ritual practices at family gatherings:

"Like for me, my expression of my life as a Jew is inseparable from my expression as a woman, as a person, as a mother, like all of it. And I'm confident that's because of how I was raised. My family was—anytime we were together as a family, there was a Jewish ritual involved and that was explicit and designed. Like my parents were transparent about how they designed rituals to make it work for our family, because the two of them chose things and then I inherited it."

For some interviewees, their family lives and congregation were the only Jewish experiences they had while growing up. "I grew up Jewish and connected Jewishly but not sort of in an institutional way. I grew up in a very small town in a very small Jewish community. So, I didn't grow up with any kind of Judaism beyond like the family and the synagogue. I didn't go to youth group. I didn't go to camp. I didn't go to Hillel. I didn't sort of do any of that stuff."

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For others, growing up in a family that was actively involved in Jewish traditions and community life naturally led to a range of Jewish learning experiences throughout childhood. About Jewish identity development, one interviewee remarked that “It’s not the teen program that does it, it’s the family system that goes to JCC or that goes to the museum or that goes to the synagogue that does it.” The implication of this for Jewish education leaders today is that youth development programs should not always be designed with youth as their target audience. Instead, “Jewish education now has to be family [focused] because 72 percent of non-orthodox marriages are outside or beyond the faith. So you’re raising families when you’re doing Jewish education. You can’t just teach children if it doesn’t happen at home.” To an increasing degree, educators may discover that providing Jewish education and experiential programs for parents and families will allow them to impact more young people than designing programs that focus exclusively on engaging young Jews.

Attending Jewish Day School

Many of the people we interviewed expressed opinions or concerns about Jewish day schools, but not as many described personal experiences with day school, and many of those were only in passing. Those who did attend day school as a child talked about it as one aspect of having grown up in a family and community that prioritized Jewish traditions and values and that regularly participated in Jewish community activities. Taken together, those childhood experiences generally translated to a strong sense of Jewish identity later in life. In particular, there was a trend to associate day school experience with developing confidence in Jewish content knowledge. “I did go to day school, but I would say it was not one of the positive [experiences]. I mean, it definitely had its anchors and its rooting, and I wouldn’t know as much as I do [but] it was not my favorite thing about childhood.”

Conversely, it was common for interviewees who said they did not attend day school to mention it in connection with feeling a degree of insecurity about their level of Jewish knowledge.

“I went to a day school for elementary school, but then went to a public high school, and [I have] a pretty active, engaged, Jewish family. And then getting to college and realizing my Jewish education really stopped in fifth grade and was very stunted. And so, feeling like that was something missing for me. So, that was kind of like that initial piece of, “Oh, I better handle this.””

In some cases, we heard that a leader grew up without having much involvement with Jewish institutions, without engaging in Jewish learning experiences, or without feeling strongly attached to a personal Jewish identity. Instead, they discovered and embraced their Jewish identity later as a reaction to a social environment in which Jews were a minority.

“I as a kid did not love Jewish things very much. I didn’t love Jewish social things, didn’t have a great experience at my Jewish school. I tried Jewish summer camp, didn’t love it. I had kind of my own group of friends. Most of them weren’t Jewish and I was just never highly connected. And I actually started to become more intrigued about my Judaism when I was in a non-Jewish high school, where I was really the only Jew. And everyone had a culture, so suddenly I had a culture and that was super interesting.”

Since our interviewees were asked to describe events that were significant to their development as a leader, it is noteworthy that youth experiences like day school were mentioned at all. What day school experiences seemed to contribute most to leadership development is a feeling of confidence about standing up and being looked to as a leader specifically within a Jewish setting. We see the potential to extend this benefit by adopting the practice that is common in Jewish youth groups and camping experiences of continually providing opportunities for young people to take on leadership responsibilities and organize action in groups. Leadership development education might also be systematically incorporated into day school experiences and curricula to transform school culture at every level.

Jewish Community Participation and Youth Groups

Leadership can be developed by young people through participation in Jewish community settings, such as attending Synagogue on a regular basis, and being entrusted with a regular responsibility at services, such as reading Torah, leading prayers, or working with children. Through experiences such as these, they learned how to play a role in a group setting and became accustomed to being in front of people. In Synagogues and other community settings, young people can be supported in developing leadership skills by being entrusted with responsibilities such as asking them to hold a ritual object, sing in Hebrew, give a speech, or take responsibility for planning an experience or mentoring younger peers. Through experiences such as these, a young person might have been given hundreds of opportunities to exercise leadership by the time they graduate from high school.

