

Making it Work

Jewish institutions, especially synagogues and preschools, continue to appeal to the parents of young children; parents seek nearby, child-friendly, and genuinely inclusive spaces to foster Jewish connection. Emergent, informal communities complement—and often compete with—institutional settings, especially for mixed-heritage, PoC, and LGBTQ+ families who seek fully inclusive gatherings. Parents strive to create meaningful Jewish experiences at home, often relying on online resources to do so, but they face challenges when they lack strong community supports or Jewish literacy. Ultimately, while parents aspire for their children to embrace their Jewish identities, they balance this aspiration with contemporary parenting ideals and a deep commitment to expressing and celebrating the diverse identities in their families.

Despite the challenges and obstacles described above, most participants in our study were connected in some fashion to Jewish institutions such as preschools and synagogues. Their reflections on how such connections came about or what gave them meaning shed light on what might inspire other families who are not currently connected.

4.1 Institutions That Work: Nearby, Child-Friendly, Authentically Welcoming

For parents, proximity is crucial. When they have access to Jewish institutions or live near Jewish family members, especially their own parents, their options to provide Jewish experiences for their children considerably increase.

We belong to a local Reform temple and my son attends Jewish preschool. He's learning about Jewish holidays and traditions. He's still really young to comprehend what it means to be Jewish, but my in-laws are [Jewish] as well, and they live within waving distance. So, we get together with them for holidays, and I think it's very special that my son gets to celebrate with grandparents and keep those traditions alive. I mean, we're in South Florida, so we're basically southern New York; there is a huge Jewish population here. And through the temple we've been able to meet more Jewish families with young children and get to do things with them. So that camaraderie has really been great for us.

PoC LGBTQ+

I feel really lucky. I think we have all the resources we could ever want and need within 15 minutes of our home: the JCC, which is where we are members, and we go there for other activities. Plus, that's where my two-year-old goes to preschool. ... And then the amazing synagogue that we go to ... all the great programs they have for young families. ... So we feel very fulfilled there.

General

As a corollary to the earlier discussion about barriers, mixed-heritage, PoC, and LGBTQ+ families narrated how early signals of inclusion let them know a community would be an accepting place. Consistently, these signals conveyed that the spirit of welcome was an important part of institutional culture, not a marketing strategy or the initiative of one individual. The person below describes her first impression of the synagogue where she eventually chose to complete her conversion to Judaism:

One of the first things I remember was [the synagogue] put a really, really big emphasis on just being welcoming to all persons. And it was kind of just noted everywhere. In the bathroom there were stickers, "This is a safe space." That was the first shocking part to me was like, it's just a bathroom ... I thought that was really, really interesting. You're not only showcasing that throughout your synagogue, but it's even prevalent in the bathroom.

PoC

There were many interfaith families, many diverse families, and many people who had converted to Judaism or who had come back to it after leaving it for many years. ... I think we just felt really welcomed. It felt like people weren't going through the motions of like, oh, here's a new person. Check off their name, give them a thing and say hi. ... It was like, here's people, and they genuinely wanted to know me and what interested me. And the rabbi, too, it was like she made it a point to come over and get to know us.

LGBTQ+ Sparse pop Single parent

Finally, the spirit of welcome was reinforced by structures and services that meet the needs of parents with young children. These institutions have provided wraparound support. They enable families to find community, access activities, and draw on additional resources to enrich Jewish practice in their own homes.

This is [my son's] third year [at a Jewish preschool]. He has brought that into our home by bringing home homemade challah that they make on Fridays and by singing all the songs they do at Tot Shabbat every Friday. I swear he knew more Shabbat songs than he did nursery rhymes before he was two. ... Plus, all the events they hold outside of school have been really amazing. They do so many things and it was really easy to go and all the kids are running around, so you never felt pressured that they had to sit at a service. It was all kid-friendly, which I did not grow up experiencing. I look around and I see a lot of kids and a lot of families, young families, and it blows my mind because again, I never had that.

