

While researchers have extensively documented declining teen well-being in the United States, the distinct experiences and challenges of American Jewish teens remain largely unexplored. To address this gap, we conducted a national survey of nearly 2,500 American Jewish teens, examining multiple dimensions of their well-being. The study, conducted during Spring 2024, investigated both sources of stress and systems of support, enabling us to identify key factors that enhance or diminish their overall well-being. This research revealed three key insights about Jewish teens' well-being:

KEY FINDING 1:

Teens who said that being Jewish is important to them reported higher levels of overall well-being.

Among the factors studied, teens' sense of well-being was most strongly connected to the personal importance they placed on being Jewish. This relationship was evident across all five dimensions of well-being measured in the study: engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness, and happiness. Teens' perceptions of how important being Jewish was to their families also showed a positive relationship with their well-being, though this association was less pronounced than the link between personal importance and well-being. Participation in Jewish teen programming exhibited a minimal, yet still positive, correlation with teens' overall sense of well-being. Teens cited the relationships they experienced with their peers in Jewish teen programs as being particularly influential in helping them feel like they could be their full, authentic selves, however, most teens felt that adults involved in Jewish teen programs had a limited understanding of contemporary teen experiences.

KEY FINDING 2:

American Jewish teens face a dual burden: They contend with the universal challenges of adolescence while also grappling with unique pressures that arise from being Jewish.

Alongside common stressors for teens like academic

performance and social dynamics, Jewish teens are experiencing heightened tension over recent geopolitical conflicts and increasingly prevalent antisemitism. Those who reported that being Jewish is important to them experienced higher levels of overall well-being but also tended to experience more stress related to Jewish-specific issues. The interplay between identity, stress, and resilience mirrors patterns observed in other minority adolescent populations, highlighting the influence of cultural identity on adolescent well-being.

KEY FINDING 3:

Jewish teens have multiple contexts and people in their lives that allow for authentic self-expression, which supports positive well-being outcomes.

Most survey respondents indicated that they feel free to be their full selves with Jewish friends and family. About half of all teens reported feeling the same sense of freedom with non-Jewish friends. When seeking advice, Jewish teens said that they were most likely to turn to friends and parents and far less likely to turn to Jewish leaders (i.e., clergy and youth program leaders).

This study sheds light on the tension at the heart of American Jewish teens' well-being, where identity centrality emerges as both a source of strength and a potential driver of increased stress. This complex portrait presents a challenge for Jewish organizations, communal professionals, and educators who work in teen-facing settings. While teen engagement strategies have focused on enhancing teens' sense of their Jewish selves, our findings suggest the need for a more nuanced approach that acknowledges the relationship between social stressors, well-being, and teens' expressed sense of Jewish importance. Supporting Jewish teens may require providing opportunities for authentic self-expression, equipping them to engage in challenging discussions, and empowering them to ask difficult questions. While the path forward is neither simple nor straightforward, this report provides empirical grounding from which innovative responses might emerge.

This study used an iterative approach to research design and data collection including: a literature review; exploratory interviews with teens in grades 7-12; and a national survey (see Appendix B: Methodology for additional details).

At the heart of the survey are two sets of questions.

Epoch Measure of Adolescent Well-being

The first set is the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being, a 20-item questionnaire designed to evaluate the well-being of adolescents between 10 and 18 years old. This tool focuses on five key domains that play a significant role in teens' overall well-being. This measure assesses five key domains of well-being using 20 items rated on a 5-point scale. For each of the 20 items, teens were asked to select responses ranging from "Almost Never" (1) to "Almost Always" (5), or from "Not at all like me" (1) to "Very much like me" (5).

ENGAGEMENT

The capacity to become absorbed in / focused on what one is doing, as well as involvement and interest in life activities and tasks

PERSEVERANCE

The determination to stick with tasks, goals, and plans, even in the face of challenges or setbacks

OPTIMISM

Having a sense of hope and confidence about the future

CONNECTEDNESS

The presence of satisfying relationships with others, including feelings of being cared for, loved, and valued

HAPPINESS

The frequency of positive emotions and the degree of contentment with one's life overall

Dimensions of Jewish Experiences

The second set of questions asked survey respondents to describe seven dimensions of their Jewish experiences.

1 Personal Jewish Identity Centrality

The importance teens placed on being Jewish

2 Family Jewish Identity Centrality

Teens' perceptions of the importance their families placed on being Jewish

3 Jewish Friendships

Teens' estimation of how many of their closest friends identify as Jewish

4 Jewish Activities

The total number of Jewish activities teens participated in over the past three years, such as Jewish educational experiences, Shabbat observance, and Jewish holiday and lifecycle celebrations

5 Jewish Teen Program Participation

The total number of Jewish teen programs respondents participated in over the past twelve months

6 Frequency of Jewish Teen Program Participation

How often teens attended Jewish teen programming over the past twelve months

7 Perceived Adult Understanding

Respondents' perceptions of how well adults who lead Jewish teen programs understand what it is like to be a teen today

Study development began in early 2023, before the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel and the war that followed. Survey administration was planned for April and May 2024. In consultation with colleagues at BeWell, the research team decided to launch the survey on the original timeline. Between April 1st and June 7th, 2024, 2,490 teens completed the survey. Notably, as the survey went into the field, reports of encampments and protests on college campuses across the United States dominated the news cycle. As a result, the findings reported here capture teens' perspectives during a particularly tumultuous period in American Jewish life. While the study was not designed to investigate the impact of current events on teens' well-being, the research team and BeWell made a strategic decision to add an open-

ended question that would allow us to better understand how these circumstances are affecting teens. We invited teens who identified the war in Israel and Gaza and antisemitism as sources of stress to elaborate on their experiences, in their own words. The remainder of the survey was constructed as originally planned.

This report presents analyses of the survey data, supplemented by qualitative insights gathered from teens' open-ended responses. We prioritized analyses of American Jewish teens' well-being at an aggregate level to establish a baseline understanding of well-being among this understudied population. (See Appendix C: Data Analyses for additional details).

STUDY LIMITATIONS

We encourage readers to consider several key limitations when interpreting findings. First, Jewish teens who are actively engaged in Jewish activities and communities are likely overrepresented in our sample, as our primary recruitment occurred through Jewish teen-facing organizations. Our word-of-mouth recruitment efforts did reach some less connected teens—approximately 20% of respondents reported little to no formal organizational involvement. As a result, readers and researchers should exercise caution in generalizing these findings to all American Jewish teens, particularly those who are less connected to other Jewish teens.

A second significant limitation arose from constraints on survey length. Initial interviews with teens indicated they would be unlikely to complete surveys requiring more than 5 minutes, which forced us to substantially restrict our questioning. This prevented us from exploring numerous potentially valuable factors affecting teen well-being. The abbreviated format also limited our use of open-ended questions, leaving us with minimal insight into the qualitative aspects of respondents' Jewish lives and their personal interpretations of Judaism's importance. These gaps in understanding present important opportunities for future research.