"I would probably have to point to high school youth group in terms of, you know, leadership leadership. Right? I grew up in a synagogue that was participatory, lay led in terms of the davening. So, you know, I was reading Torah and all of that kind of stuff from, you know, eight, nine years old."

Youth groups were mentioned as opportunities to interact with others in a space defined by shared values, and participation often provided early experiences with taking initiative, teamwork, and group leadership, for example to organize events or programs.

"It was all about relationships. I don't think I had the vocabulary at the time to talk about what it means to take a relational approach to leading [but I learned that] you lead by example. You don't lead by standing in front, you lead by standing with. [There was a] culture of pioneering. There were never adults, so it was always—as kids, anything that you want, you create. We were responsible for ourselves. Kids were role models for kids and people took their learning and knowledge very seriously, they took their fun very seriously, they took the world very seriously, they took each other—the sense of community, the value of community... but all of those leadership things, no one ever articulated. It was just lived."

Another interviewee recalled a similar experience:

"I grew up in a youth movement when basically the objective or the motto was if you wanted something done, get it done. And you just work with your peers and your friends and I think through osmosis or learning of my former leaders or whatever it was, I just learned how to do things, right? So, it was a youth movement which was really peer-led and leaders at a very young age, so I knew how to do it. So by the time when I was [in my first job], mobilizing to do things became second nature to me."

Groups like this can help young leaders develop a sense of responsibility for bringing about positive change. The organizing and engagement projects they take on are a way to experience individual agency and build confidence.

"The synagogue I grew up at connected me to Jewish day school that I ended up at K through 12, and the Jewish day school is how I ended up in Jewish summer camp. And my trajectory through all of that time, pretty much K through, let's call it, 11th grade, was marked by a lot of recognition of my potential, celebration of my contributions, the identification of skill sets that I could offer, and often times being sort of tapped to step up and lead in some way. So I grew up knowing and believing that I was a capable, competent, Jewish leader. And, in many ways, I had a very clear path ahead."

A persistent theme in the stories we hear about participating in youth activities is how active involvement tends to snowball towards more and greater involvement that can continue into adulthood and lead to a career as a Jewish professional.

“So I grew up going to a day school and my Jewish identity was pretty solid, through my involvement with BBYO, which then led to an involvement with the JCC where I saw what it meant to be a Jewish professional. And that’s when I was asked as a teen to [accept a leadership role that made me choose this career path]. Like, I love the informal Jewish education piece. I love that people who were there wanted to be Jewish and actively sought out Jewish experiences. And the fact that, people I was hanging hang out with, we were all very similar in our background, so I really appreciated that. So that’s sort of like, for me, something that defined my trajectory of what I knew I wanted to do was through that experience with BBYO. I also think it really changed me personally. I became a much more outgoing person, I became much more of a leader, through those experiences that led me to college to get involved with Hillel and all that other stuff.”

Another way that youth groups can facilitate leadership development is by being a safe space to try new things in a low risk setting. After being involved in these groups for several years, young leaders become more comfortable with the possibility of failure. Developing this mindset is what enables leaders to learn and grow in response to failures they will inevitably experience rather than derailing.

Youth groups are often sponsored as offshoots of adult organizations, and are more common in areas with large Jewish populations, which points to two important considerations. The first is that youth groups depend upon their sponsor organizations for support, whether financially, for infrastructure, or socially as an avenue for membership. Maintaining the sustainability of sponsor organizations should be remembered as a prerequisite to supporting their contributions to youth development. The second consideration is that the leadership pipeline of American Jews draws from a national ecosystem, and further research should be conducted on how to make developmental programs and experiences accessible to Jews who do not live in cities with large Jewish populations.

Camping


Many of the leaders we interviewed said that camping experiences were an important part of their Jewish journeys.

“I think that the other is critical in your own Jewish experience, right? But you need to have it anchored and rooted before you can engage the other in knowing who you are, and in deepening and enhancing who you are. For me, like formative experiences, I would say summer camp was one.”