General

4.2 Emergent Grassroots Communities

Sometimes, the qualities of community described above can be created outside of traditional institutions and locations, among local friends who form informal groups to share Jewish practice together. One interviewee described launching a community for herself and her child by bringing

together women who shared her interest in Rosh Chodesh (new moon) practices infused with pagan—what she called premonotheistic—practices. Another evocatively conveyed how a group of friends came together, mixing informality and deliberateness, to celebrate Shabbat in a way that works for both children and parents. These self-created experiences of community are marked by the same qualities as those that are more institutionalized: they are hyperlocal, inclusive of people who share the same values, and fun for kids.

There is a group in my area of DC that has basically created a lot of tot Shabbat music programs. They've recently gotten a [nonprofit] designation, but the intent isn't to create an organization, it's just a great couple that we're friends with and they invite 30 of their friends over with their kids and we all get together once a month or in a park or at their house and people bring food and play guitars and bongos and sing some songs and get together. It's more informal and, especially for my kids, it's just about creating a positive vibe and a positive association that there's a community here. We have a common connection and we sing and be silly and eat some yummy snacks.

General

Institutions are not completely absent from this trend. We heard from several parents who benefited from institutional support in fostering informal peer communities. These included more traditional, local entities like Federations and JCCs, as well as national organizations like Honeymoon Israel and PJ Library. The participant quoted below recounts making an extra effort to ensure one such program fit her needs.

I love the PJ Library "Get Together" grants [which provide funds to support families gathering around Jewish activities]. I use them all the time. ... For me, one of my biggest things is I wanted to have Jewish friends. So, I really leaned into a program here called Shalom Baby, which put us together with playgroups. But instead of just accepting the random playgroup that I got, where nobody lived by me. ... I actually asked, who has had a baby within six months

of me who lives by me? I just need a friend who lives by me, who's Jewish. And that friend who I met, our kids are four months apart in age, but we've been friends since they were babies, and now they go to the same school and we'll often do Jewish holidays together.

Interfaith

Those who participated in more informal groups spoke of them with great enthusiasm. They felt

fortunate to have access to such opportunities. This resonates with the popularity of innovative, inclusive community models that continue to gain momentum throughout the country, such as Harlem Embrace in New York City and Olamim in the San Francisco Bay Area. In the absence of local institutions alongside them, these alternative models will probably continue to be popular.

A Wider Lens: Challenges for Inclusive Communities Because emergent grassroots communities form around and cater to smaller and like-minded groups, they typically avoid the challenges faced by institutions that serve as bigger tents, seeking to include ever more diverse identities. Just as families wrestle with how to blend the diverse aspirations and commitments held by parents and extended family members, so do established communities in their desire to remain relevant. Communities can find themselves facing existential questions about when Jewish becomes “Jewish-and”, and when “Jewish-and” stops being Jewish. These concepts help explain the mix of affection and ambivalence inspired by Chabad institutions, specifically preschools and synagogues. Striving to be both uncompromisingly Jewish (in a traditional sense) and genuinely inclusive, they’re admired for their welcome and their authenticity while they can also feel constraining. They make space for “Jewish-and” while not institutionalizing it.

4.3 Creating Jewish at Home

Focus groups and interviews inquired into the nuts and bolts of how families create Jewish experiences—how they try to “make it work”—at home. In this section, we first describe the sometimes-overwhelming responsibility parents feel to cultivate their children’s Jewish lives. We then explore parents’ positioning vis-à-vis their own upbringing in terms of how they raise their children. We consider the online and offline resources people mine to create Jewish experiences at home. Finally, we examine the creative practices that mixed-heritage families implement to form families that are “Jewish-and” (including Jewish and other identities).

4.3.1 If I Don’t Teach Them, Who Will? The Burden of Transmission

In general, the parents we spoke with expressed feeling responsible for curating their children’s Jewish lives in ways that are fun and engaging. At the same time, they want to “correctly” teach them about practices and beliefs. Parents who lacked access to broader

community support felt particularly “on their own” in this endeavor. Women-identifying participants often (but not always) reported shouldering more of this burden in their households, consistent with research literature demonstrating that the American cultural norm is for mothers to be the bearers and transmitters of religious practice and identity.¹⁵ The anxiety that some parents feel in bearing this responsibility came through in these conversations.

