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# Bumps, Obstacles, and Difficult Contexts

When asked about the barriers they face in realizing their (Jewish) aspirations for their children and families, parents identified several obstructions, including geographic distance from Jewish organizations and the cost of Jewish life. Families living in smaller Jewish communities also contend with broader Christian-centric cultural norms and political polarization within both Jewish and local non-Jewish communities. Finally, families with marginalized identities or circumstances can also encounter a lack of welcome in some Jewish institutions.

## 3.1 Geography

For many parents in our sample, physical distance from extended family, Jewish population centers, and Jewish institutions poses a major obstacle. This is not surprising. Given high levels of geographic mobility among Jews and rising housing costs, young families are often pushed to the outskirts of metropolitan areas. Even relatively short distances can become prohibitive. Many parents are unwilling to drive more than 20 minutes regularly for Jewish events or services, leaving those who live outside of the Jewish “urban core” as bereft of institutional Jewish life as those who live further removed.

*So, you think San Diego, and you're like, oh, that's a big city. We live 40 minutes from the nearest synagogue. There are so many Jewish people [in the area we live in], but there's nothing. If we want to do Jewish and we want to be part of a Jewish community, we either make it ourselves or we go somewhere else [outside of our local community].*

Interfaith

The lack of Jewish infrastructure is even more difficult to overcome in small towns or rural areas.

*We have a small synagogue of about 20 people where my children are the only children. So, if we want to go to a larger one, we have to make a six-hour round trip to a larger synagogue and it's just not always possible.*

PoC Sparse pop

*I live rurally, between two cities, where there's a synagogue in each [city], an hour away each. There's really no place I can go to be with other families with children. So, we've developed a real home with the rabbi and the students at the [local] college. ... I was hoping for something more, a community with other children being raised with some of the same values and all that. Visiting my folks, we got to go to a “Tot b'Shabbat” and it was so wonderful, I wish there were more opportunities to be with other Jewish families with small children.*

Interfaith LGBTQ+ Sparse pop

When there is a nearby synagogue, parents often find few other families with young children. Chabad was frequently mentioned as “the only game in town.” Most appreciated Chabad’s openness, warmth, and child-friendly offerings; however, some did not feel they aligned with the organization’s vision and values. Such ambivalence was particularly acute for families that included marginalized identity categories.

*[Chabad is] very open. When you do connect with them, they're really excited that you're there. And they do cater to a younger age group, which fits our family. They're always putting together little shindigs or events. ... It draws people in. When you want to connect, they're there, but then there's also the little bit of extremism that kind of comes along with it, where it's all good and then something might turn you off a little bit.*

EV Sparse pop

In sum, those who live in towns or suburbs with sparse Jewish populations are often faced with yet another difficult choice: either participate in locally available groups that are not a good fit either for their age, life stage, and values; create Jewish life outside of institutions in some fashion; or forgo their Jewish aspirations altogether. No study participants took the last route entirely, likely because such people were unlikely to have opted in to the study. Some had largely given up on finding a physical community; others invested effort in building Jewish life outside of one but did not succeed as they would have liked. In the words of one participant:

*Not that we're going to stop being Jewish or anything by any means, but it makes it almost seem like, okay, well then we don't need to do this right now, or we'll just do it next year and putting it off and putting it off. And then eventually our kids are going to be grown and that identity will be lost.*

Sparse pop PoC

The efforts of those attempting to build Jewish life outside of institutions are explored more deeply below.

### 3.2 Economic Vulnerability and the Costs of Jewish Life

The cost of Jewish life emerged as a recurring barrier, especially for families experiencing economic vulnerability. This finding is neither new nor surprising, but it bears repeating given the pervasiveness of this issue in today's high-cost-of-living climate. Economic constraints often drive young families to settle far from Jewish institutions.

*We actually decided not to be members of a synagogue this year, and it's just because we can't afford it. And we were thinking once our son is old enough to do Sunday school, that costs a lot of money, a lot of money, which makes sense. It's just that we're going to have to figure out, how does that fit in the family budget? I do want him to have that kind of connection to his peers and also learn things*

*through that, but it's so expensive and we also want him to have other extracurriculars other than that, and that all adds up. It's a pretty penny, and so you have to figure out where you want your resources to go, and maybe not this year, but maybe next year, yeah, it's a big cost.*

Interfaith LGBTQ+ Sparse pop

A few parents who reported economic vulnerability also described feeling socially out of place in Jewish spaces where financial affluence often shapes the community culture.

*I was doing a commute so that we could live in an Orthodox community. ... Every time the dads [from the synagogue] got together, it would be at the golf club. The talk over kiddush would be people kvetching about their cleaners or whatever. We just looked at each other and we were like, these are not our people. They're living a completely different life to us. So we decided to move. Now we're trying to figure out what it means to be Jewish at a time when we feel like ... being Jewish isn't just a religious identity, it's an economic identity that we can't afford to be part of. Now, living as only one of a handful of Jews in this small town, Judaism is mostly something we do at home.*

EV Sparse pop

For more information about this family, please see Appendix A: Portrait 4, "Struggling in a Small Town."