In several accounts, what made camping such a moving experience was the feeling of being part of a community and gaining some knowledge of Judaism in an informal setting. “Somehow I ended up at age 13 at Camp Ramah and it changed my life... It’s there that I experienced the beauty and power of Judaism lived at a living community. And I’ll never forget when I was first being exposed to it. And it touched my heart and soul.” Kids aged ten to fourteen are at a critical stage in their moral development in which they will learn values that will likely guide them for the rest of their lives, and learning those values in a community setting is significant. The camp community was special because it allowed young Jews to experience community

and shared tradition in a group where they could also find diversity and pluralism.

“What still sticks and resonates [about] summer camp [...] for me it’s very much about community and about the fact that wow, I might meet someone [from] somewhere else in the world and they’re also Jewish and like that kind of started at summer camp where it was Jews from all over and people from Israel and [we all] shared song and dance and tradition.”

Especially important, both in youth settings like camp and in later career phases, was having one’s leadership potential acknowledged through the experience of being recruited or recommended for a leadership role. 

Camp offers an immersive experience for an extended period of time with the same groups of campers often coming back together year after year. As a result, campers establish close relationships. In fact, several people told us they are still in touch with their friends from camp, either on an individual basis or as a cohort. This testifies to the effectiveness of the camping experience at combining shared experience and personal social connection to generate a lasting sense of social identity. Like other cohorts, groups of friends from camp can play an important role for professionals later in their career, as a community that extends personal or professional networks, shares advice, and provides support for members facing difficulty.

Camping offers leadership learning opportunities by assigning various responsibilities to campers and by opening a path toward a progression of increasingly challenging assignments. Through their shared lodging and regular responsibilities campers learn to be a part of a community, and as counselors, they learn how to develop and foster community. “[At camp] it’s one thing to sing songs, but it’s another thing to engage people in a tradition, and in prayer, and in ritual in a way that serves meaning to them.”

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The camp setting makes it possible to create formalized leadership roles for a large number of participants. Many people told us that their first leadership role was being a group leader, counselor in training, or counselor at camp. Having held multiple leadership roles from a young age—whether in camp, youth group, or other settings—seems to have led to greater comfort accepting leadership roles later in life and throughout their careers. Those early experiences often proved to be pivotal roles that influenced their future directions.

“I started to become just really interested in what it meant to [be] a role model and having a hand in raising the next generation of humans and Jewish humans, in particular. And I was just super intrigued by that and also seeing camp as this like fascinating immersive environment where you can really shape people and people can have [...] peak experiences.”

One element that was often remembered as especially important, both in youth settings like camp and in later career phases, was having one’s leadership potential acknowledged through the experience of being recruited or recommended for a leadership role. “When I was like in middle school I was a color war captain in summer camp and that was like a whole thing because a bunch of peers that are looking up to you, and also the administration’s nod to your leadership capacity.” Leadership roles such as these allow young leaders to take risks and experiment as they develop their personal leadership styles. “There was a spirit and freedom at camp that wasn’t offered in more traditional settings. But in my particular case, I was really invited to exercise leadership in ways that were untraditional and bold for its day, I think.”

“When I was a counselor in a summer camp... I was invited, prematurely, to become the group leader of an entire age group [...] because, the person who was supposed to do the job, at the last minute backed out. And the director called me and said, “Do you want to do this job?” I mean, it was like weeks before starting. And I said, “Yeah, I’ll take it, but I got to admit it kind of scares the hell out of me.” And he said, “Well, never take a job that doesn’t scare you.” So that was like a really powerful moment, I think, of kind of honoring and encouraging and saying like you want to put yourself out of your comfort zone in order to grow professionally.”

We heard from several people that camp provided not only a first experience, but a well-defined path through several leadership roles with increasingly greater responsibility. As a result, campers in their early teens may have the awareness of already being on a career path in Jewish education in which they anticipate returning every year, eventually taking on the roles of counselors or division heads as they grow older. “And yes, I ended up going back every summer, getting promoted...And so, all of a sudden, you’re in this like crazy management role at age 23 and realizing that camp was this fascinating phenomenal site of kind of leadership potential and growth... [it’s an] incubator of so many kind of risks, opportunities, challenges.” It was telling that one person explicitly referred to it as a career experience:

“And, at later points in my camp career, supervising people, helping them get—I look back at the way I supervised 16 years ago and I’m like, “I could have used some pointers,” but gaining ways that I could help younger staff and campers kind of do better at what they do, realize their potential and dreams, and help them do their work better. Those were all formative and leadership/Jewish educational experiences for me.”