I would like to expose them more to what it means to be Jewish. ... Just when it gets to holiday stuff, they'll ask questions, and I want to answer the questions. And it's really important to me that if they are curious about something, that I can explain it to them and give them a perspective that they're not going to get in school, most likely, because there just aren't very many Jewish kids here at all.

Interfaith

15 Fern Chertok, Rachel Minkin, and Matthew Brookner, “All in Her Day’s Work”; Micaela di Leonardo, “The Female World of Cards and Holidays.”

I've been trying. ... I grew up having the Sunday school, the Hebrew school, Hebrew high school, going to services. They don't have that option. So, if I don't teach them, who will?

Sparse pop Single parent

4.3.2 Replicating, Recasting, & Initiating: How Parents Relate to Their Own Jewish Upbringing

Parents often framed their responsibilities in relation to their own childhoods, whether from a desire to *replicate* what they had experienced or to *recast* those experiences in more positive form, seeking to depart from the practices of their own parents. Those who embraced Judaism as adults followed a third path, seeking to *initiate* something they had not experienced as children; this includes parents who had converted or otherwise came to identify as Jewish later in life and those who were supporting their children's Jewish identities alongside a Jewish spouse. As we explore these three kinds of relationships to childhood experiences—replicating, recasting, and initiating—it is important to bear in mind that these are not necessarily discrete categories (for example, families may wish to replicate some aspects of their childhood, while recasting others).

Parents who wished to *replicate* aspects of their childhood Jewish experiences often spoke of the warmth and vibrancy of family gatherings.

Everything was really just positive, so I just knew that I wanted to instill that in my own family and children as well. It was such warm, loving memories of just always being with family ... even extended family; it wasn't just immediate family. Particularly for things like break fast [after Yom Kippur] and Passover. ... I wanted to do the same for mine because [these were] such wonderful memories for me.

Interfaith PoC

Those who had been raised as Jews and who wished to *recast* their childhood experiences and do things differently, included some who had felt marginalized

in Jewish settings and didn't want their own children to feel that way. Others didn't want Judaism "forced" on their children in the same way it had been forced on them.

I am half-Jewish, half-Puerto Rican, and so I grew up understanding both religions and both sides of my family wanting to make sure that we celebrated and believed in each side. ... And so, growing up it was a little bit confusing for myself and my two siblings because we felt that it was kind of pushed on us and we didn't really have an opportunity to enjoy it the same way. After my [Jewish] grandmother passed, I started to read a little bit more about [Judaism], started to purchase some books and started to really incorporate that with my kids. Not necessarily forcing it on them the same way that it happened with us, but more just trying to bring out the fun side of things so that way they can really celebrate both sides [Jewish and Catholic]. ... I'm making sure that [my kids] can have a say.

Interfaith PoC

Those who are *initiating* Jewish practice as adults have various profiles: these include non-Jewish people in interfaith partnerships, many of whom do not wish for their children to miss out on the cultural and spiritual resources of their Jewish heritage. The parent quoted below explained how she is raising her child as both Chinese and Jewish in terms of culture, but only as Jewish in terms of religion (a distinction explored further below).

I converted seven years ago before we got married. And now as a seven-year-old Jew I want to learn everything. We have a Jewish household. We celebrate all the holidays. I have our PJ Library books, it's not just about her learning, I'm also learning, and I want to be a resource for her. If we have grandkids I want to share with them in a meaningful way and not just look stuff up on Google.

PoC LGBTQ+

A handful of those *initiating* Jewish practice had Jewish ancestry but were raised with few or no Jewish

experiences. Now, as adults, they were embracing a Jewish identity for themselves and their families. These included the children or grandchildren of interfaith unions, those who had discovered Jewish ancestry through DNA testing, and descendants of Jews from the Former Soviet Union.

