

# Introduction

Family has long provided both the context and content for being a Jew. While the structure, composition, and meaning of family has shifted over time in the United States, family remains a crucial source of vitality for contemporary Jewish life. And yet, as Harriet Hartman reported in 2016, “some families, marginalized by the mainstream Jewish community, find it difficult to be engaged Jewishly on a communal level because of their special needs or conditions, such as economic vulnerability, immigrant status, multiracial/cultural diversity, and sexual orientations.”<sup>1</sup>

Hartman’s observation was based on research analyzing data and literature more than a decade ago. As the social landscape continues to shift, so does the composition of Jewish families. According to the Pew Research Center’s “Jewish Americans in 2020,”<sup>2</sup> Jewish families today increasingly include People of Color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and members from multiple religious, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds. Families living outside established Jewish population centers, or those in economically vulnerable situations, struggle to access institutional Jewish life. There is now a pressing need for research that intentionally includes these and other families with marginalized identities or circumstance.<sup>3</sup> To address this need and further their commitment to deepening Jewish life in the United States, Crown Family Philanthropies, the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, and the Jim Joseph Foundation commissioned Rosov Consulting to undertake this study.

1 Hartman, “The Jewish Family.”

2 Pew Research Center, “Jewish Americans in 2020.”

3 As underscored in Belzer, et al, “Beyond the Count: Perspectives and Experiences of Jews of Color.”

In fall 2023, we began a qualitative study to explore the interests, needs, hopes, and desires of Jewish families with young children. We were specifically interested in understanding the experience of Jewish families with diverse backgrounds, identities, and structures, alongside those that align more closely with traditional Jewish family norms (e.g., heterosexual, two-parent, white Ashkenazi families). We also wanted to learn more about less-engaged Jewish families—those that are not already deeply involved in Jewish communities or Jewish institutions. (This is why we did not include Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox families in this study since they have often made significant, structured commitments to Jewish life that distinguish them from the families we sought to examine.)

We centered our inquiries around the following questions:

- ➔ What kinds of Jewish lives are families living, and what Jewish lives do they seek to construct?
- ➔ From where do they derive their Jewish inspirations, and what kinds of resources do they utilize to give them expression?
- ➔ What are their Jewish needs and how are they being met, or not?
- ➔ What do Jewish families from diverse backgrounds want Jewish institutions and others to understand about their desires, needs, and realities?

To address these questions, we employed a two-phase qualitative research design. In the first phase, we conducted 40 focus groups with parents who have at least one child aged 0-8 and are raising them with Jewish experiences. In nearly all cases, only one parent per family participated in the groups. The

second phase, initiated after a preliminary analysis of the focus group data, involved 40 one-on-one interviews with select participants from the focus groups.<sup>4</sup>

This report presents what we have learned. We begin by describing our methodology, followed by a discussion of some of the political, economic, social, and cultural features of American society that shape the experiences of these families. Against this backdrop, we introduce a recurrent theme in our findings: the **tensions** that arise both within parents' various aspirations and between families' aspirations and the broader structural context. We then present what parents shared about their **aspirations** for their children and their family lives, both in Jewish and general terms, along with the **barriers** they see as obstructing these aspirations. Next, we explore **what parents do** to foster Jewish life at home, and how they think and feel about the activities and the resources they employ. We also address the

increasingly fraught role of **Israel** in these families' Jewish identities and their relationships to Jewish community. Finally, we present the key **takeaways** from our research, as well as additional questions raised along the way.

Throughout, we draw attention to the dedication and resourcefulness of Jewish families as they grapple with challenging circumstances and navigate increasing diversity within their families and communities. A series of **participant portraits** representing different family identity profiles is included in Appendix A, and a deeper dive into our methodology and participant recruitment are in Appendix B. Finally, at the conclusion of each major section of findings, we offer a **wider lens** perspective to contextualize these findings, underscoring their broader significance or posing additional questions prompted by the data.

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4 There were several adoptive parents and one grandparent who participated. We use the term "parent" throughout this report to refer to all study participants.

