

# *"Four Up"*

## **The High School Years, 1995-1999**

**The Jewish Identity Development of the  
B'nai Mitzvah Class of 5755**

*by* Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar

**Funded by  
The AVI CHAI Foundation**



**A Project of the Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism  
Jewish Theological Seminary**

Jack Wertheimer, *Director of the Ratner Center*

*"Four Up"*

The Four Up - The High School Years, 1995-1999: The Jewish Identity Development of the B'nai Mitzvah Class of 5755 study was funded by The AVI CHAI Foundation. The conclusions and interpretations are those of the authors.

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# Foreword

## Foreword

In the mid-1990s, the Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism organized a multi-pronged project designed to examine the contemporary Conservative synagogue and its members. That project included intensive ethnographic studies of four congregations as well as separate surveys of synagogue practices and programs, the patterns of Jewish belief and practice among members of Conservative synagogues, and the Jewish commitments and experiences of recent b'nai and b'not mitzvah.

From the inception of this project, the component on recent bar and bat mitzvah celebrants was planned as a longitudinal study that would track young people as they matured. The decade of the 1990s, after all, had witnessed the emergence of the so-called “continuity agenda” within the official leadership circles of American Jewry. What better way to learn more about “Jewish continuity” than by following a single cohort of young Jews after their official assumption of Jewish responsibilities!

In order to learn about the impact of the high school years, the Ratner Center re-interviewed members of this cohort four years after they had celebrated a bar or bat mitzvah. We were particularly eager to learn about their Jewish identifications and commitments: To what extent were these teenagers still engaged with Jewish life? Had their beliefs and attachments changed? Had they continued their Jewish education? And how did their participation in programs of formal and informal Jewish education correlate with their levels of practice and participation as Jews?

These and many other questions are addressed by Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar in their pioneering new study, “‘Four Up’-The High School Years, 1995-1999,” a report that focuses sharply on how young people live as Jews. In order to place the findings of this study in some broader contexts, four respondents have contributed to a symposium section.

It has been a pleasure to work with Drs. Kosmin and Keysar. Barry Kosmin deserves much credit for conceiving of this longitudinal study. Ariela Keysar, who saw its implementation over a six-year period, has been an ideal collaborator.

This study has been generously supported by the Avi Chai Foundation. Strongly committed to strengthening Jewish education, the board of the Avi Chai Foundation was quick to understand the value of studying a cohort of high school students. I am particularly appreciative of the ongoing help provided by Yossi Prager, Executive Director North America, of the Avi Chai Foundation. As has been the case many times before, Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, has been a steadfast supporter of the Ratner Center and its mission.

I am indebted to several individuals who helped with the production of this study. It has been a pleasure to work with our graphic designer, Glenn Abel, who has collaborated on a number of previous publications of the Ratner Center. Ruth Seldin served as copy editor. Thanks are also due to Rabbi Judd Levingston, principal of the Solomon Schechter High School of Manhattan, for helping to obtain photographs of high school students. The cover photographs were taken by Marjorie Gersten.

**Jack Wertheimer**, Director

*Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism*



## Introduction

This report presents the highlights of a new survey of Jewish teenagers who celebrated their bar or bat mitzvah in a Conservative synagogue during the mid-1990s. It represents the second phase of longitudinal research designed to monitor the Jewish behavior and attitudes of a cohort of youngsters at different developmental stages in the formation of their religious and ethnic identities.

At the time of the first phase of the study in 1995 the respondents were 13 or 14 years old. They were interviewed during the year following their bar/bat mitzvah, a period of intense religious training and close contacts with the rabbi, the synagogue and Jewish peers. In the second phase, four years later in 1999, the teenagers were encountering different sorts of identity-building experiences: for instance, a group trip to Israel, which is common after the junior year of high school. Most were entering their senior year in high school, but a minority were about to start college. All were beginning to plan for an independent life away from home and the influence of parents or other family members.

“Four Up” sheds light on religious behaviors and attitudes of Jewish teenagers in North America at the turn of the 21st century. A lot is unknown about such teenagers today. There is more myth than concrete evidence regarding their lifestyles, feelings, opinions and spirituality. At a critical time in their lives, they have largely been neglected by Jewish social research. This study sought to fill this information void by engaging these young people in an intelligent and respectful conversation about their ideas and experiences.

The report is based on a portion of the questions from the two surveys. It focuses on the religious observance and Jewish identity of this large representative sample of an annual cohort of Conservative youth. The first section of the report, following a brief description of the research design, presents a social and attitudinal profile of the sample of Conservative Jewish teenagers, drawing mainly on 1999 data. The second section presents a comparison of responses to a battery of questions that were asked both in 1995 and 1999. The third section examines the power of three explanatory models—gender, geography and teenage Jewish socialization—to account for the patterns of identification and engagement of this teen population. The results are presented from different angles, both descriptive and analytic. Following an applied research approach, the report is geared to answer key policy questions that should be of special interest to Jewish educators, rabbis, lay leaders and parents.



## The Study Design

Sponsored by the Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism at the Jewish Theological Seminary, this longitudinal study has a three-phase panel design using telephone interviewing. During the first phase, under a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, children and parents were interviewed during the bar/bat mitzvah year in 1995. The second phase, sponsored by a grant from the AVI CHAI Foundation, engaged in research on the same population, which by 1999 consisted of 17- or 18- year-old teens. A remarkable 89 percent of the original bar/bat mitzvah sample participated in the teen survey four years later. Parents were not surveyed in Phase II. All telephone interviews in phase I and phase II were carried out by professional interviewers from Schulman, Ronca & Bucuvalas, Inc. (SRBI), a market and opinion research firm based in New York City. (For more on the study design, see the appendix.)

The plan of the overall research design is to interview this population for a third time during their late college years. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah and High School Surveys offer a unique opportunity to explore the attitudes and beliefs of a large sample of young people of similar age, similar religious background and socialization, and somewhat similar socioeconomic status who are drawn from a variety of geographic locales in the U.S. and Canada. Furthermore, data collected in 1995/96 (during Phase I of the study), enabled us to compare the answers of children and their parents. In that survey, both generations were interviewed separately. This is different from the common practice in which parents report on behalf of their children or vice versa. In addition, private telephone interviews at home rather than surveys conducted in classroom settings minimized the group effect and the influence of peers on the individual teenage respondents.

The follow-up phases of the study allow us to monitor the youths as they mature. The comparisons between religious attitudes and Jewish commitments of youngsters at different stages of their religious development and identity formation are critical to our understanding of how young Jews are socialized and educated.



## FINDINGS: SECTION I

### The Profile of the High School Sample in 1999

#### Demographics

##### a. Gender Composition

Overall, the proportion of boys to girls among respondents in 1999 is close to that of 1995. The higher proportion of boys in 1995 reflects our finding that boys are more likely than girls to undergo the bar/bat mitzvah rite of passage in the Conservative movement. The slight fall-off in the male majority in the 1999 sample reflects differential response rates by gender. This trend toward slightly more positive Jewish identity among females is common to most contemporary surveys.

Table 1

	1995	1999
Boys	55%	53%
Girls	45%	47%

##### b. Educational Level

Since this phase of the study was focused on the effects of the high school years, we hoped to reach the 260 students, or roughly one-fifth of the total, who were leaving home to begin college in the fall of 1999. The college experience not only distances young people from their home and family but also exposes them to new influences that will affect their Jewish identity formation and their views on the questions we raised. We succeeded in reaching 198 respondents in July and August before they left for college, while 24 students were interviewed after they had begun their freshman year.

Table 2

	1995		1999
7th grade	6%	High school	82%
8th grade	76%	Entering college	18%
9th grade	18%		

### c. Region of Residence

The uniformity of the geographical distribution of the two surveys is striking. Though about 10% of the families moved between 1995 and 1999, most relocated within the same city or state. The data on region of residence further attests to the unusually stable nature of this population.

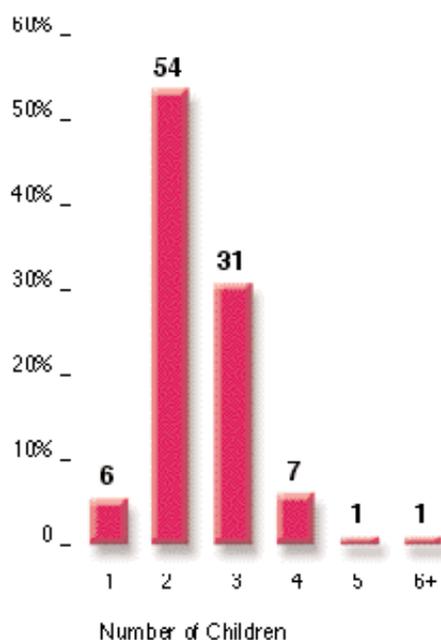
Table 3

	1995	1999
Northeast	34%	34%
South	22%	22%
Midwest	21%	21%
West	19%	19%
Canada	4%	4%

### Family

Chart 1

Number of Children in the Family in 1995



Note: Categories add up to 100%

families not only promote the well-being of children but are likely as well to provide a coherent and steady religious upbringing.

Table 4

Married in first marriage	83%
Remarried	10%
Divorced	5%
Separated	1%
Widowed	1%

### a. Family Composition

Our sample of young people was drawn from typical contemporary Jewish families, with most having one or two children. The most common family size of the bar/bat mitzvah class of 5755 was two children. Fewer than a third of the families had three children. Having one child was about as common as having four. These patterns are quite similar to those of Jewish families in the U.S. in general as found by the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (Keysar, Kosmin & Scheckner, 2000). (See Chart 1.)

### Parents' Marital Status in 1995:

Clearly this was a population with relatively low rates of family breakdown. Only 7% of the b'nai mitzvah in 1995 lived in single-parent families, compared with 12-13% of Jewish children overall in 1990 (Keysar, Kosmin & Scheckner, 2000). It is widely accepted that stable

**Family Living Arrangement in 1999:** The overwhelming majority of these teenagers (87%) said in 1999 that they lived with both of their parents. A minority (12%) said they lived with only one of their parents, primarily with their mothers. These results are somewhat difficult to interpret. Some of those who said they lived with both parents may have meant a parent and a stepparent. The 12% who said they lived with only one parent were asked about the marital status of that parent; one-sixth, or 2% of the total, said the parent was remarried. This is quite different from the patterns of family composition and living arrangements of adolescents in the general Jewish population. According to NJPS, in 1990 about 18% of 15- to 17-year-old adolescents lived in single-parent families (Keysar, Kosmin & Scheckner, 2000). Once again we find that our Conservative teenagers tend to live in intact families and experience higher than average family stability even at an older age when family breakdowns are more prevalent. These background data on the secure social environment of this population suggest that Conservative Jewish youths who were teens in the 1990s are members of a fortunate generation, one that has largely avoided the traumas associated with family breakup and residential dislocation and has been raised in a time of exceptional economic prosperity and social acceptance of Jews. We might expect these young people to be optimistic and positive in their psychological outlook. Certainly at age 13 they were already articulate young people with a high level of self-esteem and sense of accomplishment.

Table 5

Both parents	87%
Only father	2%
Only mother	10%
Other arrangement	1%

#### b. Family Involvement in the Synagogue

In 1995, 95% of the parents of b'nai and b'not mitzvah stated their intention to remain members of synagogues. According to the teens interviewed in 1999, 93% of the families had in fact maintained their memberships. This is an impressively high continuation rate, considering the widespread assumption that many families drop out after their children become b'nai and b'not mitzvah. A partial explanation is that many of the families have younger children who are receiving or will receive bar/bat mitzvah training. Half of the b'nai mitzvah class of 5755 were the first child in the family and 38% were the second child. With most of our sample having younger siblings at home, there was a clear need for the household to maintain its synagogue membership.

In 1995 we found that 24% of the parents held some office in the synagogue and 44% were actively involved in synagogue life and belonged to one of the following: the men's club or sisterhood, the religious school's PTA, a havurah group, a committee for fund-raising, a social-action group, a "Hearts and Hands" group, or other group. This level of parental involvement in synagogue life is impressive and may help explain the cohort's strong attachment to Judaism in 1995.

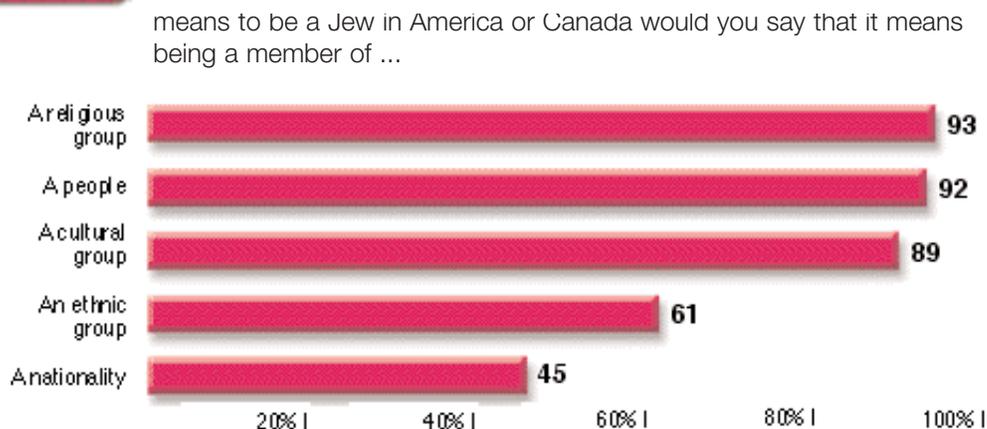
So what was the situation in 1999? We found that considerable parental engagement continued in the synagogue four years after one of their children celebrated a bar/bat mitzvah. For example, 26% of parents volunteered for the synagogue board or committee. These parents represent a group of involved Conservative Jews who are role models for their children and encourage their teenagers' involvement with the Jewish community.

## The Attitudes of High School Seniors

### a. Collective Identity

Jews have long differed over how to define themselves as a group. On this subject, the high school students were offered a choice of views from which they could select or reject as many as they wished.

Chart 2



Most young Conservative Jews in the study (about 9 in 10) perceive their Judaism as multi-dimensional, but mainly as a religion, as peoplehood and as culture. They are less likely to feel that being Jewish means belonging to an ethnic group or to a nationality. These attitudes are quite different from those of the adult Jewish respondents in NJPS 1990, who were far less likely to define a Jew in America as a member of a religious group (fewer than half agreed that Jews are a religious group). Clearly the teen sector of the younger generation has a stronger religious orientation than the older generation (Kosmin et al., 1991).

### b. Religious Observance

Asking young people about the past, present, and future offers us a glance at their evolving religious outlook. They were provided with the opportunity to assess their religious observance at the time of the bar/bat mitzvah rite of passage and four years later. They were also asked to look ahead to the future.

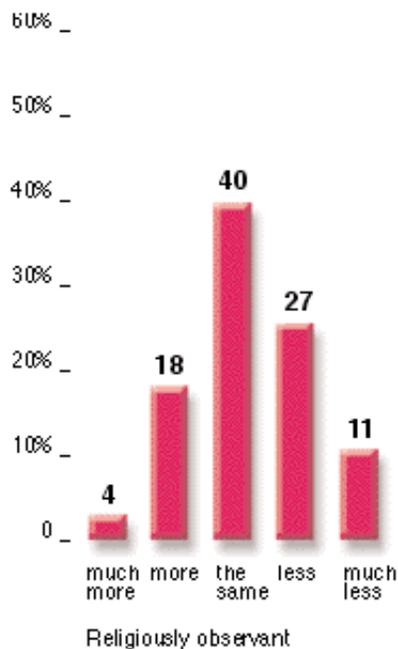
In their own self-assessment, these teens perceived an erosion in their religious observance in the years since the intense bar/bat mitzvah year: 38% reported being less or much less religiously observant than they were in their bar/bat mitzvah year. A large group (40%) claimed to have stayed the same, and only 22% increased their observance. A very small minority (4%) reported becoming much more religiously observant. (See Chart 3.)

The majority of teenagers expressed a wish to maintain their present level of religious observance. However, a large group (40%) said they would like to be more religiously observant in the future, and very few wished to reduce their level. While it is difficult to know if and how this attitude will manifest itself in behavior, the finding is noteworthy. It appears that not only do these teenagers feel good about their Judaism, but they also wish to augment their ritual practices. (See Chart 4.)

As noted above, this cohort of teenagers tends to see Jewishness through religious lenses, presumably because of its strong links to the synagogue. Thus, synagogues ought to feel confident about reaching out to these young people and helping them meet their religious needs. True, the youngsters have their own ways of defining religious observance, for example (see below) giving

Chart 3

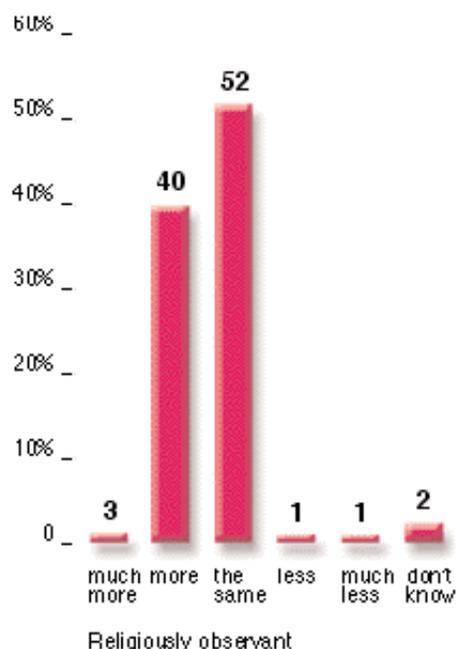
At *present*, are you more religiously observant or less religiously observant than you were in your bar/bat mitzvah year?