So, I was actually raised Christian. My grandmother, she told us about her Jewishness, so that's how we found out. ... I prayed about it, and then I was like, maybe I should see where my ancestors are from ... maybe I should meet with a rabbi. So, I actually met a rabbi at Chabad, and at the time I was still holding onto Christianity. ... He was like, you're Jewish. And then he invited me to come meet with him, and he was like, you should attend services and see if you like it. That's how I pretty much ended up where I am. So, for me, it's just really been about how do I translate the part of me that is so connected to [Judaism] to my kids, especially since it falls on me. I don't have a partner that will help me, he'll support me, but he's not going to drive it.

Interfaith PoC

Like others initiating Jewish practice in their families, such parents are hungry for opportunities to support their own learning and that of their children. Whether they are replicating, recasting, or initiating, parents seek resources and support for guiding their children's Jewish journeys.

4.3.3 Using the Resources on Hand (or Online)

What are parents to do if they lack the know-how to create meaningful experiences for their children? They go online! The internet plays a critical role in the Jewish home life of many families. When asked specifically which resources they sought, most parents couldn't name a specific site and said they "just Googled." Often they go to websites in preparation for holiday celebrations at home, for example for ideas of how to celebrate or how to explain things to their children. Again, parents are often looking for ways to make things fun and exciting for their kids, relating to the sense of responsibility mentioned

above for making Judaism something positive that their children will someday choose for themselves. Some spoke of seeking Jewish resources related to other interests, hobbies, or values (for example, music, cooking, or nature). Finally, some parents are seeking their own spiritual or intellectual fulfillment online.

There's a clip we use for our Havdalah ceremony [at home]. We just pull up the same YouTube video every week and they sing the song with us, and we don't necessarily need the clip anymore, but it's nice to have the guitar playing in the background. ... I also like the resources that bring traditions into contemporary moments and with contemporary concerns. Every year I just kind of go digging, getting ready for Passover and oh, what am I going to find? There was one organization that had the 10 plagues for modern times instead of the biblical plagues. It's social justice issues that we're dealing with today. Oh, I really like that.

General

There is a podcast that I listen to, a Sephardic rabbi, and he gives lectures every morning. He actually has very good stuff, and he also doesn't beat around the bush. ... There are some different rabbis that I find on YouTube. I just listen to their lectures or shiurim and take whatever I need to take from there. It's eye-opening to a lot of things I didn't know before.

Interfaith PoC EV Sparse pop

While online resources are essential, many parents find them insufficient for creating or sustaining Jewish life at home. They still hunger for community or at least for help from someone with whom they are in an ongoing relationship. One participant put this very powerfully:

I don't think I'm doing a very good job at any of it, honestly. I don't have the people to go to. I don't necessarily think Googling it is going to suffice. I feel like I've done as much as I can on my own, but I need people, I need guidance. ... After COVID, it finally hit a point where I need people and I need people's guidance, not the internet. ...

With my kids, too: what they need is interaction. And I feel kind of hopeless because of the community I'm in. There isn't anything here.

Sparse pop

The ever-expanding marketplace of content plays an important role in enriching Jewish home life, wherever Jewish families find themselves. Nonetheless, parents still seek, and ultimately prefer, in-person relationships and communities. That is why, as we have seen, they relish such experiences when they find them.

4.3.4 Cultural Sharing and Meaning Making in Families with Diverse Backgrounds

A major goal of this study was to understand the identities, practices, and desires of mixed heritage families. Consistent with previous research, we found these families making creative, purposeful decisions about how to honor their multiple heritages.¹⁶ As institutions look for ways to attract such families, it continues to be instructive to see what families are doing in their homes.¹⁷ For example, incorporating diverse foodways into Jewish rituals is a popular practice, although not always without tension.