Despite the relative safety of the environment, camp leadership roles were often stretch assignments that helped leaders learn how to exercise effective teamwork and management.

“My last two summers at the camp were—there was kind of a series of incidents where I was either involved in organizing something, usually not easy dealing with the consequences of decisions that our staff members had made. And it was a very high-emotion, adolescent time. I was 14 or 15 years old. And those moments really gave me I think an initial sense of possibility and allegiance and of

the consequences better and worse of leadership of other people's exercising of their leadership. And so I think that's often where my origins for these begins in a telling in those moments as a young camper."

Camp leadership roles and the perception of a clear path to advancement within the camping experience complicate the question of when a career in Jewish education begins. From the perspective of young campers, the career pipeline at camp is clearly visible every day as they observe the staff at camp and learn their stories. One interviewee remembers thinking as a camper, "first you're at camp, then you go on seminar, then you're a Mador, which is a first-year staff member, then you're a Rosh Edah, and then eventually you're executive director at camp," and intending to follow that trajectory. Future research might explore whether a multi-year experience like camp, in which a process of leadership development and advancement is normalized to the point of being presumed, allows campers to develop greater self-confidence and acceptance of their personal leadership potential. It also serves as a reminder that, if the current pipeline is presumed to be lacking in terms of diversity, that we can look to camp experiences as an early opportunity to expand the pipeline intentionally. Structuring leadership development experiences for campers such that a more diverse group of campers have the opportunity to experience the scaffolded and supportive environment of developing their leadership skills within the camp setting may help bolster the pipeline of emerging leaders.


College

Some of the leaders we interviewed said that their first leadership experiences were in college. The majority of college leadership experiences that we heard about were related to involvement in Hillel. Through these experiences, leaders developed planning and organizational skills and exercised group leadership. Usually, an important aspect of the experience is learning to create a welcoming shared space and working together with Jews from a variety of different backgrounds.

"I think really it was being involved in a Hillel as an undergraduate. That's where Jewish leadership began for me... Because I was at a small liberal arts college and we didn't have particularly strong organized leadership there, there was a lot of pressure on students to make Jewish life and make it work. Sometimes I was like, oh, I wish I at was [at a bigger school] where I could have like 15 paid staff serve my every Jewish need, [but] I wouldn't be the leader that I am today if, at 18, 19, 20, 21, 22 years old, if I didn't need to be like how do I build a Jewish community with Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox students? How do I create a community from anti-Zionist to Zionist Jews? How do I keep a kosher kitchen when not everybody in Hillel keeps kosher? How do I invite a speaker? I do I write a thank-you note? How do I write a budget request? Like how do I lead a protest against an anti-Semitic speaker on campus? How do I access the Jewish resources in [my city] to make sure that students are taken care of and supported when anti-Semitic things happen on campus? How do we make sure that despite all the challenges of leadership, that things still remain fun and enjoyable so that people still want to be involved?"

It makes sense that boundary spanning and working across diversity for shared goals would be particularly important in college leadership. While youth groups often bring together Jews of similar backgrounds based on denomination or location, groups in college are more diverse. Creating a sense of community in which members of diverse groups could find a place to belong was a persistent theme in college leadership experiences.

At the same time, leaders talked about the importance of feeling agency regarding a situation and demonstrating initiative to create change. For some, this included learning how to lead social action activities such as protests, and for others it was by engaging with institutions or student groups on campus.

Experiences like this can embolden young leaders to continue pursuing Jewish community building and social leadership work in their careers. 

“When I was in college is when I started initiating activities that could be described as leadership. You know, I founded an Israel club, and I started a Hebrew group, and those were things that, in my mind, in some ways I was taking a risk by trying to start something. So in my mind, that’s kind of what leadership is. So in college I started doing that. At the time, I didn’t know that I was going to do this kind of work professionally, but I guess it’s where I gravitated.”