Note: Categories add up to 100%

Chart 4

How religiously observant would you like to be in the *future*?



Note: Categories add up to 100%

more importance to attending synagogue than to following Kashrut laws. In many ways they create their own “Shulhan Aruch”— just like adult Conservative Jews (Wertheimer, 2000).

**c. Tribalism - Feelings of Peoplehood**

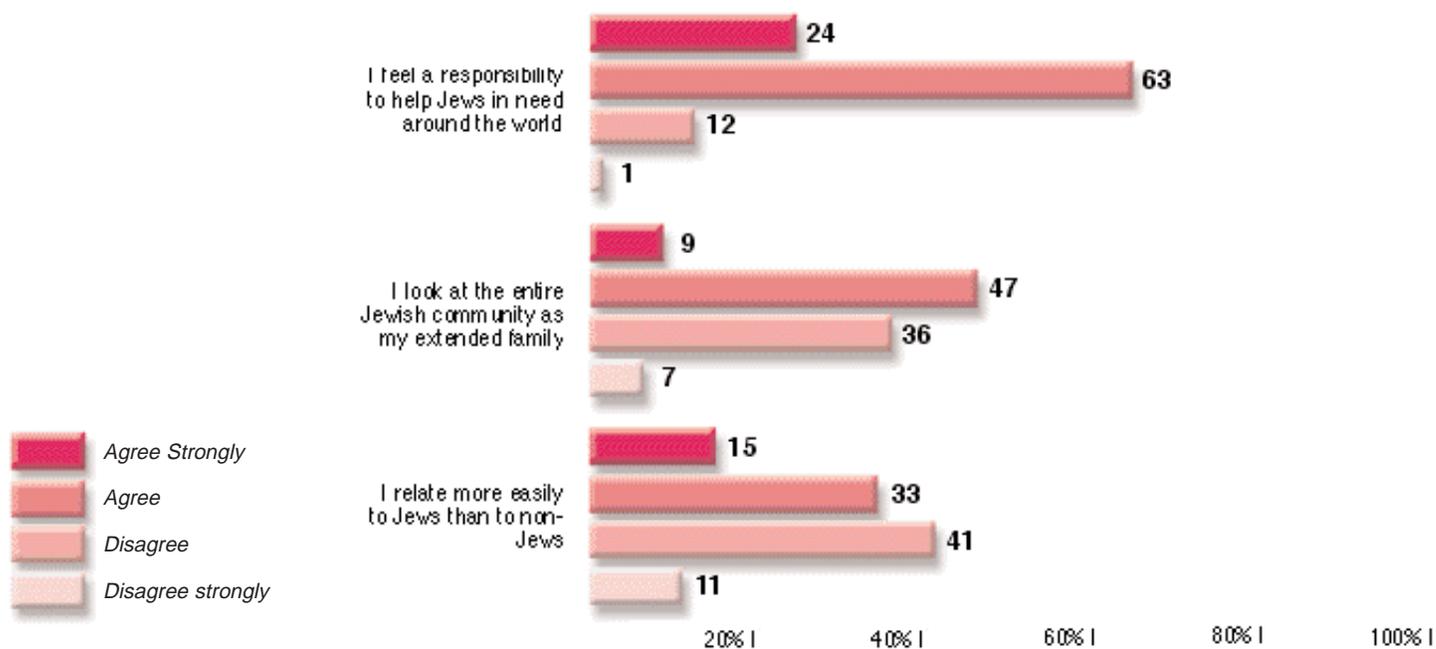
Although, as already noted, ethnic identification appears weaker in this generation, it has by no means vanished. A number of questions probed for aspects of peoplehood that still resonate among contemporary youth.

The value of Ezrat Achim (helping fellow Jews) prevails among the vast majority of Jewish teenagers today with 87% of them feeling a sense of responsibility to help Jews in need around the world. In fact, 24% strongly agree with this value and only 1% strongly dissent. The responsibility to help other Jews emerges as this cohort’s strongest expression of Jewish peoplehood. (See Chart 5.)

More than half of the teenagers regard the entire Jewish community as their extended family. Overall, there are more positive than negative reactions (56% compared with 43%), to this view of Jewish tribalism. However, viewing the Jewish community as an extended family is not as widely endorsed as feeling responsibility for other Jews. (See Chart 5.)

The teenagers split almost equally on the in-group/out-group issue — a preference for fellow Jews. While 48% agreed that they relate more easily to Jews than to non-Jews, 52% disagreed with the statement. (See Chart 5.) Opinion on this issue is probably a product of each individual’s socialization within general society as well as the number of his or her own Jewish social

Chart 5



connections and experiences with Jewish youth groups and summer camps. These attitudes may further affect or be the consequence of choices of friendships, Jews versus non-Jews, and dating behavior. The weak response to this question seems to go hand in hand with the relative lack of a strong Jewish ethnic outlook among many of these teenagers.

#### d. Conservative Denominational Identity

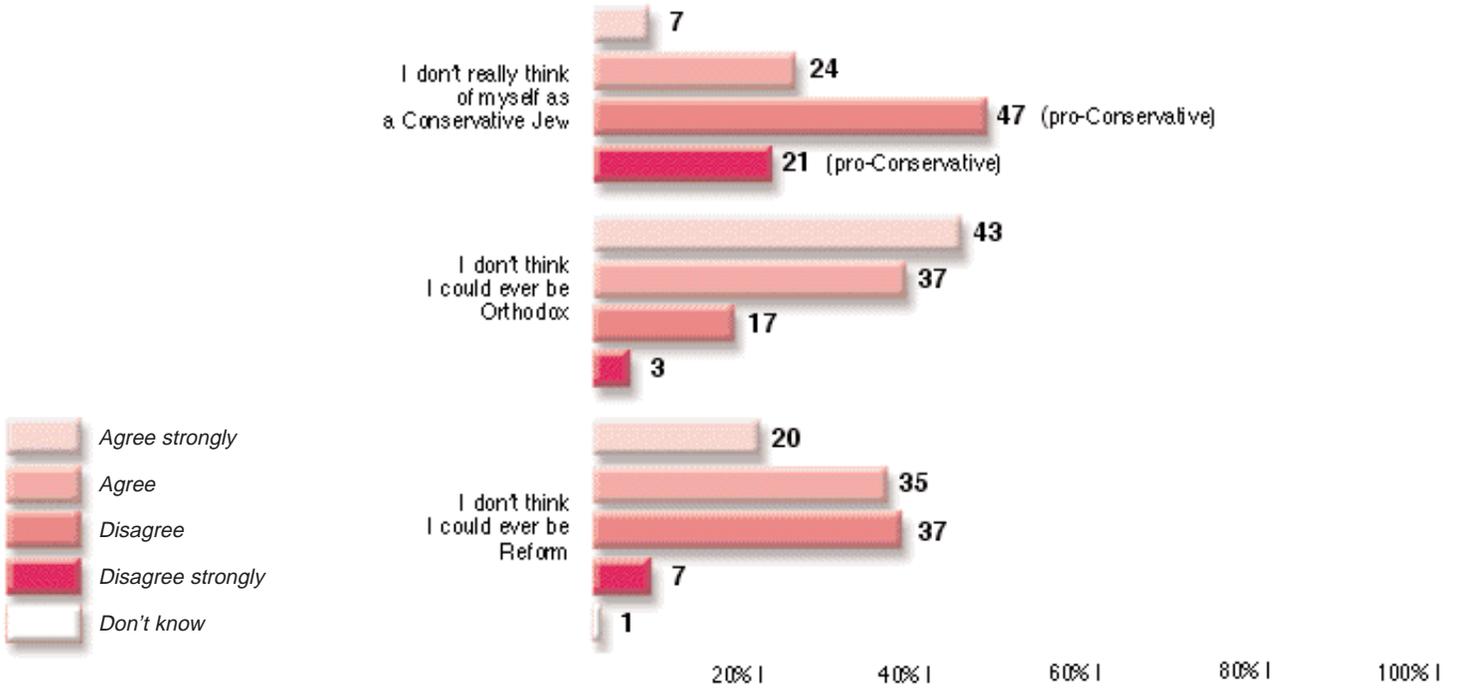
An important issue for the future of Conservative Judaism in North America is the extent to which the younger generation affirms Conservative Judaism. Our population of teenagers was mainly brought up in and educated under the auspices of the Conservative movement. Their families are primarily members of Conservative synagogues, and the teenagers were all (even the day school students) at one time enrolled in the religious schools associated with them. Likewise, the teenagers' informal Jewish experiences, summer camps and youth groups are largely associated with the Conservative movement.

This issue was posed negatively – “I don’t really think of myself as a Conservative Jew” – in order to ensure comparability with other surveys. Just over two-thirds of the teenagers disagreed with the statement, offering a response that affirmed their identification with Conservative Judaism. For this majority, the Jewish education they have experienced in Conservative synagogues presumably contributed to their loyalty and enhanced their attachment to Conservative institutions and people. How then do they feel about the other Jewish denominations? (See Chart 6a.)

Eighty percent of the teenagers said that they could never be Orthodox. Only a minority of the teenagers thought that they could become Orthodox Jews (20%). These attitudes are similar to those expressed by adults who were members of Conservative synagogues in 1995, among whom 71% felt that they could never be Orthodox (Wertheimer, 1996). (See Chart 6b.)

Chart 6

(b) I don't think I could ever be Orthodox  
 (c) I don't think I could ever be Reform



Forty-four percent of the teenagers could consider becoming Reform, while only half that number could consider becoming Orthodox Jews. Still, a majority of teenagers (55%) do not think they could ever be Reform. (See Chart 6c.) This pattern is not unique to young people. Adult members of Conservative synagogues in 1995 were also more inclined to be attracted to Reform than to Orthodox Judaism, but at a lower rate than the younger generation. Only 29% of adults claimed they could ever be Reform (Wertheimer, 1996).



## FINDINGS: SECTION II

### The Effect of the High School Years - A Comparison of Survey Responses in 1995 and 1999

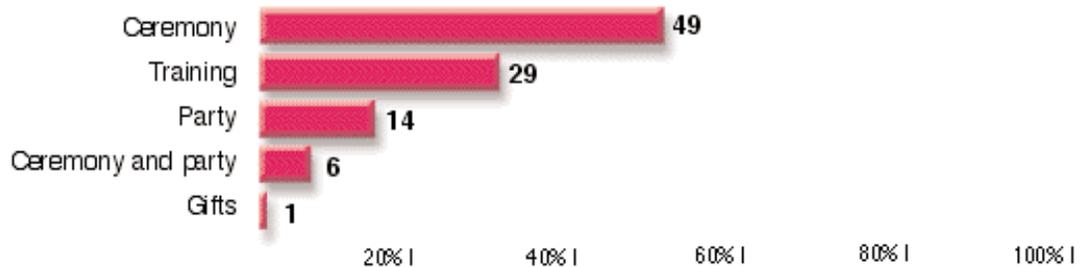
As noted earlier, the bar/bat mitzvah class of 5755 (1994-95) in Conservative synagogues throughout the U.S. and Canada was surveyed in 1995. A sample of 1,462 boys and girls in the 8th and 9th grades were asked a range of questions about their rite of passage, their Jewish education, friendships, religious attitudes, and practices. Four years later, in 1999, 1,295 of the same youngsters were re-contacted for the high school phase of the study. This is the first time that a panel of Jewish youth has been re-interviewed using many of the same questions, thus making it possible to go beyond the snapshot profile of one year, and to monitor changing patterns. The focus of the study was to determine how the outlook and behavior of these young people changed as they matured: Did they maintain their earlier attitudes towards Judaism? What changed and what has remained fixed over the four years? Did they continue to follow their parental home practices? Or did they form an autonomous Jewish identity independent of their parents? Is the bar/bat mitzvah rite of passage a point of entry or departure from the synagogue and religious life?

#### Memories of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Experience

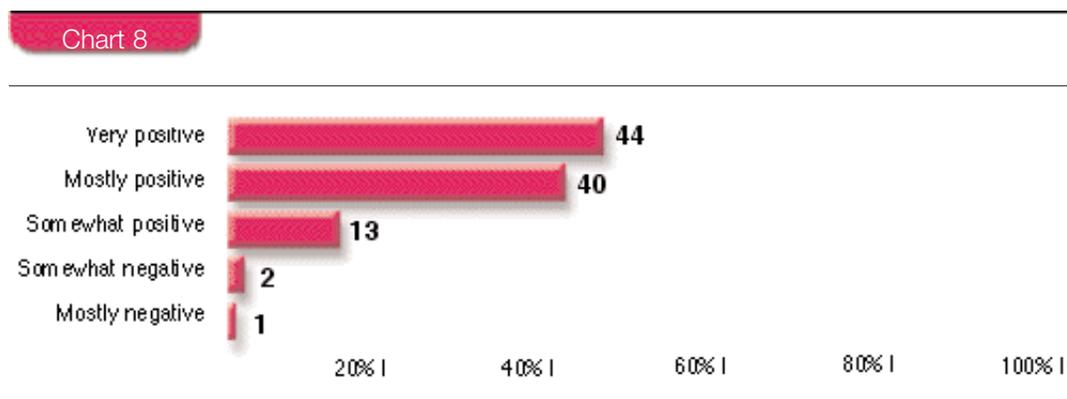
Among the key findings of the first phase of the study was the tremendous emotional and time investment made by the young people and their parents in the bar/bat mitzvah rite of passage and the very positive feelings they reported in the immediate aftermath of the event. The ceremony, which was reported as the most important part of the bar/bat mitzvah experience at the time, remained so in the memories of a plurality of teenagers 4-5 years afterward. The party and gifts were not regarded as important by most youngsters, either at the time or four years later. Interestingly, the training leading to the bar/bat mitzvah was considered a more important aspect and remembered most by 29% of respondents four years later. For the synagogues and Jewish educators these are good news items; the seeds were planted. The strict requirements set by the Conservative movement for years of training and the “competence” aspects of the bar/bat mitzvah process seem to have been pivotal to these teenagers.

Chart 7

Bar/Bat Mitzvah: Aspects Most Remembered



### High School Students' Views on Training in 1999:



The vast majority of teenagers who were trained in Conservative synagogues remembered the bar/bat mitzvah training as a positive experience, even 4-5 years later. Furthermore, just under half of them regarded the bar/bat mitzvah training as a “very positive” experience. Only a few youngsters (3%) recalled it as a negative experience. (See Chart 8.)

### Jewish Education in 1995 and 1999

Only a handful of Jewish teenagers in the study continued their Jewish education in Jewish day high schools. This may be due in part to a lack of such schools where they live. A large majority of students (4 in 5) attended public schools, both at ages 13-14 and later in high school. (See Chart 9.)

### Students' Enjoyment of Jewish Education

Clearly there is a consistency in teenagers' attitudes toward their Jewish education between ages 13-14 and ages 17-18. Slightly fewer report “enjoying it most of the time” in 1999 while slightly more report that they “never enjoyed” their Jewish education. Overall, over 90% of the Jewish teenagers viewed their Jewish education as enjoyable. (See Chart 10.)

### Continuation of Jewish Education

In 1995, 78% of parents expressed a positive wish for their children to continue their Jewish education in Hebrew high school and 69% of students said they planned to do so. Our 1999 survey found that in fact 50% of the cohort did continue their Jewish education or Hebrew language studies in a Hebrew high school or a supplementary school. Since it takes both the students' interest and parental support to effectuate these educational plans, our sample clearly consisted of motivated families. Further analysis of the data may shed more light on the differences between those who continue and those who drop out.

What motivates youngsters to pursue Jewish education and continue their Jewish studies during high school or later? The data suggest that a young person's belief in the importance of Jewish education may be a motivating factor. At ages 13-14, two-thirds felt that Jewish education was “very important” to their own sense of Jewishness. Almost half of the 17-18 year olds expressed similarly strong feelings. And while more students opted for the more moderate answer “somewhat important” in the second survey, negative expressions toward Jewish education and sense of Jewishness were expressed by only a fraction of these teenagers, both at younger and older ages. (See Chart 11.)

Chart 9

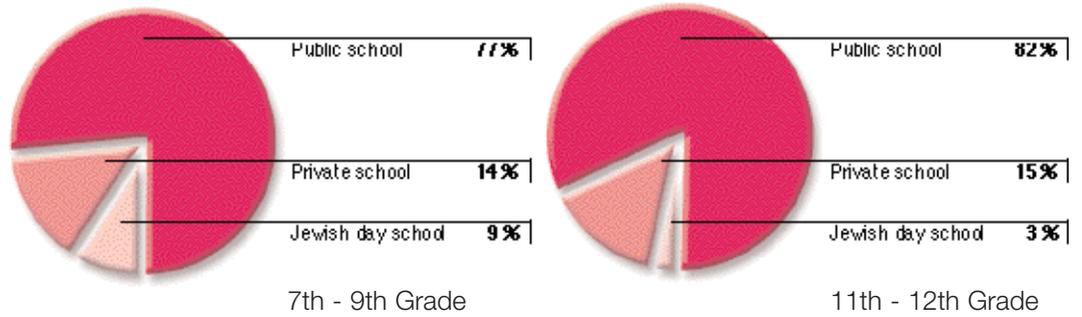


Chart 10

you ...  
1999: Thinking of your Jewish education did you ....