# Methodology

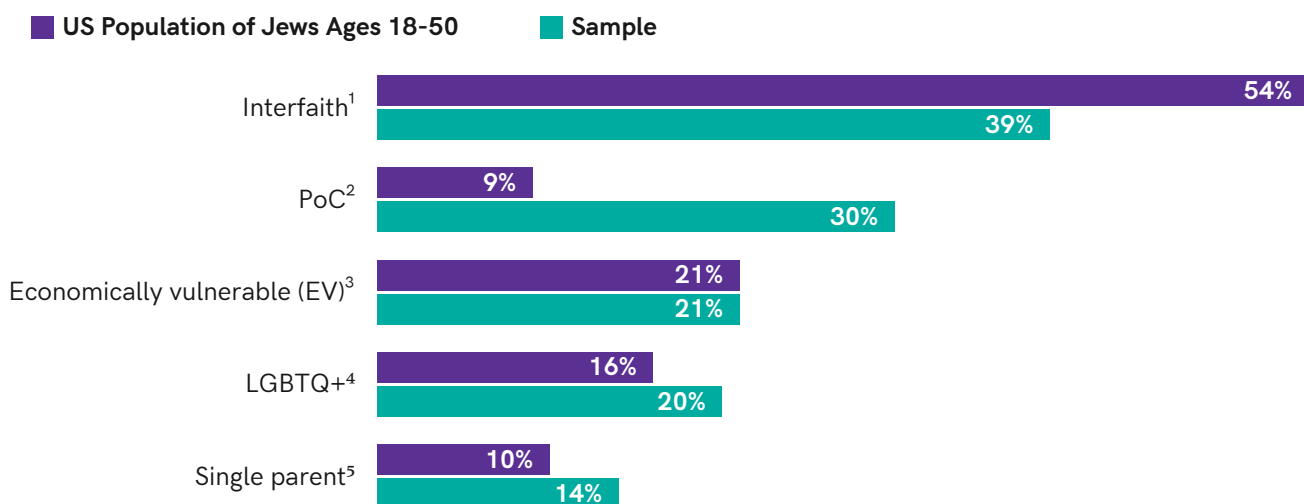
To learn as much as we could about a range of families, we designed our participant recruitment strategy to include as many as possible less-engaged families and families with diverse backgrounds. We did this by deploying an online screening survey that gathered information about each family’s demographic and structural composition, where they live, and aspects of their Jewish lives—including how they engaged in Jewish terms both inside and outside the home.

To determine the engagement levels presented in Figure 2, we applied a scoring system that quantified various expressions of Jewish engagement, thereby positioning each participant along a spectrum of engagement. Appendix B provides more extensive information about our methodological approach,

recruitment strategies, and definition and calculation of engagement, along with our learnings and reflections from these processes. Figure 1 presents the final distribution of family characteristics and demographics, contextualized by the 2020 Pew data. The approximate engagement distribution of participants is shown in Figure 2.

What is not seen in Figure 2 but may be inferred is that the majority of participants in our sample were indeed connected in some fashion to Jewish institutions such as preschools and synagogues. This, we suspect, is an artifact of our sample recruitment: our recruits included parents who were interested enough to participate in a study about how they were raising their children with Jewish experiences of some kind. Thus, our sample skews

Figure 1: Sample Compared to US Jewish Population, Age 18–50 (Total Sample = 187)



<sup>1</sup> Calculated only among married Jews ages 18–50.

<sup>2</sup> For PoC and LGBTQ+, Pew data is calculated by individual, while sample data is by household, meaning that at least one member of the household identifies in this way.

<sup>3</sup> Includes both people who report they cannot pay for basic expenses and those who can just afford basic expenses.

<sup>4</sup> Defined as those who are not married or partnered but have at least one child.

Figure 2: Engagement Levels of Sample (N = 187)



more toward institutionally engaged families than initially intended, which is worth bearing in mind when interpreting our findings. Nonetheless, the sample’s demographic and structural diversity (see Figure 1) did allow us to hear about a rich variety of experiences both within and outside of Jewish life, including both affirming and alienating stories.

When we quote participants below, we identify relevant demographic markers associated with each respondent. These markers help contextualize their comments and demonstrate that the views within particular minority groups are far from uniform. We do not distinguish between comments made during focus groups and those made in interviews, since we did not notice a meaningful difference in the substance or tone of these responses.

All focus groups and interviews were transcribed and coded using the qualitative analysis program NVivo, blending deductive and inductive approaches. In our discussion, we refrain from precisely quantifying phenomena or patterns since our data come from a qualitative sample. We do note, however, when such phenomena were commonly observed using terms such as “many” or “most”.

#### Demographic Groups Referenced in Quotes

General

Interfaith

EV (Economically vulnerable)

Sparse pop (Sparse Jewish population)

PoC (Person of Color)

LGBTQ+

Single parent