One interviewee talked about being disappointed in the Hillel experience at college, and taking on a leadership role through efforts to improve the situation:

“When I got to college, I walked into the Hillel and the offering for people like me—strongly identified progressive Jews—was pretty bleak. And...there were two options. [Either] “it’s like that, we’re not going in” or “it’s like that, I could make it better.” So that’s what I did and I helped create an experience that felt like it would be exciting for me and therefore for other people. So that was an interesting moment for me to sort of, I think, with reflection acknowledge “here was something that could be fantastic and what role could I play in making it fantastic” as opposed to being like, “Oh forget it.””

College holds the distinction of occurring at the boundary between youth and the time when young adults will embark upon their professional lives. College leadership experiences can straddle that boundary in a way that allows young leaders to recognize themselves as adults and their activities as real work, while still experimenting in a relatively low-risk environment where there are often more experienced people who can step in to offer help or guidance if needed.

“When I was in college, I was active at... the Hillel on campus, actually, so I think my first leadership role was becoming [the] student leader of the... prayer group that meets on campus and, you know, I was, like, nineteen years old and running a service with other nineteen-year-olds, and it was, like, you know, we’re the real deal. It wasn’t a pretend service. It was an actual service with actual ritual skills... By the time I graduated college as a twenty-one-year-old, I had a lot of significant Jewish leadership experience on-campus and that—In many ways because I didn’t want to be a Jewish professional—I was doing that as my volunteer, you know, good citizen work, but it wasn’t really building up my career in my head. But thinking back on it, obviously it played a role in giving me experiences that I was able to translate when I did become a Jewish leader professionally.”

What seems important in these experiences is the transferability of the skills learned through these experiences into professional life. These leaders learned to recognize their agency, take risks, create inclusive communities, work together in diverse groups, organize events, and mobilize for social action at the same time that they were contemplating their future career options. When experiences like this are supported, they represent early successes that can embolden young leaders to continue pursuing Jewish community building and social leadership work in their careers.

Israel Experience

In our interviews, we heard about three basic categories of experiences with Israel as important to Jewish journeys or leadership journeys: living or traveling to Israel (often repeatedly) with family while growing up, short trips as a teenager or in college, and gap years or extended time living and often studying in Israel after college. With few exceptions, interviewees who mentioned personal experiences in Israel only mentioned briefly that they considered those experiences formative or critical, but without providing any further explanation. For example, one interviewee said that after growing up in a family with a strong Jewish identity but no institutional ties or habits of ritual practice, “weirdly, we lived in Israel for a year and that was like a really formative experience when we were young, but really not in any of this like communal stuff.”

Other leaders mentioned Israel experiences in passing together with other early experiences: “between 16 and 21, there were tons of those kinds of experiences all within the context of Jewish youth groups and summer camps and teen trips to Israel that gave me the tools I needed to sort of see myself as a Jewish leader and beginning to contemplate devoting my adult professional life to it.” Sometimes, a trip to Israel was linked with the outcomes of additional trips or continued interest in Israel later in life: “I would say that [my camping experience with Ramah] led to me going to Israel my junior year which was probably critical... It led me to want to go back to Israel many times. And I have and do as a result of that. My jobs always sort of had Israel in some sort of tangential way, if not [an] intentional direct way.”

Only one of the leaders we interviewed went into detail about the impact of a trip to Israel as a teenager, however, the description makes it clear that what was most valuable about the experience was the opportunity to make friends while traveling together:

“My parents wanted me to have like sort of a Jewish friend group or at least Jewish experience, so they signed me up and sent me on a teen trip to Israel. It was six weeks; five weeks in Israel, one week leading up to it. [What made it impactful for me] was not actually being in Israel. It was really the people on the trip. And all of a sudden, I had 80 people, other young Jews who were my same age. We were 15 and 16 years old, who I had these deep, wonderful connection relationships with, and it made a friend group that was even more deep than some of my friends from regular high school. And so that to me was really transformational to have a really strong group of other Jews who also had a similar immersive experience together. So that was just a wonderful experience. And I know I didn’t go to Jewish summer camp, I didn’t go to day school, I just didn’t do these things. And so that was really—it made me realize that having a Jewish community and Jewish friends was something that I wanted to have in my life... I think it was just traveling together, being together all of the time. I mean, you were sharing rooms. It was every waking hour. It’s not like a high-end luxury trip where it’s like, “Okay, you guys have free time for today. Go shopping,” and everyone has their own room. I mean, we were bunked up, we were on the bus, we were going from place to place. It was just all of these incredible memories together. And it was a long enough period of time that you really got to be together.”