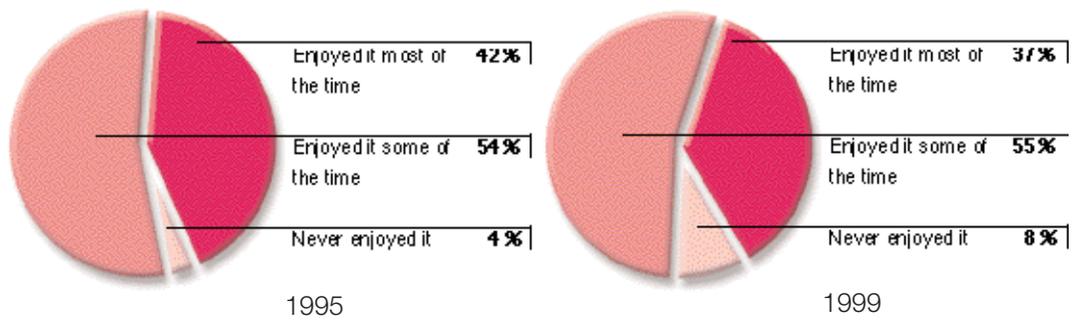
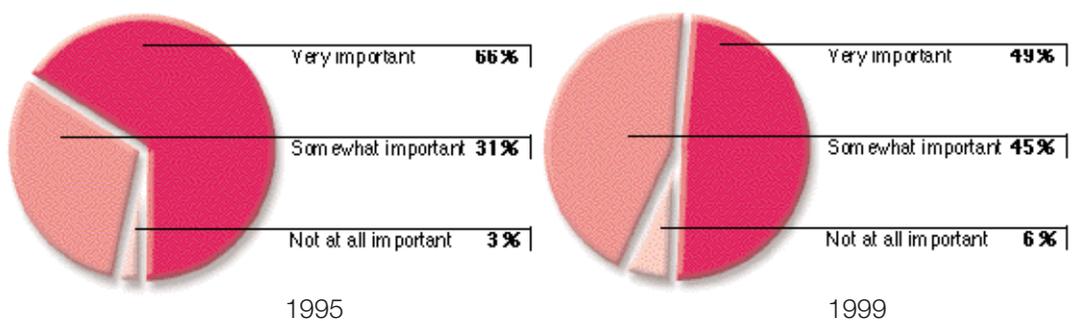


Chart 11

Jewishness



In 1999 we asked those who continued their Jewish education where this took place:

Table 6

Bar/Bat Mitzvah

In a Jewish day school	8%
In Hebrew high school/supplementary school	77%
With a tutor	1%
In Israel	3%
Other	4%
Through the synagogue (voluntary added category)	2%
Self-taught (voluntary added category)	2%
In college (voluntary added category)	1%
Offered through public school (voluntary added category)	2%

The preferred educational venues for Conservative teenagers to continue their Jewish education after bar/bat mitzvah training are primarily Hebrew high schools or supplementary schools, most provided through Conservative synagogues. Jewish day schools either cannot meet the demand for Jewish educational enrichment or are not the preferred mode for this age group.

### Informal Jewish Educational Experiences

Attending a Jewish summer camp and/or belonging to a Jewish youth group widens a teenager's Jewish social circle. These activities are widely considered to be enriching Jewish socialization experiences that should strengthen Jewish commitment.

#### Attendance at Jewish Summer Camp, 1995 and 1999

Already at ages 13-14, over 60% of b'nai and b'not mitzvah had experienced about three years of Jewish summer camp. Most of them went to day camps; about one-third attended a Y or JCC summer camp. Interestingly, nearly half of these boys and girls continued their involvement in Jewish summer camps after bar/bat mitzvah, with 48% attending in at least one of the last four high school years. (The median number of years of camp attendance was three.) The data suggest that around 27% of Conservative youth attended Camp Ramah, the Conservative movement summer camp, at some time, but that the number dropped off over the years, and only 9% of this cohort attended while in high school. In contrast 12% attended a Y or JCC camp during this time.

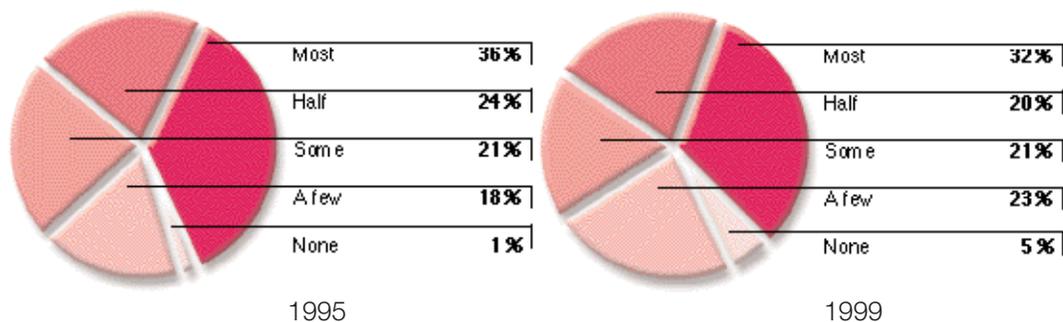
#### Membership in a Jewish Youth Group

The 1995 results showed that a majority (57%) of these boys and girls had already joined a Jewish youth group by their bar/bat mitzvah year. Most of them (58%) then belonged to Kadimah, the Conservative pre-high school movement, and a minority to Young Judaea. A vast majority (85%) of parents, moreover, stated their intention to encourage their children to join a Jewish youth group. Four years later, two-thirds of the teenagers (67%) reported that they had, in fact, participated in a Jewish youth group while in high school, and 44% still belonged in 1999. Many were quite involved; more than 60% of attendees participated in events or meetings monthly or more often. Only a fraction never attended meetings. Whereas it is possible that at age 13 many teenagers participated at their parents' urging, we can presume that at ages 17-18, they attended of their own volition.

## Jewish Friendships

The findings demonstrate that these teenagers are almost equally divided between those who socialized mainly with other Jews and those who did not. In addition, the pattern of friendships that existed at ages 13-14 was largely maintained in the next four years. At the time of their bar/bat mitzvah training they had many opportunities to associate with other Jewish teens at the synagogue and in the religious school, but possibly fewer such opportunities in the high school years.

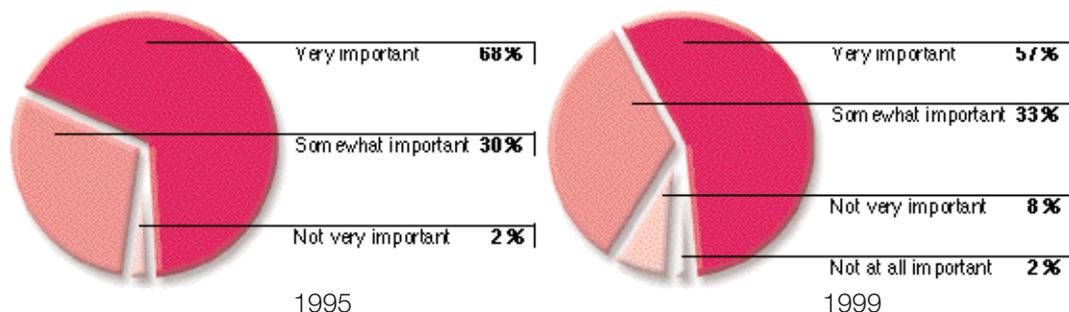
Chart 12



## Jewish Identity and Attitudes

The strong sense of Jewishness expressed by b'nai and b'not mitzvah largely prevailed through their high school years. The majority of teenagers at ages 17-18 still felt that being Jewish was very important in their lives. Moreover, only 10% felt that being Jewish was not important. The bar/bat mitzvah rite of passage did not seem to signal the end of a strong Jewish identity for most of these teenagers.

Chart 13



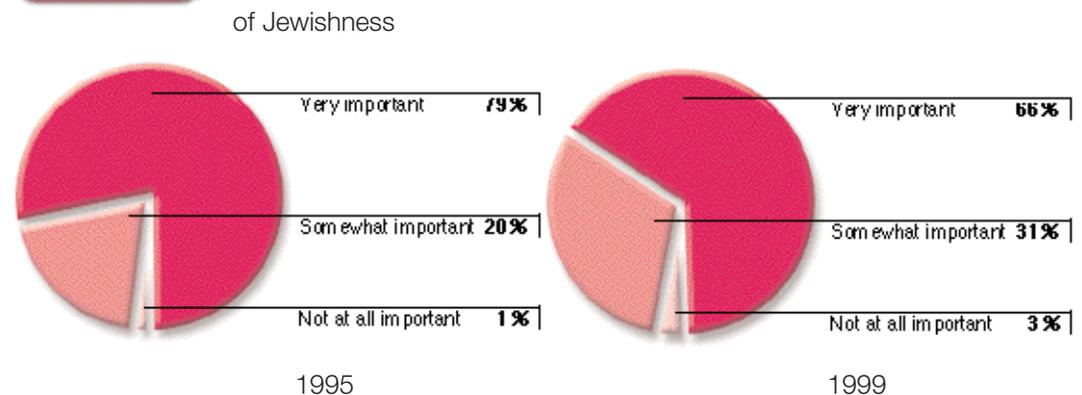
Only a very small proportion (7%) of b'nai and b'not mitzvah said they had ever been embarrassed about being Jewish. Similarly, at ages 17-18, for the most part they claimed "never" to have felt embarrassed about being Jewish; only 12% "sometimes" felt embarrassed. These findings corroborate the ongoing positive attitudes toward being Jewish that were expressed by the generation of teenagers in our study.

Table 7

Ever in 1995?		How often in 1999?	
Yes	7%	Often	1%
		Sometimes	12%
		Never	87%

Not only did they not feel embarrassed about being Jewish, but loyalty to the Jewish heritage remained very important to most of the youngsters' sense of Jewishness. Some erosion is evident between 1995 and 1999 among those who expressed the strongest positive views about Jewish identity questions, but it is mainly into the middle range or neutral categories rather than to outright negativity.

Chart 14



### Voluntarism in the Community

Pursuing the Jewish values of giving and volunteering is mostly expressed in the way teenagers "keep their promises." When b'nai and b'not mitzvah were asked "will you volunteer in your community?" 87% said "yes." Four years later 85% said they volunteered in the community. Most of them (61%) volunteered in both the Jewish and general communities, mainly for social action and cultural causes.

Table 8

1995		1999	
Will you volunteer?		Do you volunteer?	
Yes	87%	Yes	85%

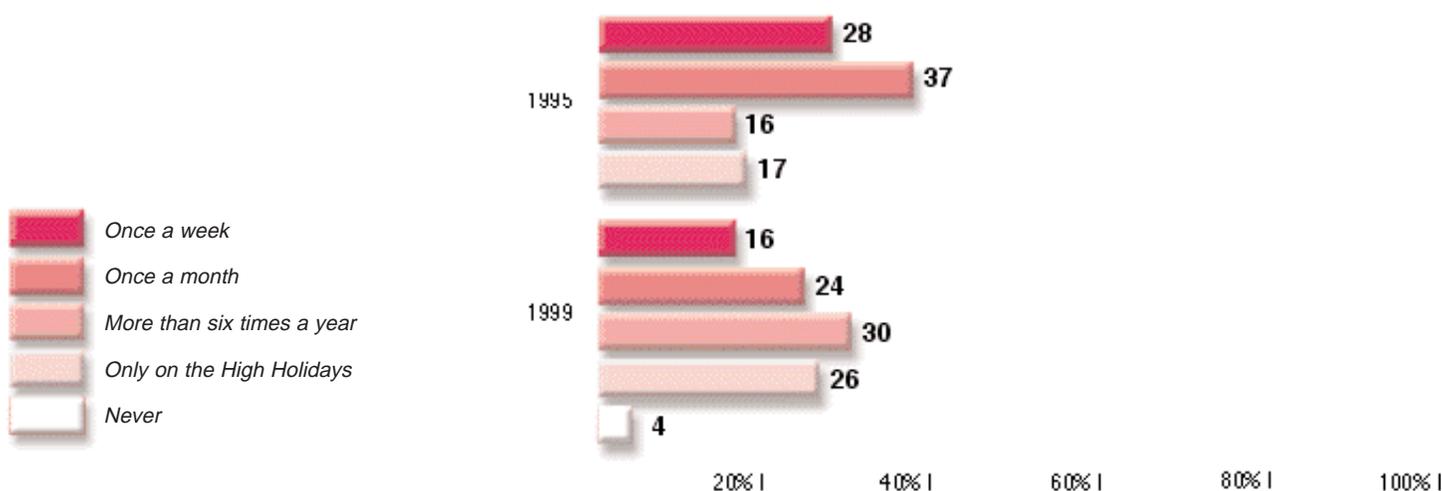
## Synagogue Attendance

There is considerable evidence that Americans of all faiths exaggerate their attendance at religious services. This makes time-series data like our two surveys extremely helpful for understanding trends. In 1999 a large group of the teenagers (40%) reported attending at least once a month. Comparing their intentions in 1995 to their reported behavior in 1999, it is clear that not everybody fulfilled his or her plans. The youngsters were enthusiastic about attending synagogue during their bar/bat mitzvah year, but as the years went by, the frequency of attendance was actually less than intended. Just under one-third of the students attended only 6 times a year or more, and one-quarter attended only on the High Holidays. Still, very few never attended synagogue services four years after their bar/bat mitzvah.

Most of the teenagers at ages 17-18 were still living with their parents, who may well have served as the driving force encouraging their children to attend synagogue services. Still, the teenagers' monthly pattern of attendance was some nine points lower than that of their parents. As the youngsters leave home and enroll in college, peers rather than parents will be the biggest influence on their religious behavior, so we can expect the generational gap to widen further.

Chart 15

1999 (B) How often do you go?



## Religious Beliefs and Practice

As our teenagers matured and were further removed from the bar/bat mitzvah experience, they were less likely to view the authorship of the Torah as the actual word of God. Many more teens at ages 17-18 compared with ages 13-14 regarded the Torah as an ancient work of history recorded by man. Interestingly, Conservative Judaism's middle-ground belief that the Torah is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, prevails among 6 out of 10 teenagers in both surveys. We can see a movement leftward theologically, with the proportion adopting an Orthodox position eroding. In turn there is a rise in the Reform theological position. The pattern of these responses is remarkably similar to those on denomination reported below. These two sets of findings thus tend to reinforce each other's validity. (See Chart 16.)

Chart 16

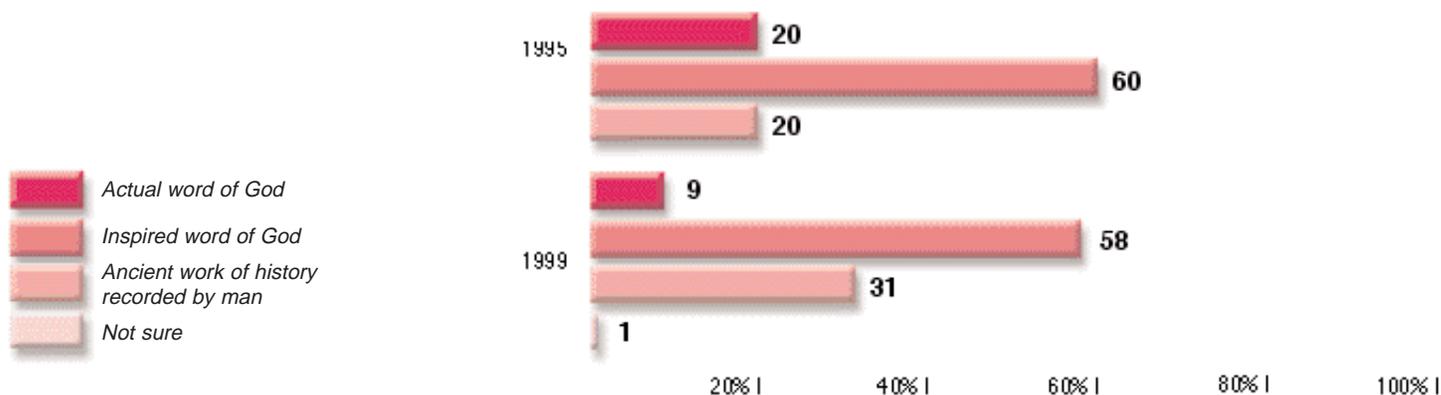
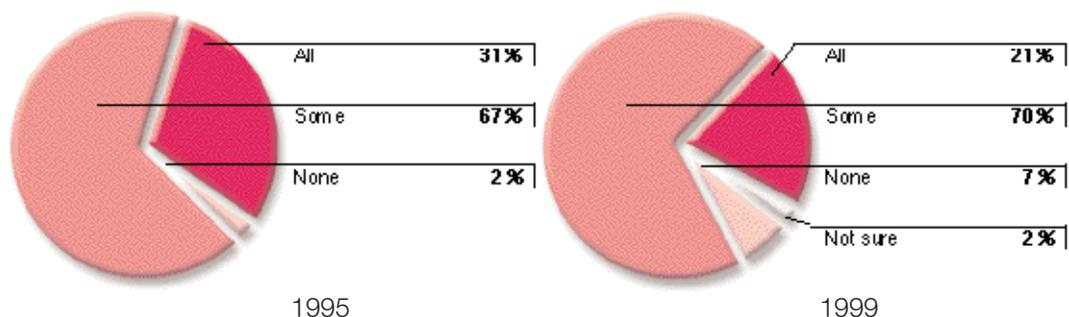


Chart 17



Similar trends emerge as regards the veracity of the miracles recorded in the Torah. Most teenagers, again, both at younger and older ages, opted for the middle-of-the-road answer. Although, once again, the group became more skeptical over time, seven out of ten believe that some of the miracles recorded in the Torah are true, and overall there is a very high level of belief in supernatural events.

