



# How Can We Create and Support an Engaging, Appealing, Inclusive Jewish Community?

Jewish Community Foundation Donor Discussion:  
December 4, 2013

## Background

The recently released [Pew Research Center's Religion and Public Life Project Study "A Portrait of Jewish Americans"](#) has received much attention. A key aim of the survey was to explore Jewish identity in America and the report examines different ways in which people identify as Jewish, what they consider essential to being Jewish, how they are raising their children, whom they are marrying, their religious beliefs and practices, and their social and political views.

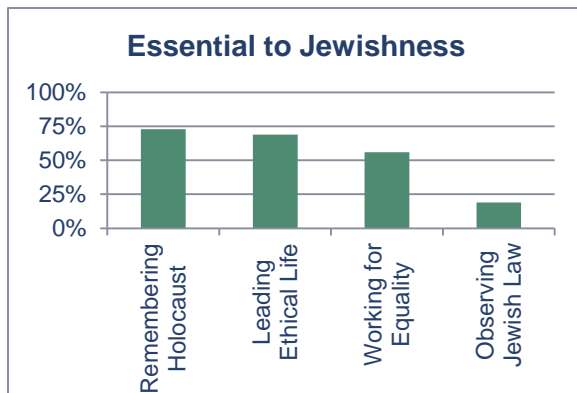


Multigenerational Panelists

Recently, the Jewish Community Foundation partnered with San Diego alumni of the Wexner Leadership Program to convene a panel of its donors representing a spectrum of ages and denominations. Each responded candidly with personal reflections to the Pew findings and also discussed strategies for engagement and inclusivity. Participants included Karen Aron, Orin Green, Shana Hazan, Becky Newman, Ed Samiljan, and Matthew Valji. We are grateful for their honest and thoughtful feedback. The gathering took place at the North County Jewish Hub, a Leichtag Foundation Initiative, which offered a compelling setting for creative thinking.

## Participant Questions & Response Highlights

- Jewish Identification** The percentage of adults who say they are Jewish when asked about their religion (a group the survey calls "Jews by religion") has declined by about half since the late 1950s and currently is a little less than 2%. Meanwhile, the number of Americans with direct Jewish ancestry or upbringing who consider themselves Jewish



yet describe themselves as atheist, agnostic or having no particular religion appears to be rising and is now about 0.5% of the U.S. adult population. Just 7% of Jews in the "Greatest Generation" are Jews of no religion, while 32% of Jews in the youngest generation identify as Jewish on the basis of ancestry, ethnicity and culture (rather than religion).

In the Pew study, large majorities of U.S. Jews say that remembering the Holocaust (73%) and

leading an ethical life (69%) are essential to their sense of Jewishness. More than half (56%) say that working for justice and equality is essential to being Jewish. Observing Jewish law ranks lower; just 19% say it is essential to what it means to be Jewish (with 79% of Orthodox Jews a major exception).

*Participants were asked to share their personal reflections on how they identify Jewishly — by religion? By ancestry, ethnicity, culture? All of the above?*

*Panelists were also asked to explain what makes them feel most connected to the Jewish people.*

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- While all of the participants feel that being Jewish is a central part of their identities, their responses spanned the spectrum of religion, ancestry, ethnicity, and culture and also included an emotional attachment to Israel, civic and social justice activities, ethics, values and friendships.



- Several speakers said that how they have identified Jewishly has changed over their lives, depending upon their personal priorities, where they happened to be living, and the influences of family, education, peers, and spouses.
- Panelists concurred that it was key to expose children to positive, immersive Jewish experiences at a young age so that they could develop their Jewish identities early and would have a basic foundation of Jewish values, culture and religious understanding. Jewish camp, youth groups and day schools were identified as important opportunities for this exposure, as were Shabbat and at-home Jewish practices.

**2. *Interfaith Families*** One of the most interesting study findings is that half of Millennials (individuals reaching adulthood around the year 2000) who identify as Jews come from interfaith families.

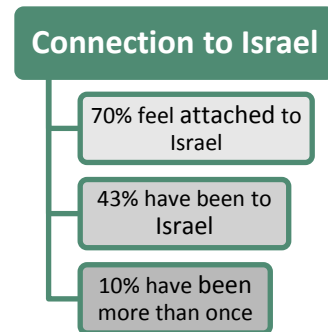
*Participants shared their personal experiences with this topic and reactions.*

*They were asked to identify opportunities to reach out to this cohort.*

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- For the most part, participants agreed that, while interfaith marriage is a reality, it is vitally important to include and welcome interfaith families in the Jewish community.
- For some families, synagogue is a great connection point. For others, there may be other points of entry aligned with their interests.
- Another panelist said that, more than anything, children from interfaith families need a religious foundation of some kind as too often this is lacking.

