

Parental Priorities and Aspirations

When parents talked about aspirations and priorities in their children's upbringing, three concerns loomed large: (i) The importance of embedding children in community; (ii) Cultivating a positive sense of self and identity in their children; and (iii) Building tolerant and inclusive homes through multicultural exposure and understanding. A smaller number of parents also explicitly discussed the importance of instilling specifically Jewish values in their children and connecting the choices they make as parents with those values.

2.1 Finding and Building Community

Pervasively, parents expressed a strong desire to find or build community for themselves and especially for their children. We asked parents specifically about this aspiration and about if and where they find Jewish and other forms of community. The importance—and often the elusiveness—of community surfaced repeatedly, whether in discussions about barriers to Jewish life, reflections on their own childhoods, or the broader challenges of raising children today. For parents, “community” had various meanings, encompassing institutional, school, and online communities. Nevertheless, they commonly expressed a wish for spaces where their children (a) would be supported and valued, (b) would see themselves connected to something larger than themselves or their immediate families, and (c) could form trusted relationships outside the household with peers and other adults who reinforce shared values.

I want him to feel, beyond the extended family, really held by community. I grew up in a really wonderful Jewish community here, and I know that's not the only way in, but it's my reference point. And so, I want him to have other adults that he's not related to that he feels close to.

Interfaith EV

For us, a lot of it is about having that community available. We don't have a ton of family who live nearby, and so we want him to know that there are multiple groups of people

that he can be a part of. ... For me growing up, being Jewish was being part of a community and that community is large and geographically diverse. Wherever he goes, I want that community to be available to him.

General

While some parents see online communities as a substitute, most associate “community” with a local, “real life” network of supportive relationships with people who share their values. These people live close enough to join in celebrating holidays; planning activities; attending schools, synagogues, and community events; and simply doing things together. For some parents, extended family provides this kind of community. Others look to friends, institutions such as synagogues and schools, or even neighborhoods to fulfill this purpose.

Finding that local Jewish community has always been sort of a nice refuge from my [military unit], from whatever it was, having that sort of safe place and space. ... For me, it's wanting that for my kids, wanting them to have that anywhere in the world. And even if you don't speak the language, if you find that community, you can at least pray together and feel that sense of belonging somewhere that you otherwise have no sense of belonging. ... It's giving my kids that connection to this greater community that I've been blessed to be part of.

Interfaith

A lot of people will have their family come visit for the holiday, so we'll have whosoever parents are visiting for that holiday ... and then a couple of other families will come and join. That's kind of what ends up happening. My family, we all live very far away from each other, so I guess for me, our extended family is not as present, so we've really kind of had to build our own Jewish family here.

General

Parents in sparsely populated Jewish areas particularly stressed wanting their children to connect to a Judaism that extends beyond their own household. They see this as essential to building and reinforcing Jewish identity and values, and to helping their children see Judaism in a positive light.

Community is important to us, and our values are important to us. And what we love about being part of the Jewish community is that it is a package, a way to have both community and values and instilling those values through the community. So, when we show up at Shabbat, we know that our kids are going to be taught whatever things that we value, and they're going to be around the people that they feel safe around.

General

Many parents are also interested in their children belonging to other kinds of communities in addition to Jewish ones.

We're really intentional about being part of the Girl Scouts program and then looking ahead to Cub Scouts, because we think that giving back isn't just a thing you do alone, even though that's good too.

Interfaith LGBTQ+

There are so many layers of our existence to feel belonging and connection to. Judaism does a good job of storytelling over a long period of time, so seeing where we are in the context of our ancestors; the way Judaism does it through storytelling is great. But I also feel strongly that [our children] know other stories of existence and creation, so we have friends of other groups and backgrounds, and that's really important to me. And connection to the earth, natural systems we're a part of, native plants and how indigenous folks have taken care of our land and learned from it. We're part of a community of indigenous farmers, and that's a really important piece of our lives, that solidarity.

PoC LGBTQ+ Single parent

A Wider Lens: Parents' Hunger for Jewish Community ▶ The deep hunger for community expressed by study participants may be because community is more elusive today than in previous generations, specifically when today's parents were children themselves, and/or because community has special importance for the parents of young children. The busyness and isolation of parents with young families, making their homes in areas without Jewish infrastructure because of soaring housing prices, has made Jewish community increasingly precarious and elusive. It is striking how different this appetite for community is from the views reported in the Pew study of Jewish Americans where only 33% of respondents agreed that being part of a Jewish community was "an essential part of what being Jewish means to them."¹⁰ This discrepancy may suggest that community is of particular importance to parents with young children or that community in a broader sense (not specifically Jewish community) is what matters most.