Belief and practice are different aspects of religiosity as well as different dimensions of the teenagers' sense of Jewishness. The results from both years suggest that among the teens in this sample atheistic ideas are not widely held. (See Chart 18.) Yet while believing in God is "very important" to the majority, ritual practice, such as living in a kosher home, was not at all important to most of them in 1999. This lax attitude is not in line with the principles of Conservative Judaism, yet it begins early. Young Conservative Jews exhibited their relaxed feelings about Kashrut laws already at ages 13-14, and the attitude persisted and grew even stronger over the next four years. (See Chart 19.)

Behavior and attitude go hand in hand here. Most of the teenagers did not observe the Kashrut dietary laws. Fewer than one-third of them refrained from mixing meat and dairy foods when they ate out. However, this pattern has to be placed in perspective. In response to a related question, the 1995 Conservative Membership Study (Wertheimer, 2000) showed that only 16% of adults refrain from eating meat in non-kosher restaurants. Thus, twice as many teenagers as adults claim to adhere to this particular requirement of Kashrut. (See Table 9.)

### Importance of the Following to Your Own Sense of Jewishness

Chart 18

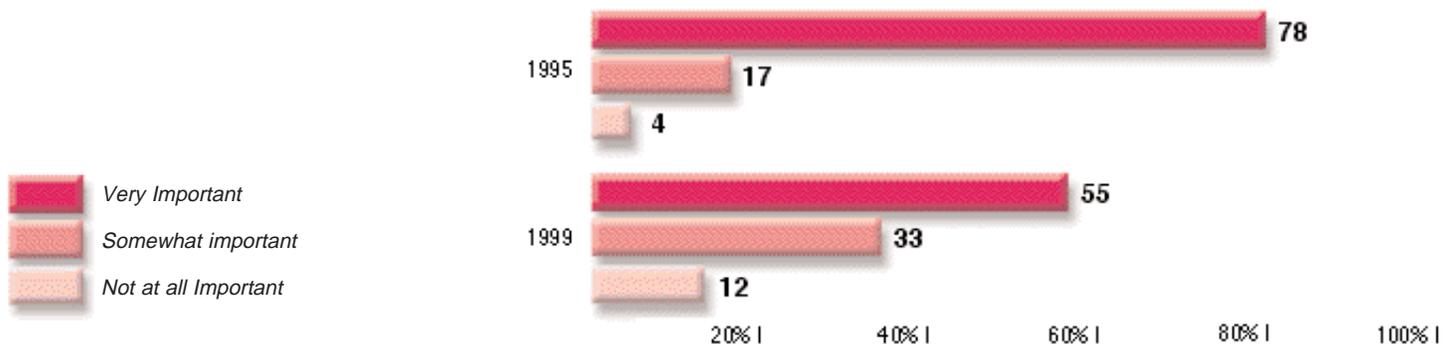


Chart 19

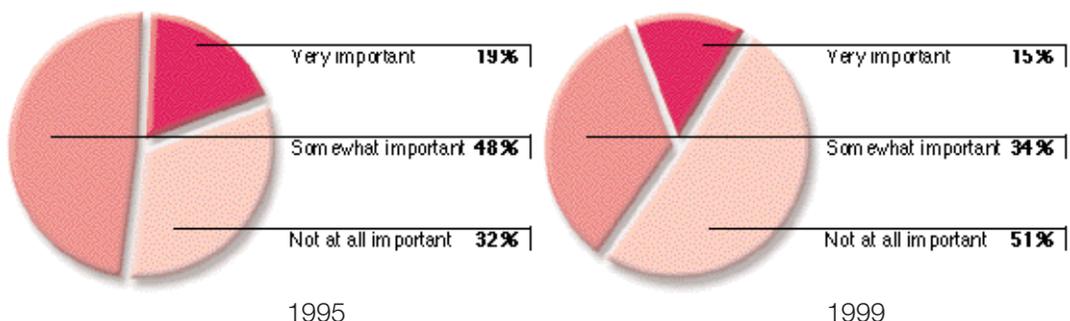


Table 9

#### When Eating Out

1995	1999
37%	31%
	2% vegetarian

(Note: in 1999 we recorded a voluntary answer, "vegetarian.")

In 1995 a positive intention to fast on Yom Kippur was reported by 90% of the students; in 1999, 85% of them reported having fasted that year. The pattern among the teenagers at ages 17-18 is remarkably similar to that of their parents, 87% of whom reported in 1995 that they fasted on Yom Kippur. This annual religious ritual receives a high degree of compliance and consensus in the Conservative movement.

How “spiritual” are today’s teenagers? One expression of spirituality is personal prayer. Almost half of 17 to 18-year-olds said they pray on their own frequently or occasionally, clearly indicating spiritual engagement beyond organized religious services. It is hard to know the purpose or content of these experiences, yet young people do not hesitate to acknowledge these personal practices. They answer willingly and openly. (See Table 10.)

Table 10

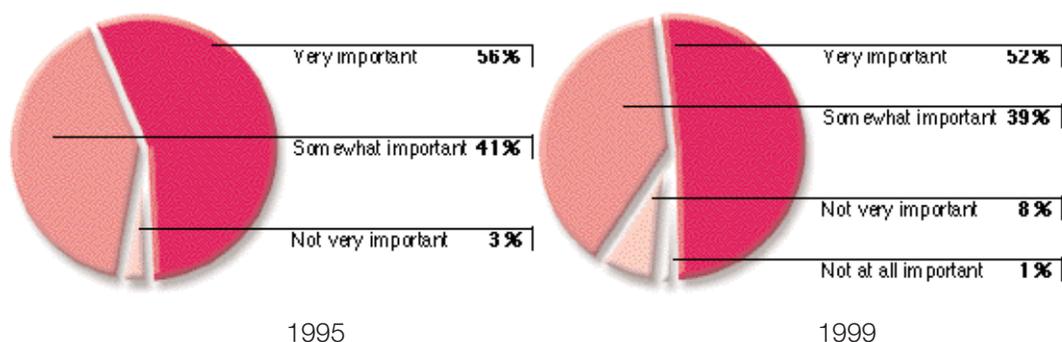
## Organized Religious Services

Pray on your own in 1995	38%
Engage in personal prayer in 1999	
Frequently	16%
Occasionally	30%
Rarely	36%
Never	18%

## Israel

The strong feelings toward Israel expressed in 1995 seem to have held up among these teenagers. More than half said that Israel was “very important” to them. None or almost none said that Israel was “not at all important” at ages 13-14 and again at ages 17-18. The origin of this “Zionist”

Chart 20



outlook could be the home, religious school, Jewish summer camp, Jewish youth group or a visit to Israel itself. (See Chart 20.)

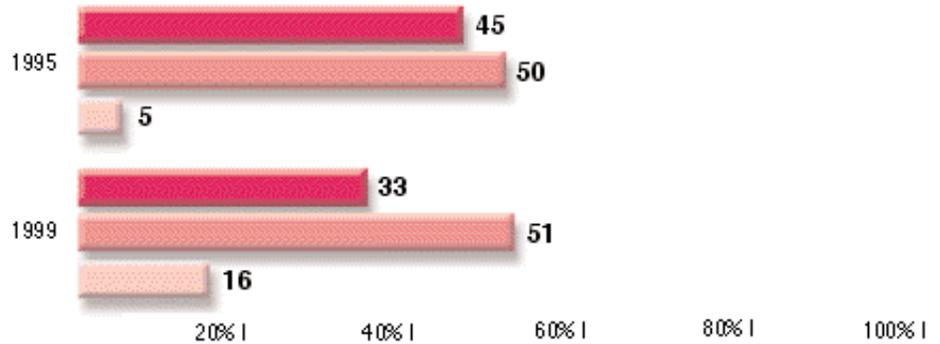
More than half of the parents in the sample (54%) had already visited Israel in 1995, as had 25% of the students. (The 1995 Membership Study of Conservative Jews, which includes well-traveled older people, not just parents of b’nai/b’not mitzvah, revealed that 62% had visited Israel at least once.) By 1999 the number of teen visitors had doubled to 52%, a similar proportion to that of their parents. They went either on a family trip, school or synagogue trip, or a youth group tour such as The Israel Experience, all supported and financed by their families.

When asked how important their ties to the Jewish homeland are for their own Jewishness, more than 80% of the high schoolers indicated that it was still important. However, fewer of them as high schoolers than as b’nai/b’not mitzvah expressed very strong feelings and more expressed negative feelings. The difficult relationship during the 1990s between North American Conservative Jews and the State of Israel has to be borne in mind when interpreting any diminution in attachment. (See Chart 21.)

Chart 21

Sense of Jewishness

Very important  
Somewhat important  
Not at all important



Anti-Semitism

Though these teenagers at ages 17-18 were less likely than at ages 13-14 to view anti-Semitism as a major current problem for Jews in the U.S. or Canada, they were now more likely to report experiencing anti-Semitism personally in their neighborhoods or at school. Either they were able, as older teens, to distinguish between personal encounters and a collective perception, or, at a

Table 11

1995		1999	
Yes	68%	Yes	51%

Table 12

at school?

1995		1999	
Yes	28%	Yes	40%

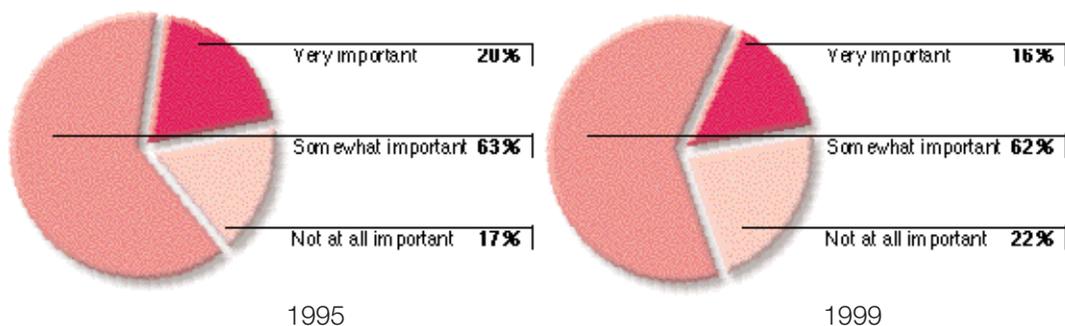
younger age they did not view their own personal incidents as serious. (See Tables 11 and 12)

Jewish Culture

Jewish culture was not seen as a very important aspect of most teenagers' own sense of Jewishness, either during their bar/bat mitzvah year or later in high school. At the later age, less than one-fifth regarded art, music and literature as "very important," and one-fifth even viewed it as "not at all important." This finding suggests that Jewish educators and parents ought to expose teenagers more intensively to the richness of Jewish culture, especially as an educational tool for teaching about Jewish history and tradition. (See Chart 22.)

Chart 22

and Literature, to Your Own Sense of Jewishness

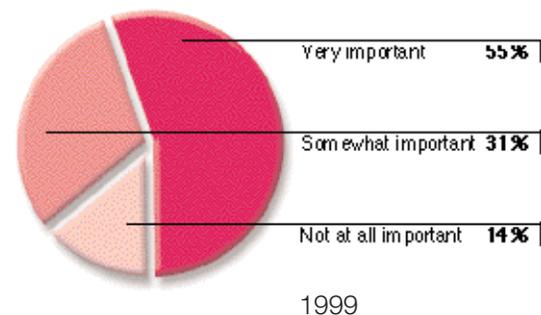


### Intermarriage

American and Canadian teenagers live in an open society that advocates pluralism and religious tolerance. Not surprisingly, two-thirds of b'nai and b'not mitzvah in 1995 thought that "it is OK for Jews to marry people of other religions," an attitude that contradicts the philosophy and teaching of Conservative Judaism. However, in 1999 a majority of the high school seniors indicated that choosing a Jewish partner was important for themselves personally. Interestingly, the percentage committed to choosing a Jewish partner (55%) is around the same as the national level for in-marriage in first marriages as recorded in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey.

Chart 23

How important is it for you to marry somebody Jewish?



### Summary

The value of this project emerges clearly from these comparative data over time. From the data, it appears that for most aspects of Jewish identity the pattern set in the early teenage years persists through high school – a finding of major importance for Jewish educators. There is some erosion of traditional or normative Jewish religious values and behaviors, but the strong internal psychological identification with the Jewish people and the state of Israel, which was at a surprisingly high level at ages 13-14, seems to have remained firm. Whereas patterns of Kashrut observance and attitudes towards intermarriage are unsatisfactory from the perspective of normative Conservative Judaism, certainly there is no trend toward alienation from most things Jewish during these years among this sample of Conservative teens. They often seem to mirror their parents' patterns of Jewish behaviors- living at home and still mainly following in their parents' footsteps in fasting on Yom Kippur and synagogue attendance. Moreover, they largely accept their parents' aspirations for them regarding Jewish education, socialization in youth groups and visits to Israel. Along with these generally positive findings, there are also areas of opinion and practice on which there is no consensus, and which elicited a wide range of responses among the teenagers, indicating varying degrees of commitment and involvement. We therefore turn now

## FINDINGS: SECTION III

### Models for Understanding the Responses

#### The Gender Factor

Are there any background characteristics that might be associated with the different response patterns of the teenagers? One of these is gender, which assumes that males and females differ in attitudes, opinions, patterns of behavior and involvements due either to variations in socialization experiences or innate psychological differences. The 1995 study found that at ages 13-14 there were only minor gender differences among the students. In fact, one important theme of the report on the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Survey was “the triumph of egalitarianism” and “the doubling of Jewish participation” in Conservative synagogues (Kosmin, 2000). In the co-educational atmosphere of contemporary Conservative synagogues similar inputs had largely produced similar outputs, irrespective of gender. The statistically significant gender correlations in 1995 were limited to a small range of items in the civic and educational realms, such as Tzedakkah and helping Jews in distress. Also, the girls expressed a greater willingness to volunteer in the Jewish community and attributed more importance to being Jewish than did the boys. The girls were also slightly more likely to think Kashrut in the home was important, to have enjoyed their Jewish education and to want to continue studying.

At ages 17-18, the gender differences were again statistically insignificant when correlated with most of the survey questions with a few exceptions, most of which related to the areas identified in 1995. For instance, the largest gap between the sexes was on the importance of a having a good Jewish education, which was “very important” to 54% of girls but only 46% of boys. The earlier pattern of differences in the civic realm was repeated. The importance of being Jewish was again more strongly felt by girls, who declared it more important to celebrate the festivals and Sabbath than did the boys. In general, the girls’ self-described pattern of religious observance during the high school years showed less erosion: 35% reported themselves less observant and 27% more observant whereas 39% of boys said they were less observant and 19% stated they were more observant. Interestingly, at this age Kashrut was no longer a gender marker. All in all, gender differences explain very little about individual variations among the sample population, and even the statistically significant items are not very robust.

#### The Regional Factor

Another background characteristic that is often assumed to account for differences in national surveys is geographical location or region of residence. There is a long history of considerable regional variation in patterns of religiosity across North America, which gives rise to terms such as the “Bible Belt.” Certainly Christian America has deep regional cleavages (Kosmin & Lachman, 1993). The West is generally considered to be more religiously liberal and innovative by both Jews and Christians, while Jews imagine that the Northeast and Midwest are more traditional in outlook. There are indeed some regional differences among Conservative synagogues and rabbis that fit this pattern, but among the congregants there is less variation. In the 1995 study, “regional differences [among the youth] were found to be very infrequent in tests of significance . . . the exceptions were the Canadians” who were more traditional in outlook and practice (Kosmin, 2000).

In 1999 all the findings were again analyzed for regional differences by comparing the four U.S. Census Bureau regions and Canada. However, as in our survey of 1995, region was again a poor differentiating or explanatory variable. Even on items where there were statistically significant differences these were of a low magnitude and invariably weaker even than for gender. The strongest regional, in this case national, difference emerged in relation to the question that asked the respondent how strongly he or she agreed with the statement “I relate more easily to Jews than to non-Jews.” The small sub-sample of 60 Canadians had a uniquely split response pattern, whereas the U.S. pattern had more middle-range responses and little regional variation. The Canadians were more than twice as likely as Americans to “disagree strongly” with the statement (25% vs. 6-14%) and were also nearly twice as likely to “strongly agree” (23% vs. 12-17%).