I consider us a Jewish family; we do Jewish stuff in the house. We do Christmas with our [Korean] in-laws, belong to a temple for the past seven to eight years, and we do a lot of Korean stuff, food and language and culture. There's not much tension except for the food. We're not kosher, but I grew up kosher, and I'm still not that comfortable having octopus in the sink. They do that a lot at their house, and it was hard when [my mother-in-law] wanted to do it at our house. So, there's a little tension there around food, but otherwise we've achieved sort of a stable equilibrium around that.

Interfaith PoC

16 See, for example, Thompson, *Jewish on Their Own Terms*; McGinity, *Marrying Out*; Miller, *Being Both*; and other works cited in Rosov Consulting, "Jewish Families Today: Insights from Literature and Advisors."

17 See: Ariela Ronay-Jinich, "Latin Jewish Families and Their Educational Choices: Navigating Multiple Identities."

Another strategy for promoting multiple heritages is through cultivating and maintaining different languages. In some such cases, the boundaries between language and culture can become opaque and even fraught, especially when one of those languages is closely associated with a particular religious tradition. Language is rarely a neutral vehicle for communication.

I have my family in Mexico and identify as Mexican. My husband is Italian, so there is a lot of rich culture in the family. But how that manifests is that his mom handles the Italian stuff and Christmas. But what's harder is my kids go to a Spanish immersion [school], and I think most of the kids there are pretty Catholic. Catholic culture sort of underlies what they talk about there, so I have to bring in the Jewish part and sometimes it feels competitive.

PoC

In describing their approach to maintaining multiple traditions, many parents made a distinction between "religion" and "culture." According to this logic, "religion" is the domain of religious institutions only, with their respective dogmas and competing truth claims. "Culture," on the other hand, designates more neutral practices that can more readily coexist within the lives of individuals, families, or communities. In this schema, many ritual practices (for example, lighting Hanukkah candles or putting up a Christmas tree) are assigned to the domain of culture.¹⁸ Our participants demonstrate that this remains a pervasive logic that mixed-heritage families employ in blending traditions. However, it is not applied in uniform ways. Some expressed that they are religiously Jewish, while the other traditions they observe in their home are strictly cultural. Others designate all the practices they follow as "culture." Still others are raising their children as dual-faith, begging the question of if and how divergent theologies are navigated with young children.

18 Samira K. Mehta, *Beyond Chrismukkah*, 137.

My husband brought up very early on that it was important to him to raise his children Jewish, and I was like, oh, what's the big deal. ... I was happy he felt strongly about something. But it was always important to me that we would honor where I come from, so we do celebrate the Christian holidays in our household, too. We celebrate them and tell [the children] that we don't do it for religious reasons, but cultural reasons, and there's no right or wrong way.

Interfaith

We have both Christian and Jewish faith in the house. So I embrace both; the children embrace both. ... It's just always been that way, and we explain that to them, that everyone has different values of what they believe in and we are just combining two together, so you get the best of both worlds.

Interfaith PoC LGBTQ+

A Wider Lens: When “Good Enough” May Have to be Good Enough 🕒 As the findings from this study repeatedly attest, parents’ desires around their children’s Jewish experiences, their interest in “creating Jewish at home,” exist in tension with what they themselves are able and willing to provide. Nearly all parents we spoke to want their children to love their Jewish identity and feel proud of it; they’re committed to what we called the “burden of transmission.” Yet, many either don’t have access to the kind of deep socialization that could generate such an outcome and/or they balk at the disciplinary rigor it would take to create. To make matters more complicated, they frequently pointed to the holes in their own Jewish literacy and the challenges this presented for building a Jewish life for their children. As seen above, online resources paper over those holes in a limited fashion; the notion of “exposure,” described above, also provides a way to navigate such gaps. Ultimately, it seems, contemporary parenting norms (e.g., not forcing, letting children “choose”) are in tension with a combination of parental ambitions and contextual barriers (wanting children socialized into Jewish identity and pride but not necessarily having access to the means). Wrestling with these compounding tensions, perhaps the best parents can hope for is to be what pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott famously called “good enough.”¹⁹

19 Donald Winnicott, *The Child, the Family and the Outside World*, 173.