

Challenging Times and Compounding Tensions

Before we present major findings from our focus groups and interviews, we think it useful to reference challenging social, economic, and political conditions that currently shape family life in the United States. Our previously published review of relevant research literature explored several of these issues in greater depth.⁵ For the parents in this study, these conditions are not abstract concepts; they are palpable influences affecting how they raise their children. Parents referenced these conditions, either directly or indirectly, as they discussed their decisions, aspirations, and concerns regarding their children's Jewish lives.

- ➔ **Political polarization**, at a high in American public life, strains relationships within families and communities, including within Jewish communities.⁶
- ➔ **Antisemitism** is increasing from both the political Right and Left.
- ➔ Overuse of **digital media** and screen time is a top concern for contemporary parents. At the same time, the internet provides essential resources for families raising young children.
- ➔ **Lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic** continue to ripple through learning delays, social disruption, and widely felt social isolation.
- ➔ **Jewish migration** rates within the US are higher than those of the general population and have been rising since the start of the pandemic. Such mobility affects family and friendship and disrupts institutional engagement.⁷

5 Rosov Consulting, "Jewish Families Today: Insights from Literature and Advisors."

6 Ariela Keysar, "The Hollow Middle."

7 Michael Weil, "Jews on the Move."

- ➔ **Inflation and high costs of living** shape decisions about where families live and where they educate their children, often at the expense of their Jewish ambitions. Economic vulnerability among Jews in the United States is rising, which directly impacts parental stress and wellbeing and, in turn, that of their children).⁸
- ➔ **Unrealistic cultural expectations** place responsibility on parents—especially those who identify as women—to satisfy all of their children's social, emotional, and educational needs. Combined with the factors above, many parents are suffering burnout.⁹

These conditions constrain parents' choices and give rise to multiple tensions as they navigate Jewish life and parenting more broadly. Three tensions are especially evident:

- ➔ **Tensions between parents' own aspirations or commitments.** Parents often feel torn between wanting to expose or immerse their children in diverse environments while also fostering a Jewish environment that supports a strong Jewish identity. Similarly, they desire to foster a positive Jewish identity in their children while feeling reluctant to "force" anything on them.
- ➔ **Tensions between parents' aspirations and the structural and cultural contexts they inhabit.** Some parents' visions for their children are borne of their own childhood experiences, formed in

8 Alan Cooperman and Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz, "Advancing Research on Jewish Poverty: A More Unified Approach to Measuring Economic Deprivation and Vulnerability.," Kotler-Berkowitz, "Chapter 2.9 The Vulnerable Among Us."

9 Kate Gawlik and Bernadette Mazurek Melnyk, "The Power of Positive Parenting: Evidence to Help Parents and Their Children Thrive."

a different historical context. Others want to be part of a strong Jewish community but are thwarted by the economic realities, such as the need to move for better job opportunities or more affordable housing.

- ➔ **Tensions between what families seek from institutions and what institutions are equipped or willing to provide.** Many families seek clear commitments to inclusivity that some institutions have been hesitant to extend. Families may seek inclusion of diverse religious identities or specific stances on Israel, which can be straightforward for individuals but complex at the communal level.

Altogether, large-scale societal pressures create a disorienting reality for many families. Societal norms and expectations are being challenged by alternative sets of values in ways that have not yet been resolved collectively and that exist outside the realm of individual influence. In this context, people are strongly drawn to ideas and institutions that can provide meaning and a sense of orientation to their present challenges. At the same time, they frequently find themselves caught between conflicting frameworks of meaning. We find this explanatory framework helpful for understanding the aspirations that parents in our study articulated for their children, their descriptions of the challenges to those aspirations, and the strategies they employ to overcome those challenges.