The Canadians and Midwesterners stood out by tending to consider Sabbath observance “very important” (27% & 24%), compared to those in other regions (14-19%). Opinions on the “importance of living in a kosher home” showed some variation, with Southerners and Westerners most likely to see it as “very important” (14% & 16%); surprisingly the Canadians had the smallest proportion, thinking it “very important” at 7%. Contrary to the pattern in 1995, the Canadians showed the greatest drop-off in religiosity, with 45% reporting a fall in religious observance since their bar/bat mitzvah year compared to only 21% in the U.S. Midwest. Nevertheless, the Canadians were much more likely to agree with the statement “I don’t think I could ever be Reform” (62%) than were Americans (42-58%).

To sum up, region is not a significant explanatory variable among contemporary Conservative Jewish youth. The Northeast fails to emerge as the heartland of traditional Conservative Judaism, and Western or Southern youth are not more “liberal” on most items concerned with religiosity and identity. The small sample of Canadian young people maintained its uniqueness over the high school years, but somewhat surprisingly it also recorded the largest movement of opinion after 1995.

### **Socialization Factors and an Experiential Model**

Since our sample is relatively uniform in terms of background characteristics—age, family type, home language, general education and Jewish education to age 13— and since gender and geography hardly influence the results, we have to look elsewhere to explain the range of behaviors and opinions we discovered. One possible approach focuses on the teenagers’ levels of engagement in Jewish life. Does participation in Jewish activities make a difference? If so, which activities and how much participation are significant? We refer to this approach as an experiential model. It assumes that the range of different identity-building experiences available to Jewish teens can be scaled into a hierarchy based on intensity of exposure and that significant differences will emerge from the scale.

Jewish high school students in North America are provided with a range of formal and informal opportunities for Jewish enrichment by a sophisticated system of youth programs eager to recruit and involve them. At one extreme there is full-time Jewish day school education; at the other there is the freedom to disengage and drop out after the bar/bat mitzvah and have nothing further to do with Judaism, Jewish institutions or even Jewish peers. In between these poles is a range of informal social activities such as youth groups, summer camps and supplementary Jewish education in congregational high school networks. Most of these educational and social experiences can be combined if the young person wishes to do so and has the requisite parental support and available time. Thus, the young people in our sample could have joined all of them, some of them, or none of them during the four years between 1995 and 1999. Based on this, we constructed an intensity or additive scale of Jewish experiences during the high school years from zero to thousands of hours. Analysis of the high-schoolers’ responses using the scale gives us a

better understanding of the process that actually produces the outcomes that we have reported. It also affords an insight into the added relative value of various youth activities and involvements, and so offers an opportunity for cost-benefit analysis at the aggregate level.

The sample of 1,295 respondents was segmented into six subsets to form a hierarchy, using the approach described above. The top category in terms of greatest intensity of involvement and exposure, which was also the smallest in terms of size, consisted of those respondents who had attended a Jewish day school during their high school years. Two-thirds of them completed a full 12 years of Jewish day school (i.e. elementary and secondary schooling). The next subset contained those who had graduated from Hebrew high school after having attended for four years, which, interestingly, was the largest subset, covering 27% of the sample. The third subset comprised a relatively small group of those who had not met the criteria for the other two groups but had attended a Jewish summer camp for four of their high school years. The next subset down the scale included respondents who could not meet the above criteria but were currently involved in informal education as members of a Jewish youth group in their high school senior year. Below this was a group whose only Jewish involvement was to have belonged to a youth group for some period in their high school years. The sixth category was made up of those who had no involvement with Jewish agencies of any kind since their bar/bat mitzvah. These uninvolved youth comprised just over one-quarter of the cohort.

Table 13

Category	Number	Percent
1. Jewish day school	67	5.2
2. Hebrew high school graduate	352	27.2
3. Four years at summer camp	97	7.5
4. Member of Jewish youth group in 1999	237	18.7
5. Some Jewish youth group	208	16.1
6. No Jewish involvements	334	25.8

There is, of course, a degree of overlap between the experiences in these various categories as one moves up the scale. This reflects the well documented social reality that those committed to Jewish life have multiple involvements in it. Day school students go to summer camps and youth groups. Among the Hebrew high school graduates, 83% percent had belonged to a youth group at some time – 65% in their high school senior year. In addition, 64% of them attended Jewish summer camp while they were at high school. The empirical evidence set out below shows that the categories work exceptionally well to differentiate subsets of the sample and produce remarkably robust results on tests of statistical significance for most of the survey items.

Of course, one problem with this scale is that it is impossible to know in which direction the causality runs. We assume that socialization activities produce stronger attachment to Judaism. However, it is also possible that families who are more attached to Judaism are more likely to commit themselves to intense socialization. For example, we have no way of knowing whether attending day school makes a child more likely to observe the Sabbath, or if observing the Sabbath at home makes a child more likely to attend day school. Because this is a longitudinal study, more complex statistical models and techniques should help to determine the level and direction of causality.

### a. Empirical Evidence of Differential Behavior

Our first application of the scale is to measure the social reality of Jewish teenagers, specifically their levels of involvement with Jewish peers. It is logical to expect day school students to have more Jewish friends than uninvolved youth, and young people who have spent all four years attending a Jewish institution to have more Jewish friends than those who attended for only one year. The data in the table below seems to validate this argument and the hierarchy of categories.

Table 14

Jewish Experience in High School	Most	Half	Some	A few	None	Total %
1. Dayschool	63	15	14	9	0	100
2. Hebrew high school grad.	37	26	18	17	3	100
3. 4 years summer camp	41	23	13	21	2	100
4. Current youth group	34	21	23	20	2	100
5. Some youth group	23	14	30	26	7	100
6. No involvement	22	17	22	31	8	100
Total sample	32	20	21	22	5	100

The six categories of connectedness to organized activities fall into three groups. The two bottom categories reflect similar Jewish friendship patterns. Categories of involvement 3-5 also appear to produce similar patterns while day school stands out as a unique social environment. (See Table 14.)

The pattern of visits to Israel further tests the validity of the scale. Such trips represent a new rite of passage for American Jewish youth and are very much encouraged by day schools, Hebrew high schools and youth groups, many of which run programs or pilgrimages. The scale delineates the hierarchy in the expected direction. Whereas 52% of the total sample had visited Israel, the variation by category progresses down the scale from 78% of day school students to 34% of the uninvolved. The day school hardly stands out from the Hebrew high school on Israel experience per se, but a much higher proportion, half of its students, had made multiple visits to the Jewish state.

Table 15

Jewish Experience in High School	0	1	2+	Total %
1. Day school	22	28	50	100
2. Hebrew high school grad.	28	41	35	100
3. 4 years summer camp	35	36	29	100
4. Current youth group	49	31	20	100
5. Some youth group	64	25	11	100
6. No involvement	66	21	13	100
Total sample	48	30	22	100

Most formal and informal programs of Jewish education stress the value of volunteering. In our sample, the proportion volunteering for anything reaches 93% among day schoolers, 91% among Hebrew high school products, 86% among summer campers and drops down to 73% among the uninvolved. As expected, the pattern of volunteering for the Jewish community follows the order of the scale reaching a level of 72% of day schoolers, 76% of Hebrew high school students, but only 30% of the uninvolved, though even that level is surprisingly high.

To be convincing, the scale also needs to work for religious practices. Since the young people in the top categories received much more recent religious teaching than those in the bottom ones, we would expect them to be more religiously observant. To test this, we looked at three key practices mandated by Conservative Judaism—regular synagogue attendance, fasting on Yom Kippur and personal observance of Kashrut, in this case measured by the refusal to eat meat and dairy products together when outside the home. Interestingly, in every category, 2% reported they were vegetarians, and these figures have been excluded from the table.

Table 16

Jewish Experience in High School	Synagogue attendance monthly or more	Fasted on Yom Kippur	Kosher outside home
1. Dayschool	55	91	58
2. Hebrew high school grad.	66	91	42
3. 4 years summer camp	35	83	33
4. Current youth group	47	90	30
5. Some youth group	26	84	20
6. No involvement	13	74	19
Total sample	39	85	31

Again, the scale works in the expected direction for all three items. Yom Kippur is a consensus practice among youth from homes affiliated with Conservative synagogues, so three out of four youngsters fast annually, even among the uninvolved. On the other hand, Kashrut is not widely practiced and only achieves a majority among the small population of day school students. The pattern of synagogue attendance may well be exaggerated, but it does show the various forms of socialization. In encouraging synagogue attendance, Hebrew high school appears to be more effective than day school in contrast to the situation of Kashrut observance, where there is a steady progression up the scale. This finding was validated by the responses to a similar question on how important living in a Jewish home was to the interviewees' sense of Jewishness. It was "very important" to 6% of the uninvolved, 10% of campers, 23% of Hebrew high school graduates and 36% of day school students. Again it must be stressed that all these results are statistically highly significant.

The answers to a question on changes in their religious observance during high school can also be correlated with the teenagers' participation in Jewish formal and informal education. The results show a clear progression up and down the scale in the expected directions for all but the day school population. Those who tended to be more involved reported greater observance and those who were less involved, declining levels of observance. The contrast between the effects of Hebrew high school and day school are also noteworthy. The day school tends to polarize young people more than the supplementary school does. The supplementary school's overall effect seems more positive in terms of self-reported outcomes. (See Table 17.)

Table 17

than you were in your bar/bat mitzvah year?

Jewish Experience in High School	Much more	More	The same	Less	Much less	Total %
1. Dayschool	11	21	37	23	8	100
2. Hebrew High school grad.	6	28	44	19	3	100
3. 4 years summer camp	4	28	36	23	9	100
4. Current youth group	5	19	45	25	6	100
5. Some youth group	2	10	36	39	12	100
6. No involvement	1	11	37	29	22	100
Total sample	4	18	40	27	11	100

The overall findings for the behavioral items are that the socialization model works efficiently and that there is a high degree of correlation in the expected direction. While this suggests that there is a clear return on the communal investment in this sample of young people, the fact that many other young people in each category go counter to the overall trends suggests that involvement in Jewish activities cannot be the only factor affecting religious practice.

#### b. Religious Attitudes

Since the behaviors reported by the sample could be the products of a number of factors, including habit or inertia, it is important to relate the various types of Jewish involvements to the young people's attitudes and beliefs. One obvious belief related to the practice of normative Conservative Judaism is the importance of keeping the Sabbath, a major theological as well as behavioral imperative.

The results in Table 18 show a clear pattern of answers in the expected direction. Because belief in the importance of the Sabbath was instilled during education for the bar/bat mitzvah, the overall pattern of agreement with the premise of the question is not surprising. Only among the uninvolved group and summer campers are there more who consider keeping Shabbat "not at all important" than "very important." On this question, we should note, day school students were more likely to provide the normative answer than were Hebrew high school students.

Table 18

Sabbath?

Jewish Experience in High School	Very important	Somewhat important	Not at all important	Total %
1. Day school	35	54	11	100
2. Hebrew High school grad.	21	68	11	100
3. 4 years summer camp	13	71	16	100
4. Current youth group	20	62	18	100
5. Some youth group	16	71	13	100
6. No involvement	15	63	22	100
Total sample	19	65	15	100

Another value that is instilled during the early years of Jewish education is the importance of Tzedakkah—both as charity and as social justice. Jewish informal and formal educational experiences in the teen years further reinforce this value. The table below does indeed show that there is a high level of agreement about the importance of philanthropy, perhaps a legacy of the bar/bat mitzvah education received by the whole sample. Interestingly, on this item the summer camp appears to reinforce charitable attitudes as much as does formal education. In contrast to the findings on the previous question showing positive attitudes toward Shabbat observance, especially among those involved in youth groups, the summer camp stands out more here. (See Table 19.)

**Table 19**  
Tzedakkah, or charity?

Jewish Experience in High School	Very important	Somewhat important	Not at all important	Total %
1. Day school	68	30	2	100
2. Hebrew High school grad.	64	34	2	100
3. 4 years summer camp	68	30	2	100
4. Current youth group	59	38	3	100
5. Some youth group	59	39	2	100
6. No involvement	47	47	6	100
Total sample	59	38	3	100

Questions concerning belief in God have tended to be problematic for modern Jews. The 1995 survey provided evidence of considerable adult/parental ambivalence on this belief item, with 45% agreeing that it “is not central to being a good Jew.” In contrast, their 13 to 14 year old children provided clear normative answers, particularly regarding the importance of their own beliefs. We concluded from this comparison that “the Americanism of the younger generation, the education

**Table 20**  
God?  
B. How important to your own sense of Jewishness is believing in God?

Jewish Experience in High School	Very important	Somewhat important	Not at all important	Total %
1. Dayschool	A 51	37	12	100
	B 57	33	10	100
2. Hebrew high school grad.	A 53	36	11	100
	B 56	36	8	100
3. 4 years summer camp	A 49	37	14	100
	B 49	39	12	100
4. Current youth group	A 61	24	14	100
	B 60	29	11	100
5. Some youth group	A 56	30	14	100
	B 56	29	15	100
6. No involvement	A 55	28	17	100
	B 51	33	16	100
Total sample	A 55	31	14	100
	B 55	33	12	100

they have received, and again their age probably account for their strong belief in God, with 78% reporting that ‘believing in God’ was ‘very important’ and 18% that it was ‘important’ to their personal sense of Jewishness” (Kosmin, 2000, p. 246). The 1999 replication of this question elicited somewhat reduced scores, although skeptics are still few on the ground among this sample at ages 17-18. When a similar item (B) placed later in the interview related more directly to the teens themselves, it produced almost exactly the same results. We can thus assume that the answers are valid and consistent and that most respondents make no distinction between the theoretical “good Jew” and themselves. However, more central to this analysis is the fact that, of all the data presented in this section, the answers to questions regarding belief in God have no direction relating to the scale of Jewish involvement and so are not statistically significant. This suggests that the added educational inputs some respondents received during the high school years had no effect on the teens’ belief in God. (See Table 20.)

### **c. Denominational Identity**

Having examined the value of various forms of teen socialization for behavior and belief, we now measure their effects specifically in terms of the Conservative movement itself. How the various types of Jewish involvement of young people affect their identity as Conservative Jews is clearly an issue with important policy and financial implications. How much public value in terms of social connectedness does the Conservative movement derive from the different forms of activities it provides for its young members?

To measure the degree of identification with the Conservative movement, we analyzed responses given by the high-schoolers to three statements: (1) “I don’t really think of myself as a Conservative Jew”; (2) “I don’t think I could ever be Orthodox”; and (3) “I don’t think I could ever be Reform.” For our purposes, we amalgamated the “strongly disagree” and the “disagree” response to measure negative responses. (Because of the nature of these statements, a negative response equals a positive affirmation.) The statements are independent of each other and it is quite possible to give more than one positive response, hence the categories do not add up to 100%. Nevertheless they provide a crude measure of loyalty and a straw poll of attitudes toward the three main branches of North American Judaism.

As we have already observed, it is quite clear that half the uninvolved group are not only uninterested in most aspects of Judaism, but we now learn specifically that they have no great affinity for Conservative Judaism. The Hebrew high school produces the most enthusiastic Conservative Jews, followed by the summer campers and current youth group members. All three exceed the day school students’ level of Conservative denominational loyalty. That educational experience appears uniquely more likely to strengthen Orthodox sentiment and to create the most distance from Reform. It is possible that some day school students either have attended or currently attend Orthodox yeshivas, or that day schools simply provide a greater knowledge of and exposure to traditional normative Judaism. (See Chart 24.)

These attitudes have social consequences that will eventually have an impact on the health of the Conservative movement, a reality made clear in responses to the statement in the next table, which offers proof of the old adage that “birds of a feather flock together.”

The top three categories overwhelmingly want to mix with peers who are socialized Jewishly in the same way as themselves. The fact that there are important differences in the ways these groups practice their Judaism and identify Jewishly makes it likely that cliques will form based on these differences. It also has to be remembered that it is only in the top categories that there are currently strong Jewish friendship networks. This suggests that expanding the reach of these educational activities is necessary in order to draw more young people into social networks that support Jewish involvement. (See Table 21.)