If this experience proves to be common, it raises the possibility of creating meaningful group experiences for young Jews without the added cost of overseas travel, for example, by traveling locally while engaged in a service-learning program.

Leaders who talked about longer stays in Israel often had more to say about the experience. Five people said they had meaningful experiences studying at Pardes after college. They highlighted the pluralism of the institute and attitude of intellectual inquiry that was cultivated among Jews from different denominations as they studied texts and reflected on what it means to live a meaningful Jewish life today.

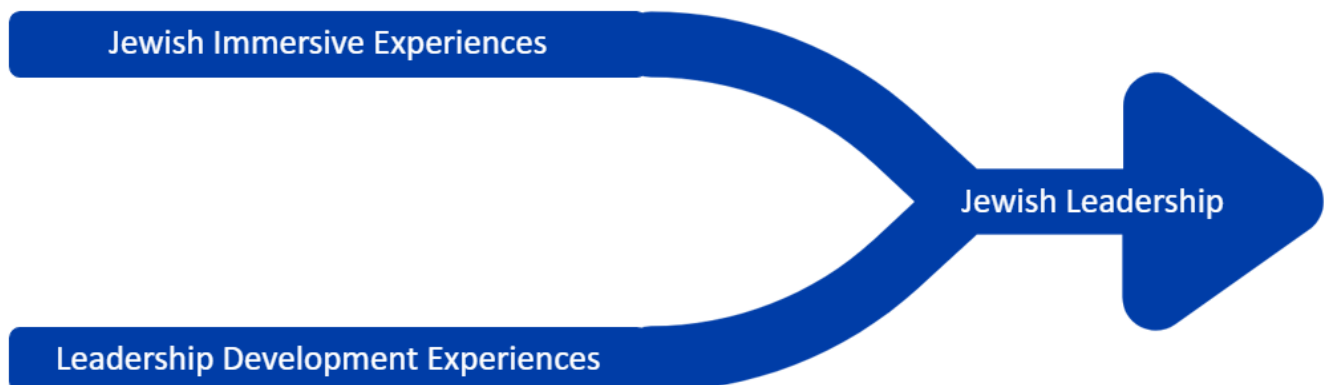
"[Other people] had master's degrees in Jewish education, rabbis, PhDs in Jewish education, or just serious Jewish day school. And I had none of that... I feel a little sad for myself that I never got to have someone write a course of learning for me that I could then study... And instead I kind of learned it on my own. Now, partly, that might have freed me up to just think differently about it."

In a comment about the value and purpose of a Jewish day school experience, content and commitment were reflected as the need for a holistic approach that succeeds in conveying both content knowledge and values:

"We probably have done a disservice by creating a Jewish education space that's separate from Jewish living, and being able to integrate the two is sort of good for everybody. You know, I send my kids to a Jewish day school. Do I want them to just learn facts or do I also want them to experience being part of community and be surrounded by a certain set of values. No, that's why we do it, it's for all of it, not just for the educational components of it."

Many people talked about experiences that were particularly effective because they were regular (like day schools), cyclical (like seasonal camping), recurrent (like programs that bring cohorts together for multiple gatherings), or long in duration (like sustained text study). One leader discussed the importance of building rhythm and repetition into immersive experiences so that learning can be carried over into everyday life:

"My sense is that it can't be only through immersive experiences, that we invest a tremendous amount of money in immersive experiences in the Jewish community, whether those are camping or Birthright or, you know, even Encounter—Like these experiences that are meant to kind of shake you up a little bit, shake you out of what you're, out of the norm and awaken you to a different way. But it had, we have to match immersive experiences with rhythm, with rhythmic experiences where there's a kind of ongoing engagement afterwards. Because people come home from camp. And if they can't match the feeling that they have on Friday night services at camp with anything at home, then they just feel like camp is really special, not Jewish life informs the way I live every day. If they go to Birthright and they feel connected to their Jewish identity and then they come home and they walk into a synagogue and



feel completely alienated, then they think, oh, the Birthright experience was really powerful. But that's not ultimately what we want, right? We don't want to attach people to one particular program or organization. We want to attach them to the ideas and the impulses that are behind them. So I think it's some combination of immersive and rhythmic engagement that helps people understand that you have to translate these ideas. And you have to start again and again and again."