Our data do not shed new light on the extent to which families are challenged by the costs of Jewish life; recent research has confirmed the pervasiveness of this problem even among middle-class professionals.<sup>13</sup> What our findings do highlight is the tension parents feel between visions of a Jewish life based on their own childhood and what is feasible in today's economic landscape. This tension is often sharpened by making their homes in neighborhoods or cities unmoored from Jewish institutions because they cannot afford to live any closer to such resources.

13 Tulane University and Rosov Consulting, *On The Edge: Voices of Economic Struggle in U.S. Jewish Communities*.

### 3.3 Christian-Centric Public Cultures

Parents in areas with smaller Jewish populations often expressed anxiety about nurturing positive Jewish identities in places with pervasive Christian public cultures and widespread ignorance about Jews and Judaism. Such environments can amplify parents' anxieties, as public schools and local events often reflect Christian traditions while overlooking or misunderstanding Jewish perspectives.

*Here in my community, they do so much Christmas in the school. It's not like they don't acknowledge any holidays, it's all very Christmas-centric, and there's no interest in showing another experience or another viewpoint. So that's discouraging to me. And I work here in the school district, I was so surprised when I was hired and I reported to the new teacher orientation breakfast and, sure enough, the head of human resources gathered everyone and said, "Okay, we're going to pray before we eat. We all bow our heads and in Jesus's name we pray." And my head almost spun around. I thought, this is the head of human resources of a large public school district. So, it's disappointing.*

**Sparse pop**

*That's a hard one for me ... that the world kind of stops and starts for Christmas and there's a lot of lights and colors and sounds and to try and raise a child, a young child who just wants to play and have fun to [say] no we don't do that. It sucks. It's hard. And that's been a major challenge, especially with daycare being public basically. [My child] is one of the few if only kids there that are Jewish.*

**Sparse pop** **Single parent**

The pressure to "compete with Christmas" was articulated by many families. They felt obliged to ensure that Judaism was something fun that their children would enjoy and someday choose for themselves, as we discuss further below. The task is invariably more daunting for those without access to supportive Jewish communities and institutions.

### 3.4 Political Polarization

The current degree of political polarization in the United States affects families' ability to engage comfortably with both Jewish and local non-Jewish communities. For some parents, local norms and political views are at odds with the values they want to instill in their children.

*I see things in the middle school and high school and hear about parents on the school board trying to censor material. It makes me feel like we can't stay in this town long term. I'm afraid of who my son will go to school with, the values he might pick up from friends, especially when it comes to people thinking some are better than others, and gun culture, etc.*

**Interfaith** **LGBTQ+** **Sparse pop**

Jewish spaces are not immune to these broader influences. Parents shared feeling uncomfortable about the normalizing of divisive political positions.

*I'm in Texas. Yesterday I went to the Israel solidarity event and [Governor] Greg Abbott spoke, who does not support LGBTQ+ anything, and it was just like, this is weird. Why did he speak? ... I think being in Austin we're lucky in that I feel a little bit more protected in that way [the city is relatively liberal], but it's still in Texas. I'm always sort of looking over my shoulder.*

**LGBTQ+**

Most who were uncomfortable with the culture of political conservatism in Jewish communities connected their discomfort to expectations of monolithic support for Israel, a phenomenon that will be discussed further below. By contrast, one interviewee—neatly demonstrating that the members of minority groups are by no means uniform in their views—described distaste for the liberal activism promoted at her synagogue:

*You don't really go [to synagogue] to hear about the rabbi's political philosophy. You're there for the faith stuff and the spirituality and even the culture. But you don't go there to hear*

*somebody talk about, okay, well this is what the president is doing. ... That's not why I am there. I just found that very off-putting. I remember we were at a high holiday service with my family a while ago, and the rabbi started talking about political stuff, left-wing stuff, and we were just getting so angry.*

**Interfaith**

These examples highlight how the current polarized American climate shapes parents' comfort in Jewish and other communities, in turn influencing their family's participation.

### 3.5 Marginalization in Jewish Spaces

While several parents described difficulties finding Jewish institutions that were a good fit, families with marginalized identities or circumstances reported particularly painful experiences of exclusion. Their accounts indicate that it is especially alienating to have one's legitimacy as a Jew called into question because of normative views of what Jewish people and Jewish families "should" look like.

*For us, the only times we've had any sort of tension with our reality of being a mixed-race couple, and a biracial child, is generally the consequences of antisemitism and racism in the respective communities. We've had a situation where we were interested in joining a synagogue, we'd heard such great things about it, and the ex-Mossad Israeli security guard at the gate wouldn't let my husband into the synagogue. It was a horrible experience. We didn't get the feedback from the rabbi we thought we should have. There are very entrenched beliefs on both sides of our cultural traditions, there are a lot of very strongly held racist beliefs in the Jewish community.*

**Interfaith PoC**

*I've tried six different synagogues. I've walked into a synagogue as a single mom, and they see me with short hair and they're like, who are you? What do you think you're doing here? I've been, I don't want to say excommunicated, but I felt very unwelcome. It's what's also made our*

*journey coming back to our communities and roots very difficult.*

**PoC EV Sparse pop Single parent**

Many such families seek evidence of true welcome and inclusion beyond slogans and signs. Without it, they may choose not to participate.