Chart 24

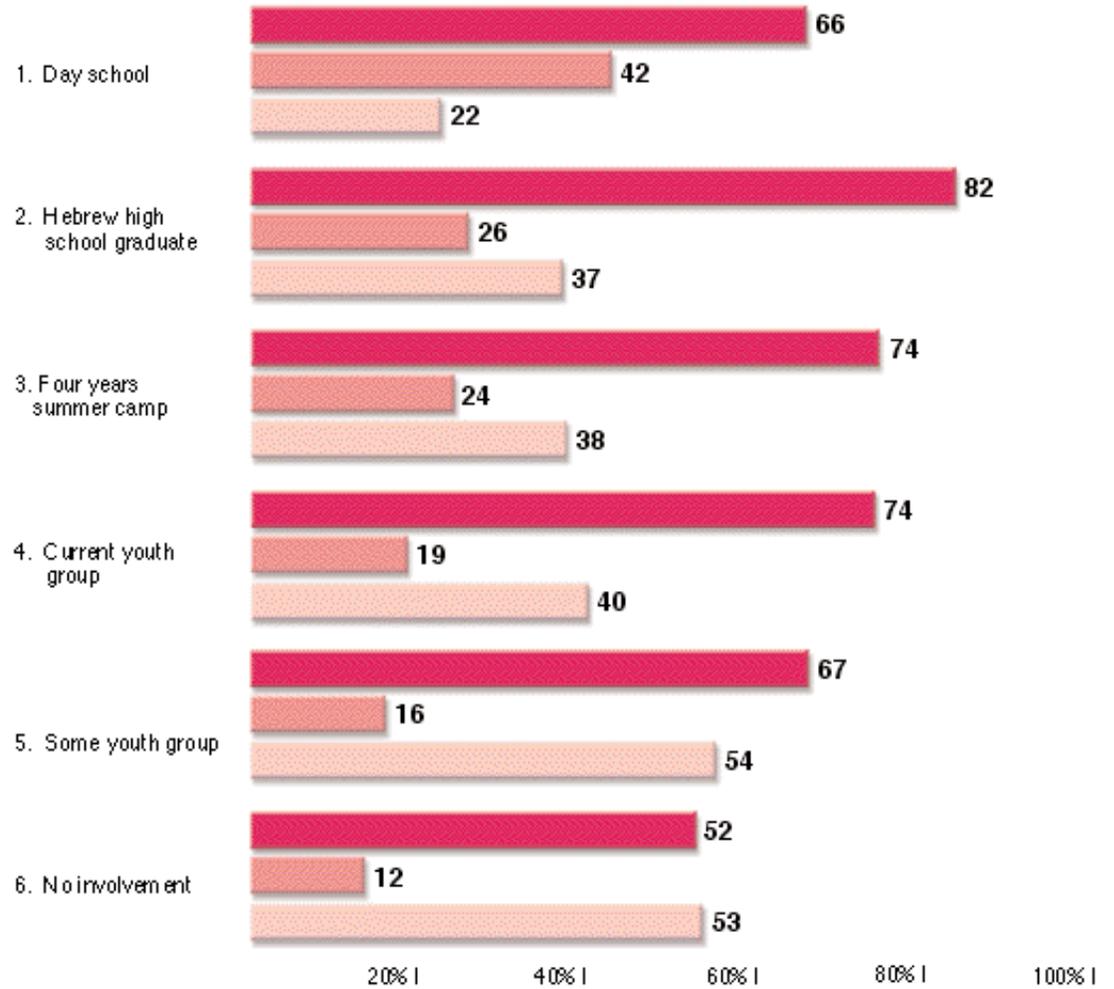
Jewish Experience  
in High School

Table 21

Jewish Experience in High School	Agree strongly	Agree	Disagree	Disagree strongly	Total %
1. Dayschool	34	45	15	6	100
2. Hebrew high school grad.	38	49	11	2	100
3. 4 years summer camp	41	41	15	3	100
4. Current youth group	29	54	14	3	100
5. Some youth group	19	47	27	7	100
6. No involvement	12	41	35	12	100

#### d. Jewish Pride and Social Exclusivity

We noted in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Survey that in their early teenage years these young people had a high degree of self-esteem and a very positive Jewish identity. As we have seen above, currently very few of these teens feel ashamed about being Jewish. To what extent is their level of Jewish involvement related to positive group identity? The table below shows remarkably high levels of pride in being Jewish. Nevertheless, there are statistically significant differences in the intensity of such pride. Those most disengaged from Jewish life in recent years show the least intensity, while the high school and youth group experiences seem to be particularly associated with feelings of pride. Interestingly, the day school and summer camp experiences produce similar scores that are actually average for the whole sample. (See Table 22.)

Table 22

Jewish Experience in High School	Agree strongly	Agree	Disagree	Disagree strongly	Total %
1. Dayschool	63	36	1	0	100
2. Hebrew high school grad.	78	21	1	0	100
3. 4 years summer camp	64	35	1	0	100
4. Current youth group	73	27	0	0	100
5. Some youth group	58	39	3	0	100
6. No involvement	49	46	3	2	100
Total sample	65	33	2	0	100

The relationship between group self-esteem and chauvinism has important consequences for inter-community relations. Pride in one's own origins need not necessarily produce disdain for the other, but it may well tend to underpin social exclusivity. The pattern of Jewish attitudes reported below may prove useful in discussions about the relative impact of different forms of socialization among Jewish youth. The sample is evenly split when asked whether they relate more easily to Jews than non-Jews, with the top of the scale producing the largest measure of agreement with the statement. The pattern of responses is different, however, from that on pride. On this question the day school students are the most polarized group, while Hebrew high school and summer camp attendees are similar to each other. The current youth group members have a great deal of Jewish pride but do not translate this feeling into social distance from non-Jews as much as do the top three groups. (See Table 23.)

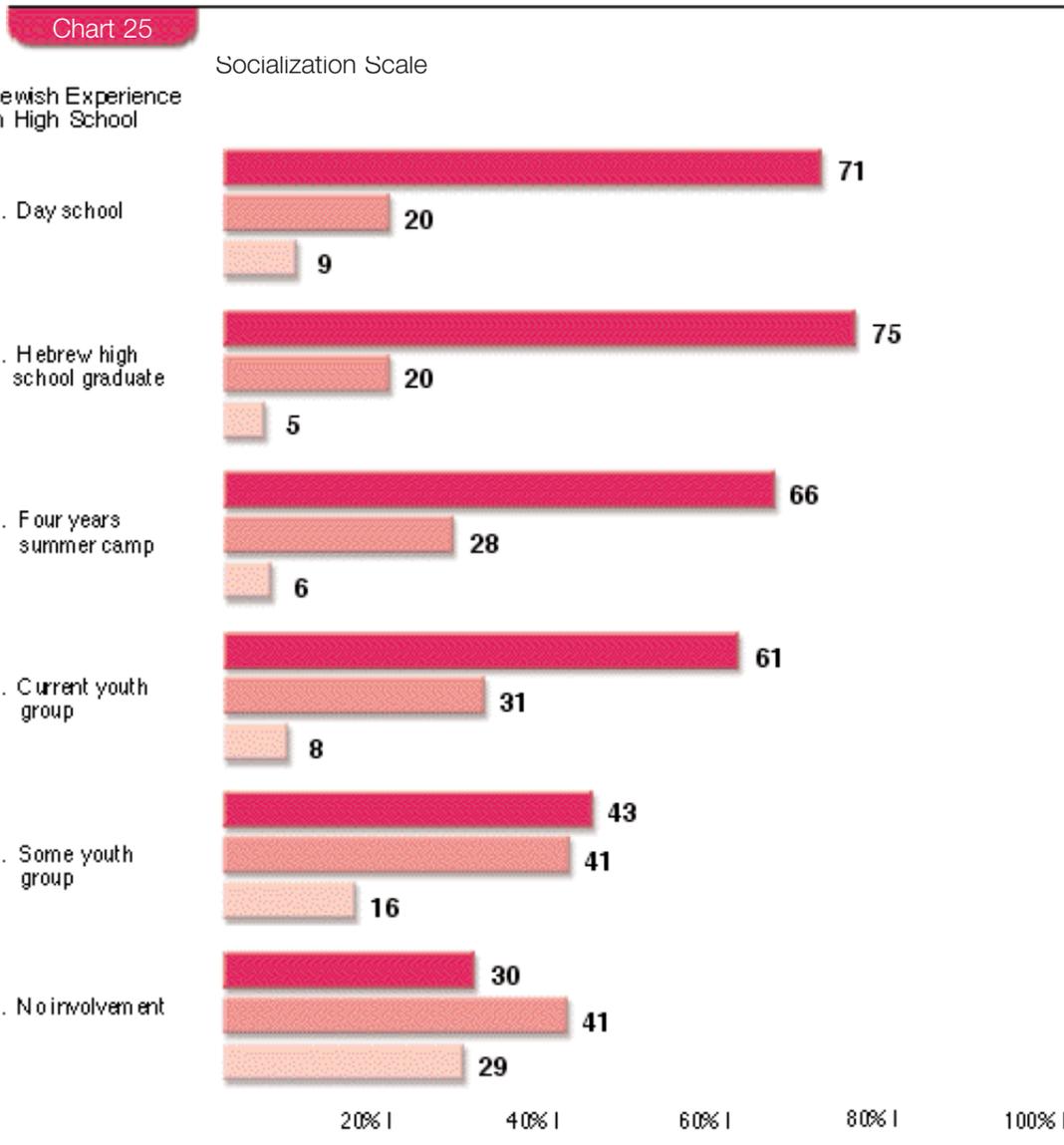
Table 23

Jewish Experience in High School	Agree strongly	Agree	Disagree	Disagree strongly	Total %
1. Dayschool	30	27	33	10	100
2. Hebrew high school grad.	19	43	31	6	100
3. 4 years summer camp	21	40	32	7	100
4. Current youth group	17	33	44	6	100
5. Some youth group	10	31	46	13	100
6. No involvement	8	24	50	18	100
Total sample	15	33	41	11	100

**e. Attitudes Toward Inter-marriage and the Importance of Being Jewish**

Since the release of findings of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey showing spiraling rates of intermarriage, the North American Jewish community has focused much attention on stemming the seemingly unrelenting tide of out-marriage among young Jews (Kosmin et al.,1991). All the major synagogue groups and communal organizations have devoted attention and resources to reversing this tide by adopting agendas for “Jewish Continuity” and “Renewal.” In light of this preoccupation, it is particularly interesting to examine the attitudes of our cohort of high school seniors on the importance of marrying a Jew. What avenues of Jewish socialization appear to be best able to deliver the message and persuade the young?

The results show that the top two categories, those involving formal education, are associated with the greatest commitment to endogamy. Categories 3 and 4, settings for informal educational experiences, form another grouping with a somewhat lower level of commitment. The uninvolved, as we have learned now to expect, are less committed to Jewish continuity than the rest of the sample. (See Chart 25.)



It must be remembered that the young people in this sample are drawn from families with current membership in synagogues and have had an average of five years of Jewish education by age 13. Hence even our uninvolved group is far more engaged in Jewish life, e.g., fasting on Yom Kippur, than the general population of North American Jewish youth. To what extent this is a predictor of future intent or action is open to question, but it is logical to expect the rank order of the scale to persist.

Is intent to marry another Jew an isolated phenomenon or is it linked to other aspects of Jewish identity? An exercise in data mining produced an important finding on this key issue, one with important policy implications for both formal and informal Jewish education. There is a very high correlation between the patterns of responses on intermarriage and those on the importance of being Jewish in respondents' lives. Despite the fact that Chart 25 has a three-point scale of responses and Table 24 a four-point one, the row figures for many cells in the first two columns are almost identical. (e.g. For instance, 71% of day school students responded "very important" in Chart 25, and 69% of them responded the same way in Table 24.)

Table 24

in your life?

Jewish Experience in High School	Very important	Somewhat important	Not very important	Not at all important	Total %
1. Dayschool	69	24	5	3	100
2. Hebrew High school grad.	74	24	2	0	100
3. 4 years summer camp	66	29	2	3	100
4 Current youth group	66	29	5	0	100
5. Some youth group	48	39	11	2	100
6. No involvement	34	44	15	7	100
Total sample	57	33	8	2	100

These findings suggest that the item about the importance of being Jewish in a young person's life can be used as a surrogate for the intermarriage item. They also suggest that the intermarriage issue is now viewed as central to personal Jewish identity among the younger generation.

### Influences Beyond the Socialization Model

Though young people's pattern of Jewish socialization in the framework of the activities presented in our model is obviously influential, it cannot stand in isolation as a process. While teenagers have considerable discretion in their choice of behavior, friends and recreational activities, parents play a significant role in decision making, and either side can exercise the veto, certainly by age 18. The obvious case is attendance at day schools, private institutions that costs thousands of dollars annually. Parents have to be willing and able to pay and the student has to want, or at least agree, to attend. Four years of summer camp for a teen is also a hefty financial outlay. There are also financial barriers to entry, though lower, to the other avenues of participation such as Hebrew high school or youth groups. Moreover, at least before the teenagers get their driving licenses at 16 or 17 years of age, parents have to be willing to drive them to meetings and events, at least occasionally. How much these patterns involve parental "push" and teen "pull" is another issue with policy ramifications.

Table 25

Jewish Experience in High School	% Always celebrate Shabbat	% Parents attend synagogue monthly	% Parent volunteers in community
1. Dayschool	51	43	60
2. Hebrew High school grad.	36	34	65
3. 4 years summer camp	26	24	50
4. Current youth group	24	21	54
5. Some youth group	14	16	48
6. No involvement	12	9	33

The table on parental engagement in Jewish life shows a clear correlation with the pattern of teenage involvement. Jewishly engaged parents tend to produce Jewishly engaged teenagers. The parents of day school students are obviously more observant than the parents of the other groups. In fact Shabbat observance (“doing something special because it is the Jewish Sabbath”) is highly correlated with regular synagogue attendance. The third item, which relates to a parent volunteering for any Jewish organization, does not differentiate the teenage groups as well, but it shows that parents who send their children to Hebrew high school are the most communally minded. This is not to say that uninvolved children do not come from involved homes. However, in this generation there are particular factors that tend to work in the expected direction. (See Table 25.)

Our teenagers represent a conformist generation. Very few are really rebellious in either direction toward or away from Jewish life. They largely go along with their parents, who are mostly moderately affiliated Conservative Jews. Presumably they do so because they want to or because the material rewards for complying are great. The results presented relate to years when they live at home and are heavily dependent on their families. Still, these youngsters also follow their parents in synagogue attendance and Yom Kippur observance, areas probably more open to autonomous choice. They seem to follow their parents’ aspirations as well with regard to Jewish education. The critical question is: What will happen to this generation when they leave home for an independent life at college? How much will home background and parental influence stick?

Early childhood experiences are another potential source of influence that has to be factored into the equation. It is possible that the parents may have changed in either direction over the years. Although we do not have long-term information about the children’s earlier years, we do have the basis for a shorter-term comparison in the data from 1995. Could the responses of the bar/bat mitzvah students have predicted the situation four years later? The possibility of answering this question is the true value of a longitudinal study.

Table 26 provides useful data showing that we can obtain relatively accurate readings at ages 13-14, since many teens have already formed their opinions by that stage. The aspiration to continue their Jewish education is higher than what finally occurs, but certainly more of the top categories wanted more education than those who dropped out. Enjoyment of Jewish education was already greater among the day school students and is a predictor of some of the patterns among graduates of Hebrew high school. Again, more of the top two groups who carried on with formal education believed it was important to do so. There were still losses to formal education at the high school level that need not necessarily have occurred, but the overall trajectory was clear, and the scale of

later teenage Jewish involvement was already beginning to emerge in the immediate post-bar/bat mitzvah period. If we factor these results into those on parental role modeling, we can see that much of the process of decision-making was already underway or under negotiation in 1995.

Table 26

Statements About Jewish Education Made in 1995  
by Percentage

Jewish Experience in High School	Wished to continue Jewish education in high school 1995	Enjoyed Jewish education most of time 1995	Having Jewish education is most important 1995
1. Day school	91	71	80
2. Hebrew high grad.	91	52	75
3. 4 years summer camp	70	38	66
4. Current youth group	68	43	68
5. Some Youth group	67	36	67
6. No involvement	49	31	57

## Conclusions

The report card on the class of 5755 at the end of their high school years is quite positive from the perspective of Jewish continuity. The strong personal Jewish identities recorded after bar/bat mitzvah have largely been maintained. Certainly there is no sign of alienation, shame, or self-hatred; on the contrary, a lot of pride in and loyalty to Judaism and the Jewish people are in evidence. The myth of the bar/bat mitzvah as an exit from Jewish life, at least in today's Conservative synagogues, has also been debunked. Our evidence shows that over 90% continue to attend the synagogue on the High Holidays, 75% of youth have some connection with organized Jewish activities after bar/bat mitzvah and half have had an Israel experience. Moreover, around 55-60% are still involved in something Jewish into their senior year of high school. Half of this involvement is solely informal education—youth group and summer camp—but nearly a third of the cohort has multiple involvements, including several years of formal Jewish education in the high school years. This level of teenage connectedness would be amazing to a contemporary liberal Christian denomination. Conservative Judaism is very successful with its youth programming. The slope on nearly every item relating to Jewish identity shows that the inputs work cumulatively. The organizational challenge is to recruit the youngsters to become bar/bat mitzvah and to make sure that they move on into teenage programs.

The religious dimension of these teenagers' Jewishness is clear and consistent. A large portion would like to be more observant in the future. While it is hard to know how strong this intention is, it can serve as a wake up call for rabbis and synagogues to reach out more energetically to young people. On a different dimension, the teenagers' ethnic ties are less solid. While it is true that they feel a strong responsibility to help Jews in need around the world, at the same time, living in an open society, they have many friendships with non-Jews. According to our data, almost half of the sample has a majority of non-Jewish friends. The consequences of having such bonds will be evident as they choose their partners for dating and marriage.

The high school survey confirms what the 1995 Bar/Bat Mitzvah Survey found: there is a new generation within the Conservative movement manifesting a new way of being Jewish. Much is positive. They feel that being Jewish is very important in their lives. This strong sense of Jewishness was largely inculcated by Conservative Jewish institutions—synagogues, religious schools, camps and youth movements. These young people absorbed and adopted values such as Tzedakah and Ezrat Achim. However, they did not absorb other aspects of Jewish teaching such as Kashrut observance.