The idea of a rhythm of experiences invites an interesting perspective on field-wide collaboration: the impact of organizations and programs can be amplified by thoughtfully coordinating between different organizations and institutions to assure that Jewish individuals and families of all demographics can engage in compelling Jewish learning experiences at a regular rhythm that stays in step with the pace of everyday life.

Summary: Preprofessional Immersive Experiences

A leading trend throughout all kinds of personal experiences described above is the benefit derived from an experience that helped a leader to develop a firm grounding in knowledge of Jewish texts and traditions that gave them the confidence to see themselves (and be seen by others) as a Jewish leader or educator.

Since many of the leaders we interviewed are engaged in developing novel ways to provide Jewish learning and community experiences, we found it significant that their own early personal experiences were overwhelmingly the kinds of traditional experiences that are provided by established Jewish institutions, especially youth groups and camping.

Prolonged immersive experiences with a social cohort element with opportunities to practice leadership by taking on challenging assignments in a low-risk environment stand out as particularly effective. The emphasis we observed on prolonged experiences makes us wonder how long an immersive experience needs to be for its developmental benefits to be realized. For example, how much text study does a Jewish education or nonprofit leader need to feel sufficiently confident in their level of Jewish learning? What trip durations, venues, and activities provide the best opportunity for group bonding among different age groups around shared values, experiences, or purposes? What is the ideal balance between imparting a sense of responsibility to young leaders taking on challenging assignments and creating a low-risk environment for experimentation in which failures, instead of leading to derailment, will be remembered as productive learning experiences?

Youth groups and camping stood out from other youth experiences for several reasons. They each offer a long-term immersive social environment in which young leaders create a sense of community, take on responsibilities and challenging assignments, and work together with peers to accomplish their goals. Several of the accounts we heard suggest that these early leadership learning experiences set the stage for continued value-driven leadership later in life.

"Yeah, I mean, my first leadership role was in youth group. Youth groups and summer camps in the Jewish community are the places where a lot of people have their first leadership experience, and yeah, I learned a lot from those experiences about how to—the sense of responsibility, how to be inclusive and try to make the communities I was leading in spaces that were open and comfortable for everyone. You know, the awareness of—again, on sort of a teenage/juvenile level, but the awareness of the power that comes with and not to abuse the power that comes with certain leadership roles. But it also gave me a taste for, you know, it's the place where I realized I have some talent for this and it fuels me and interests me and that was a big reason I ended up devoting my career to it, because it was meaningful, satisfying, you know, and gave me at that young age a sense of commitment to something and purpose."

We see in these activities several strategic opportunities to simultaneously increase the number of young Jews who have the opportunity to practice leadership while also enhancing the developmental quality of their early leadership learning experiences. Youth groups can be supported through sponsorship, recognition, and opportunities for groups from different communities to meet and work together. At the same time, they can be strengthened by encouraging information sharing among groups about the practices and frameworks that have proven to be most effective at engaging young people and providing positive leadership learning experiences. We expect that youth groups can benefit from experiences and training designed to help young leaders learn particular leadership skills. The first is boundary spanning practices for working across differences and in pluralistic contexts. The second is how to mobilize effective community responses to crises such as human rights abuses, humanitarian crises, or public tragedies. The primary concern we heard about camping experiences is their accessibility. If it is true, as one interviewee reasoned, that camping has the potential to create an impact comparable to eighty Birthright trips, and yet “90% of Jewish children aren’t going to Jewish overnight camp,” then additional research should be conducted into how Jewish camping experiences can be made more accessible.

The sections above described how young Jewish leaders develop through preprofessional experiences that we can interpret in terms of the five categories defined in the Lessons of Experience (LoE) literature: developmental relationships, challenging assignments, formal training programs, adverse situations, and personal experiences. These experiences were tightly interwoven. We can talk about each type of experience on its own and identify what elements contribute to making it a more effective means of leadership learning, but it is important to remember that these experiences are connected. For example, what makes developmental relationships especially significant is often the fact that they provide support to leaders while they take on challenging assignments or face adverse situations.