10 Pew Research Center, "Jewish Americans in 2020," 64.

2.2 Cultivating Positive Identities

Parents value Jewish community for its role in shaping children's values and identities positively. When discussing the kinds of people they hoped their children will become, parents didn't only discuss Jewish identity, of course; many referenced the personal traits and universal values they hoped their children would embody. These traits included how one treats others—with empathy, kindness, compassion, and respect—as well as traits that refer to how one views oneself—including confidence, self-esteem, and a rooted sense of Jewish identity that is still open and sensitive to others. These traits are important to all parents, but the parents raising children with multiple or marginalized identities spoke more explicitly about how they were cultivating them.

I'd say kindness for others, awareness of differences, of all sorts of differences, as a point of richness, but also to be a part of Jewish life, I'd say these are big priorities.

Interfaith LGBTQ+ Sparse pop

We talk a lot with our kids about what it means to be different and what it means to be neurodiverse, to have a name that people read as different, to be Jewish in a context where that's read as different. We talk a lot about close family friends who are themselves different. A friend of my son's has two moms, another friend is mixed race, and so we talk a lot about difference and everybody being different and being unique. We read a lot of books about diversity because I think, right now, where we are, the primary orienting thing that we have to do is get him to a place where he starts to affirm that it's okay to be different, that it's okay not to quite conform to his peers and his classmates. I think that very much connects our Jewish priorities for [our children] to our other priorities. We want them to understand that the world is made up of enormous and incredible diversity and to see themselves as part of this very multicultural cognitive, neurological world and to have that orienting framework. To us

that makes sense of both their Jewishness as well as all the unique ways that they're human in the world.

EV

Many parents specifically articulated the importance of helping their children build an awareness of and appreciation for their Jewish identity as an end in itself. When asked specifically about their Jewish priorities for their children, almost all expressed a deep hope that their children would develop a positive Jewish identity. Positive Jewish identity (aka “Jewish pride”) is a construct that resonates in the wider culture, especially given the attention paid to multiculturalism and the celebration of diverse identities in some sectors.

I have a feeling she's probably going to be one of the only Jewish kids in her class if not the only one. So, I want to instill a sense of pride and confidence in her. I don't want her to be afraid to talk about what she believes or the different holidays that she celebrates. I want her to feel that sense of self-confidence and self-worth and just be really proud of her identity and what it means to be Jewish.

General

I know from studies and from my own experience just how important Jewish sleepaway camp can be in forming a Jewish identity. In my head I just built it up that this was either going to make it or break it. Nothing else I can do can lead to him wanting to be Jewish. Luckily, he loved it and can't wait to go back next summer. I just had this huge sense of relief when he came home and I was like, okay, we're good. At least he has some positive association with being Jewish and we'll have this group of Jewish friends. He has one place in his life where he gets to be in the majority, and it felt really good.

General

Many parents described navigating simultaneous priorities of helping their children develop awareness and respect for difference at the same time as they develop security and pride in their own Jewish identity.

It boils down to exposure, not necessarily outlining that this is the way, but teaching our daughter about our culture, labeling it as our culture. But then also expanding and explaining that there are other cultures and there are other belief systems and there are other ways to set up your own morality and how you understand the world and how you understand your peers.

General

Relatively few parents expressed a desire that their children develop strong Jewish literacy (for example, familiarity with Jewish texts, ritual, and liturgy). Instead, more of them believed that “exposure”—ensuring that their children see or hear things designed to broaden their cultural horizons (including their Jewish horizons)—will help achieve their parenting goals, rather than more structured educational efforts which involve high levels of opportunity cost in terms of time expended. Conceiving identity development as “exposure,” rather than as something more intensive that might come at the expense of other kinds of learning, seems for many parents to be a way to resolve the tensions created by competing identity-forming priorities.¹¹

2.3 Inclusive Homes

Exposing children to multiple cultures, faiths, races, ethnicities, abilities, perspectives, and ideas—and generating both tolerance and respect for all these differences—was an important priority for many of the parents. Simultaneously respecting both self and other was particularly important for families with diverse identities in their own household. These families are raising children who themselves have multiple identities, and parents are especially aware that prejudice exists toward some, all, or simply the combination of these identities on the part of

¹¹ Research on cultural socialization challenges the assumptions behind the concept of exposure. Successful cultural socialization requires children to first comprehend and appreciate their own culture in a deep manner, then a different culture, and finally explore similarities and differences. The idea of superficial exposure does not seem to be an effective strategy. See Ibram X. Kendi, “How to Raise an Antiracist,” 8–10.

others, including in Jewish spaces. Thus, respect for difference is an important pathway to promoting their children’s self-respect in a world where respect by others is not guaranteed.