The positive bar/bat mitzvah experiences we recorded in 1995 had echo effects in later years. This means that quality Jewish education in the primary grade years, especially enjoyable Jewish education, is essential and must continue. It requires proper attention and serious investment. The surprisingly positive results of four years of attendance at the supplementary Hebrew high school are obviously the most striking finding. However, it is not a one-dimensional educational experience. Graduation from Hebrew high school is also associated in this population with youth movement membership, visits to Israel, some summer camp and involved parents. "The more the more" syndrome seems at play here. Multiple Jewish connections work best.

Day school proponents may well be disappointed with these findings. The gap between these students and the rest is perhaps not as wide as expected or hoped for, though it must be remembered that the sample is drawn from affiliated Conservative households, not average American Jews. In addition, the day school population is the smallest group of the six in terms of

## Appendix:

### The Research Design

#### Phase I - The Bar/Bat Mitzvah Study 1995

A telephone survey of Conservative Jews was carried out in the fall of 1995. It consisted of two interviews per household, one with a child and the other with a parent. Each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes. In total, 1,466 teenagers and 1,412 parents from across the U.S. and Canada participated in the study (See Keysar & Kosmin, 1997).

The sampling procedure was multi-staged. It was drawn from the entire list of constituents of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. First, a stratified sample of synagogues was drawn by synagogue size. Second, the entire bar/bat mitzvah class of 5755 (September 1994-September 1995) of each sampled synagogue was contacted. In total, 115 synagogues agreed to participate and provided a list of their bar/bat mitzvah families. The bar/bat mitzvah project was part of a larger 1995 study of the Conservative movement. The other parts were surveys of congregational policies and programs and members of Conservative synagogues (Wertheimer, 2000).

The parents of b'nai/b'not mitzvah were first informed by mail of plans to interview their children. Then telephone interviewers called to obtain parental permission. After obtaining parental consent, an interview was scheduled with the bar or bat mitzvah child. Following this, an interview was also conducted with one parent. The child was interviewed prior to the parent, in order to minimize parents' influence on their children's answers. Among the parents who were successfully contacted, 19% refused to cooperate. In only a handful of cases (1%), did the teenagers refuse to cooperate after their parents had agreed to their participation.

#### Phase II - The High School Survey 1999

In the summer and fall of 1999-2000 the young Jews who had participated in the 1995 Bar/Bat Mitzvah Survey were contacted by mail and were informed of the High School Survey. Then they were re-interviewed by phone. Most of the students were entering their senior year in high school. A small number were entering either their junior year or starting college.

The survey instrument was largely a replica of the 1995 questionnaire in order to ensure comparability, track students' answers and identify changes in attitudes. We devised a number of new questions that were appropriate for high school seniors, such as college choices, and a few geared toward college students, such as plans for courses of study.

The data collection was done in waves.<sup>1</sup> We began in July 1999 by contacting the high school graduates in our sample, about 260 students, hoping to reach them before they left home to start college. The second wave of telephone interviews, of 1,200 current seniors and juniors in high school, started in early October. The fieldwork was eventually completed at the end of March 2000.

By the end of the second phase of fieldwork, we had re-interviewed 1,295 teenagers; 89% of the 1995 respondents. Only 82 teenagers, or 6% of those who responded in 1995 refused to participate in the 1999 survey. In addition, we were not successful in locating and re-contacting 78 respondents (about 5%). This is a very high level of cooperation and response by teenagers to a survey that offered no incentives for participation.

numbers and a small sub-sample in survey terms, so we must be cautious in jumping to general conclusions. It must also be borne in mind that these are Conservative, not Orthodox, day school students. They and their parents have different expectations and lifestyles from those of the yeshiva population. These teens are also only a small minority among their Conservative peers, and they may find it difficult not to be influenced by the general peer group culture. In other words, there is a sociological regression to the mean. Nevertheless we had noted in 1995 that the gap between day school students and the others was not as wide as expected at ages 13-14. At that time we contended that “these are early days in the development of this cohort of adolescents and that time is needed for the true cumulative impact to emerge.” (Kosmin, 2000, p. 259) This did not happen, which suggests that more things nowadays are fixed at age 13 than we had supposed.

The proponents of informal education may also be disappointed by the results, but again they should be aware of the above caveats. Regular summer camping, presumably with attendance at youth groups, has less impact than formal education. Such findings reveal the potential value of a longitudinal study that follows the same young people over the years. This report has sifted through data at different levels of analysis and from different angles, yet the cumulative evidence points strongly in certain directions. It is an evidence-based evaluation study of outcomes that allows us to understand the mechanics and dynamics of social processes. We can now better understand how things work during the high school years and what happens to groups choosing particular tracks. The next intriguing chapter in this saga will examine the impact of the college years on the same young people.

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## Symposium

### Encouraging Data About Conservative Jewish Teens

*Alan Silverstein*

Organizers of certain "synagogue transformation" efforts currently proclaim the bankruptcy of non-Orthodox Judaism. At the conference launching the STAR (Synagogue Transformation and Renewal) Initiative, philanthropist Michael Steinhardt labeled the Conservative and Reform movements as "accidents of history," institutions that soon will fade from the Jewish scene. Conference keynoter Rabbi Sid Schwartz attacked the spiritual merit of these mainstream congregations, asserting that "Jews...looking for God...would have to go elsewhere." (Schwartz 2000, p. 290) Steinhardt's colleague, Edgar Bronfman, president of the World Jewish Congress, carried this assault into synagogue education, positing "What about the Sunday schools and after school learning that goes on? I say abolish them [i.e., they are failures]." The *coup de grace* in the assault on the vitality of non-Orthodox synagogue life was provided by the Samuel Bronfman Foundation's chief executive, Rabbi Richard Marker. Rabbi Marker alleged that "rarely can an individual synagogue have an impact on teens...therefore [congregations] should divest [themselves of this important function]." (Marker, 1999)

The Ratner Center's comprehensive 1995-96 and 1999 surveys of Conservative synagogues and individual Conservative teens offer opportunities to test these portents of doom. This is particularly important given that 47% of affiliated American Jews belong to Conservative congregations, and that post-denominationalists portray Conservative and Reform Jews as an undifferentiated mass. The Ratner data indicate that, quite the contrary, Conservative Judaism is holding its own as a vital center of American Judaism. During the preceding ten years, for example, almost 90% of Conservative synagogues remained at a similar size or grew. Only 11% (the smallest, most isolated congregations) declined. Moreover, whereas a generation ago, Conservative congregants often were identified negatively, as "not Reform and not Orthodox," widespread affirmative Conservative identity is now evident. The 1995-96 Ratner study concluded that "most members of Conservative synagogues...are genuinely attracted to Conservatism; they unabashedly reject Orthodoxy and Reform; and, as a group, they demonstrate a clear affinity for several elements of the Conservative movement's ideology."

Furthermore, it has been assumed that most families in Conservative synagogues affiliate solely during the required years (ages 8-13) of their children's religious school education, disaffiliating after b'nai mitzvah milestones. But at the lower end of the spectrum, in recent years, synagogue nursery schools have accelerated the entry point into membership ranks, welcoming parents of toddlers. And the 1999 Ratner survey of adolescents reveals another aspect of this trend toward extended membership, noting that 93% of households remained members four years after their child's bar or bat mitzvah. Indeed, many of these parents exhibited few signs of disengagement. 26% of them, for example, continued to do volunteer work on behalf of their congregations. Plus, the 1995-96 Ratner data noted that more than half of those in the 35-50 age bracket—comprising most parents of high school students—attended services at least once a month, a level exceeding the rate of attendance by older members. Accordingly, the research team points out that while "there is a widespread perception in the Jewish community of North America that with the passage of generations, the quality of Jewish life necessarily diminishes; and younger Jews are apt to have less of a Jewish education and commitment than their elders among members of Conservative synagogues, generally the opposite is true."

Optimism extends to the 1999 answers given by the high school seniors themselves. Whereas skeptics might assume that the “party” (band, dancing, lavish food) has become the main focus of b’nai mitzvah, adolescents demur. Four years later, 78% of these teens regarded the ceremony and/or the training as having been the “most memorable” aspect of the overall experience. Similarly, while complaints abound about the extra hours required for bar and bat mitzvah preparation, with hindsight, 97% of the young adults surveyed viewed that training as “somewhat” or “mostly” positive.” Also noteworthy, given a popular assumption that Conservative youth hate Hebrew school, 92% of these nearly 1,300 subjects “enjoyed” their Jewish education “some” or “most” of the time. Even more impressively, 95% retroactively acknowledged that “having a good Jewish education” was “somewhat” to “very important” to their current “sense of Jewishness.”

Also encouraging is the attitude of these graduating high school seniors with regard to interfaith marriages. When asked, “How important is it for you to marry somebody Jewish?” 55% of respondents indicated “very important,” and 31% responded “somewhat important.” Only 13% considered this crucial factor in Jewish continuity to be “not at all important.” In evaluating the 13% figure, readers should be aware that the Ratner data indicate that at least 6% of the households in Conservative congregations are intermarried homes; children in these families are unlikely to oppose the type of marriage created by their own parents. The overwhelming majority of adolescents in Conservative congregations, products of in-married households, aspire to an endogamous status in their future.

Importantly, this personal desire for in-marriage is distinct from the tolerance exhibited by these youngsters toward out-marriage by others. Just four years earlier, 65% of them had answered affirmatively to the question: “Do you think it is okay for Jews to marry people of other religions?” When it comes to shaping their own lives, however, universalism was replaced by a degree of desire for Jewish continuity similar to that expressed by their parents. Indeed, 90% of the mothers and fathers approved of the assertion that ideally “a Jew should marry someone who is also Jewish.” At the time of the 1995-96 interviews, an apparent chasm between student (35% pro in-marriage) and parental attitudes (90%) appeared “not [to] bode well for the Jewish future.” Yet in actuality, what occurred were two divergent considerations. Conservative Jewish teens do accept societal liberalism toward rampant intermarriage in society-at-large, yet they still desire to find Jewish spouses.

This nuanced view clearly represents one of the many centrist positions espoused by Conservative Jewish teens. Time and again, their profile is located somewhere between the views of their Reform and Orthodox counterparts. For example, a remarkably high (56%) number of Conservative adolescents have visited Israel, close to the still larger Orthodox numbers, yet exceeding what one might expect among Temple youth. In their feelings about their own levels of religious observance, they also seem to fall into the middle ground, considering themselves not observant (like Reform youth) but aspiring to be more “more religious” (40%) or “much more religious” (3%) in the future (like the Orthodox). Also symbolic of being “Jews in the center,” is the finding that 50% of Conservative teens continued their formal Jewish education during their high school years (somewhere in the middle between near universal Orthodox study and what we can assume is a rate of less the 50% in the Reform movements). Similarly centrist were the impressive indications that 67% of these young people participated in a Jewish youth group during their teenage years, 48% attended at least one year of Jewish summer camp, and 61% had volunteered for Jewish community service.

All of these contact hours yielded a strong sense of Jewish identification: 97% regarded “being Jewish” as either “somewhat” or “very” important; 87% had never felt “embarrassment about being Jewish”; 97% considered being “loyal to your Jewish heritage” as either “somewhat” or

“very” important; 91% viewed Israel as “somewhat” or “very” important. Plus, nearly, 70% disagreed when confronted with the statement: “I don’t really think of myself as a Conservative Jew.” Thus, the gloom cast by the STAR luminaries and other post-denominationalists exhibits two weaknesses. First, they ignore the multitude of local success stories within Conservative synagogues, instead advocating the alternative and the exotic as replacements for mainstream Judaism. Second, they trivialize the important mission of creating passionate, ideologically committed Conservative Jews who can serve as the vital centrist address for American Jewish young adults. The 1995-96 data caused Chancellor Ismar Schorsch to rejoice that “the center [meaning the Conservative Movement in American Judaism] is not only holding, but is strengthening.” The 1999 findings with respect to Conservative Judaism’s next generation ought to elicit similar enthusiasm from the movement’s leadership.

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## **Jewish Youth: At Best, the Cup is “Half Full”**

*Leonard Saxe*

Young people are now at the center of attention in the Jewish community. They are the beneficiaries of new programs as well as the focus of intense research scrutiny, both stimulated by the distressing findings on intermarriage in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS). Programmatically, initiatives such as Birthright Israel, designed to give every young Jew an opportunity to explore Israel, illustrate the way in which engagement of youth has been pushed to the top of the communal agenda. On the research front, Kosmin and Keysar’s groundbreaking initial study of bnai mitzvah is one of several research projects that have provided important empirical facts about the nature of Jewish identity development and the success of efforts to engage Jewish youth. Kosmin and Keysar’s follow-up of their b’nai mitzvah four years later is an important addition to this body of knowledge. We now have a much better understanding of whether Conservative Jews continue to be engaged after the glow of their becoming b’nai mitzvah wears off and as the direct influence of their parents wanes.

By returning four years later to the b’nai mitzvah class of 5755, the follow-up study provides a wealth of data about the development of Jewish identity and engagement. Kosmin and Keysar’s findings indicate that after b’nai mitzvah, those educated in the Conservative movement continue substantial engagement in the Jewish community, have tremendous pride in being Jewish and maintain respect for religious traditions. Their key finding is that the more adolescents are engaged in Jewish institutions – day schools, high school programs, youth groups – the more positive their attitudes are and the more their behavior reflects engagement in Judaism. Kosmin and Keysar conclude on an extremely positive, even buoyant, note. By comparison to engagement among non-Jewish youth, they conclude, the level of Jewish connectedness among their interviewees is “amazing.”

“Amazing,” perhaps, given the depressive flavor of some of the factoids reported in the last several years about Jewish continuity. But it may be premature to celebrate Kosmin and Keysar’s

findings, for it requires a leap of faith to interpret them so positively. Despite the quality of the data and the value of a longitudinal comparison, we cannot clearly conclude that Conservative institutions are successful in engaging modern youth. The fact is that, while many report high levels of engagement, the majority do not. Viewing the “cup as half empty,” the data show a decrement in engagement of Jewish youth over time. Although the curve is not quite as steep as some have feared, there is drop-off nonetheless. We should, perhaps, celebrate the fact that b’nai mitzvah do not walk off the *bimah* and into oblivion. But it is not clear that we have persuaded the majority of these youth to be responsible adult members of the Jewish community.

*Institutions.* Kosmin and Keysar’s key analyses are based on a scale of Jewish engagement that goes from enrollment in a Jewish day school to “no Jewish involvements.” In all, the scale has six categories. The scale is treated as an independent variable, on the assumption that involvement in a particular type of formal or informal education leads to Jewish identity and religious outcomes. But it is also the case that a teenager’s decision to participate in one or more of these activities is an outcome — an evaluation of sorts of their Jewish education, as well as their home environment.

When participation is treated as an outcome, the findings seem much less impressive and the data fit what some call the “rule of thirds” (1/3 of the patients get better, 1/3 don’t change, 1/3 get worse). If the six categories are collapsed into three: formal Jewish education (day school, Hebrew high school), informal education (i.e. summer camp, a youth group), little/no engagement (some youth group, no Jewish involvements)—one gets three roughly equal groups (with a bulge at the bottom level). That 32% graduated from day schools or Jewish high school programs is, undoubtedly, positive. But, we should be equally distressed that 40% have very little connection.

To be sure, it is a positive sign that so many of the b’nai mitzvah maintain high levels of identification. The number of teenagers who view their Jewish education positively, continue to attend synagogue on a regular basis and see their Jewish identity as very important is impressive. Yet the data make clear that there are important differences among the teenagers. Thus, for example, on attitudinal measures such as the importance of marrying a Jew, only 30% of the group with minimal engagement at the end of high school see in-marriage as important, compared to more than 70% of the highly engaged. Kosmin and Keysar’s conclusion that the “report card” on the class of 5755 “is quite positive from the perspective of Jewish continuity” needs to be tempered by recognition of the differences among these groups.

*Conservative youth in perspective.* Kosmin and Keysar’s data also need to be tempered by comparison with the overall profile of Jewish youth. Our own data (see Saxe et al., 2000a) from 1,500 teenagers who became b’nai mitzvah in non-Orthodox congregations, and their parents, show a similar pattern. There are high levels of pride in being Jewish, but there is also considerable drop-off in Jewish engagement over time, with just over 50% of the teenagers being involved by the time they are high school seniors. Given that only two-thirds of those whose families identify as Jewish have their children become b’nai mitzvah, the consequences of this drop-off should be clear. If the goal is continuity, then the steady “loss” of children, first at age 13, and then as they progress developmentally, should be a warning sign.

Kosmin and Keysar’s follow-up suggests, as did the original study, that the Conservative movement’s b’nai mitzvah were, in general, very satisfied with their education. In contrast, our data suggest substantial dissatisfaction with Jewish education, both as it is experienced and as teenagers recollect their pre-adolescence. In the metaphor of physical fitness, our respondents experienced Jewish education like intermittent exercise — they felt the pain of getting into shape, but never the athlete’s pleasure of accomplishment. Becoming a bar/bat mitzvah was a checkmark on the pathway to accomplishment. As many of them moved toward adulthood, the drive to make it in secular society pushed aside any latent interest of their own or any parental nudging to maintain a tie to the Jewish community.