*It's okay if you're not welcoming, but you don't need to say you are and then not be. That's totally fine. If you're not, that's okay. But if you're going to say you're welcoming, what work are you doing to actually welcome us? And what work are you doing actually to understand racism in your synagogue or undo prejudice against queer families in your synagogue? Because it's an action for me, not just a label.*

**Interfaith PoC LGBTQ**

*The reasons that going to the Unitarian Church was so easy was because my wife was raised there and her parents go there ... whereas it's not as easy to find a synagogue. If you go on the webpage of a lot of the temples and the synagogues locally, there's not any kind of message like, "Hey, have you ever been to synagogue? Are you this kind of [interfaith] family? Have you never been to synagogue as a family together? This is who you should write to, or this is what you should expect." Because like I said, I was pretty young when I went regularly, so it's different going in as an adult with children.*

**Interfaith LGBTQ+ Sparse pop**

As can be seen, first impressions are important for those who are "synagogue shopping." The parent quoted above made a judgment about congregations' inclusivity based solely on their websites. This account also demonstrates that families who belong to more than one faith community may opt to participate in the non-Jewish one if it is more accessible and welcoming. Such was the case for another interfaith family, Honeymoon Israel alumni raising their children in both Catholic and Jewish faith traditions. In contrast to their lukewarm experiences in Jewish institutions, they were actively

engaged by their neighborhood Catholic church. As a result, the family is more active in the church community than in any Jewish community, even though the Jewish spouse grew up locally and has several Jewish family members and friends nearby.

*[After our son's baptism], the community manager [of the local Catholic church] I connected with asked us to lead the interfaith ministry there. I had never experienced an interfaith group at a Catholic church. But they were like, we don't want people to feel like the partner needs to be Catholic, even if they don't come to mass. We want them to come to the church programming if we do a fish fry or whatever. So, my husband was like, okay, it sounds like they're being very open-minded about this. So, he and I are the ministry leaders for their interfaith ministry. ... It's been nice for me to connect with the church and feel that I'm doing something involved with the church.*

Interfaith PoC

➔ For more information about this family, please see Appendix A: Portrait 3: "Robust Infrastructure, Elusive Community."

*Jewish, I'm not treated as a convert. So, it's like I feel like there should be something for beginners too. There's still a lot that I feel that I don't know how to do as well.*

Interfaith PoC Sparse pop EV

In the same vein, interviewees with infants and young toddlers shared stories of feeling shut out because synagogues and other communal spaces did not sufficiently accommodate parents with infants and younger toddlers. They did not know where they fit in the communal landscape.

*Our temple's Friday night services are not set up to have children at them or at least have babies at them. And our child is quite rambunctious, so she can stay in the service for 15 minutes, maybe 20 on a really good night and loves the beginning of service with songs and recognizes the rabbis and the cantor and whatnot. But then she's got to go, there are too many people giving us looks because of the noise that she makes, which is sad and fine. And we're trying to shift the culture of the temple with our one family persisting.*

LGBTQ

*My wife and I, we move a lot, different jobs, finding opportunities. And especially at the age we're at, and in the next nine months or so, it's a weird place to connect Jewishly. There's a lot for young adults, and once your kids go to school there's a community, but in between it seems rather isolating. There are some Jewish mothers' groups, but not a lot for them, and I find that rather surprising in today's day and age. I'd say that's challenging. ... You find a Moishe House or Federation, but there's not much in this weird little space.*

General

### 3.6 Missing Services or Supports

Beyond questions of welcome, some interviewees complained about gaps in programmatic scaffolding for those with limited Jewish cultural capital (sufficient familiarity with Jewish life to navigate Jewish practices and places). Even when Jewish infrastructure is not sparse, it doesn't always include opportunities for remedial adult learning.

*Sometimes when I went to synagogue, I would feel lost. ... And since I am already considered*

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**A Wider Lens: The Continued Relevance of Synagogues** ➔ These accounts indicate that intentional, explicit practices of inclusion are essential if Jewish institutions are to attract families with marginalized identities or circumstances. For dual-faith families, other religious communities may win out if they are more effective in this way. Despite research showing a long decline in attendance at religious services in the United States,<sup>14</sup> synagogues remain one of the most viable touchpoints for young families seeking Jewish community. Families of young children seek institutions that provide welcoming community for "people like them." Evidently, Jewish institutions, and synagogues especially, have continued potential to foster Jewish life at a time when many parents are unmoored from other systems of support. Institutions must, in turn, provide sufficient child-friendly resources for families.

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14 Jeffrey Jones, "Church Attendance Has Declined in Most U.S. Religious Groups."