Identity is very important. And I think with [our son], because he’s Korean and Jewish, I think we really want him to embrace his identity and not feel like he’s kind of the other. ... And I think without there being a deliberate effort to give your child the ability to explore his identity and become confident in who he is and really gain that sense of self, I think it’s easy to internalize a message of like, oh yeah, you are not part of the mainstream, you’re not part of America.

PoC LGBTQ+

Our priority in raising our daughter is that she feels really comfortable in all of her different identity spaces. Our family is also a multicultural family, multiracial family, a multifaith family, and it feels important to us that, even if other people don’t make her feel welcome, she feels very centered and welcome in herself; that she can show up to a space and say, yeah, I belong here even if you don’t think I belong here because of the way I look or whatever. ... That’s a big priority of mine.

Interfaith PoC LGBTQ+

In these same households, valuing diversity had a particular and immediate upshot; it was integral to getting along with extended families and fostering homes in which all members’ traditions, identities, and desires are honored. As is the case for those who live in communities with few other Jews, this involves cultivating Jewish identity while carving out space within, and maintaining connections to, different groups.

We’ve also really tried to make sure that my Christian family feels comfortable celebrating their traditions around us. Like I said, half my family is Catholic, so when we visit my grandmother around Christmas, we go to church with her and we say, this is part of our larger family’s religious tradition. It’s just not our immediate family’s religious tradition. I also do a lot of work in Muslim countries. ...

My wife and I spent a lot of our dating period living in Muslim countries, and my son has now spent time with us in countries that are predominantly Muslim. So, we kind of knew that he would be raised in a religious mélange no matter what religion we raised him. Openness and asking questions and understanding other people's faith as well as your own is something that was important to us.

Interfaith

Definitely Jewish values really inform a lot of how I want my kids to think of themselves as they move through their world. I mean, certainly we talk about tikkun olam all the time, and I think I want them to specifically know that because we're Jewish, we have a history of being oppressed, which means that we also have a history of working for justice and we have the ability to connect to other oppressed groups because that's part of our value and our values. And so, when I say I want them to make the world a better place and be a force for good in the world, that is sort of how I want them to live their Jewishness and to make those connections.

Interfaith PoC LGBTQ+

What we're trying to do is incorporate something that really feels substantial. It's not just, "Hey, we made a decision" or even a consumer decision, and that's how we connect within our society. It's like, "oh no, we're actually, there's a value system" and things like that. So ... in the process of bringing our child to the community, I think for us, what we really are seeking, especially from the Reform community, is a sense of social justice, that moral foundation, and we will continue to prioritize that.

PoC LGBTQ+

2.4 Nurturing Jewish Values

While building community, fostering a positive Jewish identity, and cultivating respect for difference are priorities for most parents, a smaller but notable group explicitly emphasized Jewish values as a way to connect Judaism meaningfully to everyday life. Interestingly, a much higher proportion of respondents with LGBTQ+ members in their household reported discussing Jewish values explicitly with their children for these reasons. The values most often named included *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) and *tzedakah* (justice/charity) because of their resonance with more universalist social justice causes such as racial, gender, disability, and LGBTQ+ equity, volunteerism, and environmental stewardship.

A Wider Lens: When Personal Choices Have Public Consequences ➤ When parents talked about their aspirations for their families, their priorities were focused, not surprisingly, on their children and on the features of their immediate family contexts. Their family members' diverse identities provide fertile soil for a commitment to nurture in their children an understanding and celebration of diversity. Some families, as we have seen, reframe the honoring of multiple identities as a distinctive Jewish value, rather than as something that must be made to somehow fit with Jewish tradition. These commitments make for more harmonious families, and—at the same time—they contribute to a broader multiculturalist political project that, in some parts of America, is distinctly countercultural.¹² As Jewish families move further into areas in which Jews have not lived in large numbers, the urgency of promoting multiculturalism becomes more pressing as a guarantor of Jewish rights even as it is fraught with its own inherent tensions, with parents wondering how they teach their children to respect and tolerate the views of those different from them when some of those views may marginalize or vilify their own family or community. As our interviewees make clear, parents' choices, and the work of parenting, while intensely personal, are also loaded with public consequence.

12 See: Saffyre Falkenberg, "All Are Welcome: Picture Books and Liberal Multiculturalism Post-Trump."