Bethamie Horowitz in her study “Connections and Journeys,” (2000), makes clear that it does not make sense to think of Jewish identity development as a linear process. Regardless of level of engagement, involvement may wax and wane. But it also seems clear that one’s starting point, and one’s level of knowledge about Judaism, importantly influence the trajectory of identity development. Thus, adolescents who leave home for college with only rudimentary Jewish knowledge may not have the skill or the motivation to maintain engagement with the Jewish community. They would seem at greatest risk for losing their connection and the external forces are no longer present that might bring them back into the community. Positive early Jewish educational experiences may be a necessary condition for developing strong Jewish identity, but they are not sufficient to develop lifelong Jews.

The “take-away” from Kosmin and Keysar’s work should be that we need to redouble our efforts to engage all of those in our community. It is clear from the results of programs such as Birthright Israel (Saxe et al., 2000b) that young Jews are ready to be taken seriously as learners. More importantly, however, what these efforts demonstrate is that young Jews yearn to be part of a community. Our efforts to engage youth have focused on formal education. Young people, however, are not simply vessels to be filled with Jewish content. Being Jewish is about being part of *Klal Yisrael* and we need to shift paradigms and devise ways to make students a part of the community.

The cup is being described here as “half empty,” whereas Kosmin and Keysar optimistically conclude that it is more than “half full.” But the issue is not semantic. The question is whether the Conservative movement, along with the other streams of Judaism, is doing all it can to socialize the next generation into the Jewish community. Our tradition makes us hopeful, but the data no matter how positive should not make us complacent.

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### **Questions Beget Questions: A Response to Kosmin & Keysar’s “Four Up”— The High School Years, 1995-1999”**

*Carol K. Ingall*

The “Four Up” study evokes recollections of other longitudinal studies, like what happened to a group of eleven-year olds in England or the cardiac histories of residents of Framingham, Massachusetts. It suggests that researchers and policy makers will acquire a rich database for better understanding Jewish education and the identity development of Jewish teenagers. I have some reservations as to whether those hopes can be realized. However, what “Four Up” certainly does do is dispel a serious case of ephibophobia.

Ephibophobia is a word I have just recently learned: it means fear and loathing of teenagers. It is useful to have a word that captures this aspect of our *zeitgeist*. I have watched the body language of adults on a bus or train when a group of teenagers (particularly minority youth) board. I have also read the reviews of those who have seen (or not seen but still reviewed) films like *Kids* or *Natural Born Killers*. In the shadow of Columbine High School, parents want the reassurance that their teenagers are just like them.

“Four Up” certainly does provide that reassurance. The authors tell us that “there is no trend towards alienation from most things Jewish during these years;...they often seem to mirror their parents’ patterns of Jewish behaviors.” Like their parents, the majority of the teens in the study seem to think Israel is important, embrace volunteering and giving Tzedakah, don’t observe Kashrut or keep Shabbat, and have limited Jewish educations. For those of us engaged in teacher education and school reform, this is not all good news.

Many of the authors’ findings pique my curiosity. Why do so many of the teenagers remember their bar or bat mitzvah training so fondly? Was it the relationship they forged with the hazzan? Their teacher? The rabbi? My synagogue utilizes Torah Tutors, 15-18-year-olds who have been trained to work closely with 12-13-year-olds, serving as coaches and powerful role models. I would imagine that this interaction is bound to enhance the learning experience. The methodology of this study, consisting of fifteen-minute survey questions, doesn’t lend itself to exploration of these rich areas of inquiry. Kosmin and Keysar can inform us as to what schools these teenagers attend, the influence of variables of geography or gender, whether teenagers continue their formal Jewish education or attend Jewish camps beyond bar or bat mitzvah age. This provides extremely important data, significant because of the extraordinarily high percentage of teenagers who were available to be reinterviewed. But for those of us interested in how teenagers understand their Jewish lives, our questions remain unanswered.

Putting my interest in personal meaning-making aside, I have some concerns about the methodological design of the study. What precautions were taken to prevent the interviewees from trying to please those who were asking the questions? (I find it difficult to believe that 49% remember their bar or bat mitzvah ceremony most, as opposed to the measly 6% who found their party most memorable.) Do young teenagers, or older ones for that matter, understand the nuances behind descriptors like “religious,” “cultural,” and “ethnic groups” in a quantitative study? (My guess is that they don’t, given the significant variation in the way they answered these questions.) Then too, I am unsure of what conclusions to draw from data gathered from groups that appear to lack consistency. The report compared those “who had attended a Jewish day school during their high school years” (for a semester? a year?) with those “who had graduated from Hebrew high school.” Lumping together Hebrew high school graduates presents its own set of problems. There are students who graduate from K-8 day schools who go on to community-based high school programs which offer five to six hours of Jewish education weekly. That category may also include teenagers who are graduates of a four hours per week synagogue school, or have never attended religious school, but who joined a community high school which meets for two hours weekly.

As a teacher, educator and researcher in Jewish education, I find many opportunities for further inquiry in Kosmin and Keysar’s study. The muddled theology displayed by the respondents seems to imply that our Conservative Jewish schools are still relying on Orthodox teachers. Who is teaching our children? The findings on camping are striking. If camps are so successful in molding Conservative Jews, which I do not doubt in the least, why are so many older Jewish teens not attending them? (My hypothesis is that attending camp, for various socio-economic reasons, like the emergence of two-career families, has become a rite of passage for increasingly younger children. By the time young people could most benefit from the experience, they are already bored by it.)

As the director of the JTS day school education program, I am particularly interested in the questions raised about Conservative Jewish teenagers and day high schools. Conservative Jewish parents who have rallied around kindergarten-Grade 8 day schools have been very reluctant to send their children to Jewish day high schools (Cohen, 1992). To date, there are only four Conservative Jewish day high schools in the United States, with two more due to open in Fall, 2001. What does it mean for the movement when the bulk of Conservative Jewish teenagers are in Orthodox schools? What does it mean for them to attend transdenominational community day high schools? Kosmin and Keysar present contradictory portrayals of this group of day school attending teenagers. They have more Jewish friends, but are less connected to Conservative Judaism than their peers in Hebrew high schools, camps, or youth groups. They observe Shabbat more frequently, but go to synagogue less than their peers in Hebrew high schools. The authors tell us that day school education “appears uniquely more likely to strengthen Orthodox sentiment and to create the most distance from Reform,” and yet only 51% of this day school cohort feel that belief in God is very important. It is unclear to me whether these paradoxes can be explained by the limits of the methodology or are there other factors at work here? Under any circumstances, this study will mute the triumphalist voices within the day school community.

Kosmin and Keysar suggest that despite the loud chorus of day school boosters, day schools are not the magic bullet that will save the American Jewish community from oblivion. The “Four-Up” study also reinforces some of the findings suggested by Schiff and Schneider (1994). As the ranks of day school alumni include graduates of Conservative day schools, the classic manifestations of Jewish identity (Kashrut and Shabbat observance) decrease. In their study, the level of observance of the younger cohort of 20-29 year-olds is significantly lower than that of the 30-39 year-olds, a sample much more likely to be Orthodox.

Steven M. Cohen’s felicitous bus analogy is reinforced by this study. There are multiple entry points into Jewish literacy, practice, and identity. Our task is to provide enough buses and enough routes to pick up these potential riders. But while we await their next chapter, about the college years, Kosmin and Keysar have certainly provided us with a vast array of research opportunities, if not the kind of data promised by their title.

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## The Bar/Bat Mitzvah Class of 5755-Is This Generation Different?

*Jack Wertheimer*

It is hardly surprising that contributors to this symposium draw divergent conclusions from the Kosmin/Keysar study, for the data lend themselves to conflicting interpretations. The authors generally stress the positive: a large majority of young people remained engaged in Jewish life after their bar or bat mitzvah; high percentages identified strongly with Judaism and the Jewish people; and many aspired to even more intensive Jewish involvements in the future. Even the staggeringly high rate of response (89% of those who had participated in the 1995/96 survey agreed to be re-interviewed!), provides evidence that these young people care enough about Jewish matters to spend some time reflecting on their lives as Jews.

Several contributors to this symposium have expressed reservations about the upbeat nature of the report, claiming that the teenagers themselves seem suspiciously positive about their Jewishness. Are they responding truthfully or trying too hard to give what they imagine to be the “correct” responses? To some, the analysis also seems too upbeat and does not accord with other studies of Jewish adolescents. Such skepticism is healthy and understandable especially given the plethora of bad news about Jewish identification that has emanated from other recent studies.

Subsequent phases of this longitudinal study will tell us much about the Jewish commitments of these young people as they become adults and live independently, but in the meantime, we need to evaluate the findings of this study. To begin with, the news is hardly uniformly rosy. Let us recall that over a quarter of these teenagers had no exposure whatsoever to programs of formal or informal Jewish education after celebrating their bar or bat mitzvah; for an additional 16%, their only involvement was through episodic contact with a Jewish youth group. In other words, two out of every five of these youngsters had no ongoing engagement with Jewish education during their high school years. Moreover, only a third enrolled in programs of formal Jewish education through high school.

On questions of religious observance and belief, the picture is also mixed. Sixty percent did not attend synagogue even once a month; 15 % did not fast on Yom Kippur; and only 31 % kept kosher outside the home (a figure inflated by much higher rates of observance among day school and Hebrew high school graduates). Moreover, on quite a few attitudinal questions, these young people responded less positively than they had four years earlier.

Viewed within a comparative framework, however, these findings take on still a different coloration. The 40% of the sample who claimed to attend synagogue once a month almost precisely matches the percentage of adult members of Conservative synagogues who claimed to attend with the same frequency (Cohen, 2000, p. 55); compared to all U.S. Jews, these youngsters attended with far greater regularity. (Merely 10% of American Jews claim they attend about once a month.) (Cohen, 1998, p. 17) The same is true about some observances, such as the high level of fasting on Yom Kippur. It is also noteworthy that these young people are more likely than the general adult Jewish population to claim that they “relate more easily to Jews than to non-Jews” and to feel strongly connected to Israel (Cohen, 1998, pp. 20, 25).

All this points up the unusual qualities of the bar/bat mitzvah class of 5755. Let us recall that this class represents a select population. First, all of these teens celebrated their bar or bat mitzvah in a synagogue; in order to do so, they had to have been enrolled in a program of Jewish education, usually consisting of 5-6 hours per week for several years. This sample, in short, is not

representative of American Jewish teens overall, but of the population of bar/bat mitzvah celebrants produced by Conservative congregations.

These young people are privileged in other ways too. First, they come from unusually intact Jewish families. A relatively small percentage of these teens have parents who divorced: 87% of the 17-18 year-olds lived with both parents; only 12% lived with a single parent. The sample maintains the exact same geographic distribution as four years ago: although some had moved, the numbers are small, and even those who did relocate generally did not move far. Continuity is also evident in the high rate of continuing family affiliation with a synagogue: four years after marking their child's bar or bat mitzvah, 93% of the parents were still members of a synagogue. To be sure, these families may have maintained their membership in preparation for the bar or bat mitzvah of a younger child, but at least for the class of 5755, there was a great deal of continuity.

The larger environment also helped. These young people came of age during a time of prosperity, and their teen years especially coincided with a period of sustained economic growth. The boom years of the mid and late 1990s presumably provided their parents with disposable income which they were willing to invest in programs of Jewish education.

During this period, America also experienced a religious revival of sorts. The impact of the *zeitgeist*, with its openness to spiritual exploration and God-talk, is reflected both in the ease with which these teens responded to questions about their beliefs and in their generally positive responses. It also accounts for the gap between the teens and their parents, with the latter more likely to identify as Jewish by ethnicity, while the younger generation emphasize the religious dimension of their Jewishness. Similarly, the new openness to religion may account for some of the surprising answers offered by the older teens about their religious observance: 22 % claimed that they were more observant than when they were 13 years old, while a larger population (36%) claimed to have moved away from religious observance. The bipolar movement is nonetheless noteworthy. It is also remarkable that 43% of these youngsters expressed the wish to be more religiously observant in the future.

As we evaluate the implications of these findings, we should not limit our analysis to the influence of the larger American environment. This cohort of teens came of age during an unusual period in the life of the American Jewish community. During the decade of the 1990s, American Jewish communities rededicated themselves to strengthening the range of Jewish educational opportunities, investing large sums in programs of formal and informal Jewish education. In quite a few communities, the primary recipients of new support were precisely the programs in which many of these teens enrolled: day high schools, supplementary high schools, summer camps and youth groups. The Kosmin/Keysar study may provide the first evidence of the tangible gains that have come from those investments. And if that is so, the good news about the bar and bat mitzvah class of 5755 may augur well for the larger Jewish community as well.

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## Questions for Policy Discussion

1. During the past decade or two, a variety of lobbies within the American Jewish community have pressed for increased investment in programs of Jewish education. This study confirms the value of such programs in enhancing the human and social capital of the coming generation. Further, it demonstrates that the teen years need not be a time of alienation and aloofness from Jewish life. The policy question raised by the study concerns the recruitment of larger numbers of Jewish teens into the kinds of formal and informal education programs that will shape them as contributors to Jewish communal life. Some communities are experimenting with new types of funds to expand youth work; others with scholarship funds for summer camping; and still others are investing directly in schools. Still, only small minorities of Jewish teens are touched by these types of programs; youth groups and summer camps attract under 10% of eligible teens. A concerted effort needs to be launched to reverse the culture of “dropping out” in the post-bar and bat mitzvah years. By demonstrating that young people will identify positively if properly nurtured, the teen study should encourage even greater efforts at improving and expanding programs for this age group.
2. This study confirms the positive impact of four years of supplementary religious schooling at the high school level. Teens who graduated from such programs tended to score high on many measures of Jewish involvement and belief. Given these successes, how can congregations and the Jewish community at large encourage more young people to attend such schools? We know that some of these schools provide the reward of a trip to Israel as an inducement. Serious thought must be given to other types of programming that would enrich the offerings of supplementary high schools.
3. To what extent is the success of supplementary high school attributable to the collaborative nature of many programs? It would be useful to learn how many congregations sponsor their own programs and how many band together with neighboring congregations. A research project comparing schools could provide insight into which schools succeed best and why.
4. The study illustrates just how much young people are shaped in the years leading up to their bar or bat mitzvah. After comparing responses to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Survey with actual patterns of teen behavior, the authors conclude that they could have predicted which 13-year-olds would continue to be actively engaged with Jewish life four years later. Those who wished to continue their Jewish education were most likely to do so, as were those who claimed they enjoyed their pre-bar/bat mitzvah Jewish education. In the words of the authors, “more things nowadays are fixed at age 13 than we had supposed.” What can educational institutions do to strengthen the positive orientation of young people before age 13?
5. We need to learn more about Conservative youngsters who attend day high schools. This segment of the teen sample scored high on most measures, but a small sector of this population offered consistently negative responses. How are we to understand this subgroup? It is possible that some are in rebellion; that after 12 or more years of intensive Jewish education, they have had enough. Alternatively, it may be that some Conservative youth who study in day schools under Orthodox auspices are caught in a difficult bind in which their ideological and institutional allegiances are frequently tested (Diamond, 2000). (We can assume most of the day school students in this sub-population attended Orthodox schools because there are few non-Orthodox day high schools.) Given the large investment required of parents, schools and communities, the day school experience should not be counter productive.

6. Several of the findings beg for follow-up research. How are we to understand, for example, the expressed wish of 43% of the sample to be more religiously observant in the future? Is this merely a pious wish or is there some substance behind it? And if it is the latter, what are the impediments? The Conservative movement has long struggled to nurture religious practice and ritual observance. It cannot afford to ignore the openness of these young people to heightened religiosity; indeed, it should build upon this positive orientation. Similarly, the strong sense of connection to fellow Jews evinced by this teen population should be a source of celebration and also reflection within the Conservative movement. When asked about feeling a “responsibility to help Jews in need around the world,” just about a quarter agreed “strongly” and 63% “agreed.” By comparison, in a national sample of adults, merely 9 % agreed “strongly” and 38% “agreed;” 44% disagreed (Cohen, 1998). The good news here warrants further analysis. How deep do these beliefs run? And how do we account for such positive feelings of connection to Jewish life? We need to know whether these responses stem primarily from the curriculum of schools, from the home environments of these young people, or from both, if we wish to inculcate positive attitudes in still more teens.

7. The decline in summer camping over the high school years, especially at Camp Ramah, requires attention. Precisely during the teen years, when peer groups play so influential a role, young people need to be in strong Jewish environments. We should learn more about where Jewish teens spend their summers and why they do not participate in camps at higher rates. Then we need to re-think the types of programs that can be developed so as to engage young people in intensive Jewish living during summer vacations.

8. As the Jewish community continues to wrestle with high rates of intermarriage, we would do well to pay attention to what these teens are saying about the subject. It is worth noting, for example, that youngsters exposed to the most intensive forms of Jewish education are most committed to endogamy. Equally important is the observation of Kosmin/Keysar about the strong correlation between attitudes toward marrying a Jew and the importance these young people ascribe to being Jewish: those who regard one as “very important” or “somewhat important” are likely to answer the same way about the other (Chart 25 and Table 24). There is much to be learned here by educators about the way teens approach these issues and how to win their allegiance.

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