3. **Connection to Israel** Pew shows high levels of support and attachment to Israel. Overall about 70% of respondents say they feel either very or somewhat attached to Israel. In addition, 43% of Jews have been to Israel, including almost a quarter of those who have visited more than once. At the same time, many American Jews express reservations about Israel's approach to the peace process and some of its policies.



*Panelists were asked about how they approach Israel in their personal philanthropy and community leadership and whether they related to these responses.*

- All of the panelists felt that their connections and visits to Israel were vitally important. As one said, “Israel completes you as a Jew.”
- Several participants voiced that, as American Jews, it is important for us to separate our support of the country from our feelings about its politics. This was countered by a panelist who felt that if we as Jews have legitimate concerns about Israeli politics, it is important that we speak out.
- Panelists agreed that it is key that we continue to send young adults to Israel through programs such as Birthright and that we provide as many Israel touch points as possible that are separate from Israeli politics.
- Participants also emphasized that we also need to educate our youth regarding how they can best respond to the anti-Israel sentiment they may encounter on their college campuses.



4. **Jewish Engagement** The U.S. Jewish community seems to have a major challenge:



how to sustain identification and engagement with Judaism, both as a religious movement and a culture. Inter-marriage and the encounter with a dominant non-Jewish culture has no doubt reduced the ranks of those who identify as Jewish, but the loss in Jewish identification is far less than had been thought.

*Panelists were asked what opportunities the current levels of identification and engagement suggest and where they see the greatest value to reach Jews with a wide variety of interests and primary identities.*

- Suggestions included hosted Shabbat dinners, shabbatons, and immersive experiences in Israel for all ages.
- Jewish day schools were seen as important, though the cost of Jewish day school is prohibitive to many.
- Jewish overnight camp was identified as another opportunity of great value.

Strengthen Jewish Identity through:

- Shabbat dinners
- Shabbatons
- Overnight camp
- Day school
- Israel experiences

## Opportunities for Jewish Engagement Giving

Below are just a few examples of organizations and programs that promote Jewish engagement and continuity. For additional giving ideas, please contact Sharyn Goodson, Director of Philanthropy at [sharyn@jcsandiego.org](mailto:sharyn@jcsandiego.org) or Darren Schwartz, Philanthropy Officer at [darren@jcsandiego.org](mailto:darren@jcsandiego.org).

- ***Camp Mountain Chai***

Camp Mountain Chai expands and enriches Jewish identity by establishing an atmosphere of knowledge and love for Jewish culture, traditions and religion. More than 27% of Camp families are interfaith. The Camp opened its doors to Jewish children from San Diego and other southwestern communities in 2006. [www.campmountainchai.com](http://www.campmountainchai.com)



- ***Shalom Baby, Lawrence Family Jewish Community Center, JACOBS FAMILY CAMPUS***

Shalom Baby is designed to help San Diego families (affiliated, non-affiliated, and interfaith) celebrate the arrival of their Jewish newborns and welcome them to the San Diego Jewish Community through play groups, social events, holiday celebrations, classes, and resource guides. Shalom Baby also houses the PJ Library which provides monthly mailings of free, high quality Jewish children's literature and music to families all over the region. [www.lfjcc.org/shalombaby](http://www.lfjcc.org/shalombaby)



- ***Moishe House San Diego***

Moishe House trains, supports, and sponsors young Jewish leaders in their 20s as they create vibrant home-based communities for themselves and their peers. Moishe House has 58 houses worldwide engaging more than 65,000 attendees a year through Shabbat dinners, learning retreats, book clubs, sporting events and more. Located in La Jolla, Moishe House San Diego is the center of a fun, vibrant community, offering opportunities for social, spiritual, and service activities. [www.moishehouse.org](http://www.moishehouse.org)



- ***Tarbuton Israeli Cultural Center***

The Tarbuton builds and unifies the San Diego Jewish community through Israeli cultural experiences. Through Israeli arts, music, and cultural events, the Tarbuton offers the local Israeli and American Jewish communities the



opportunity to deepen their ties to Israel—and to each other. The Modern Hebrew programs provide lifelong paths to literacy and another means to connect to Israel. Classes for youth and adults are available, as well as Jewish holiday celebrations and Israeli plays and shows. <http://tarbuton.wordpress.com/>

- ***Taglit-Birthright Israel***

Aimed at strengthening Jewish identity, communities and solidarity with Israel since its inception in December 1999, Taglit-Birthright Israel has sent over 350,000 Jewish young adults to Israel for a ten-day experience. Participants come from 64 countries, all 50 U.S. States, Canadian provinces, and nearly 1,000 North American colleges and universities. [www.birthrightisrael.com](http://www.birthrightisrael.com)

