

Jewish Teens and Out-of-School Engagement with the Jewish Community

**A Response by David Bryfman, Director, New Center for Collaborative Leadership,
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I want to start my response by stating why I personally like to study and read studies about teenagers:

First, they are an understudied segment of the population – so for any researcher that is a good starting point.

Second, teenagers are often misunderstood. They are often vilified, feared or seen as rebellious – and sometimes with good reason – but this doesn't tell the whole story. At other times they aren't even treated as real people – instead they are treated as what I refer to as “adults-in-the-making” rather than people in their own right, because we are always expecting them to grow and develop into something else. For example, if we haven't already worked it out – we must stop using inter-marriage rates as a barometer of the success of successful Jewish teen programming – teens are considering who they will “hook up” with next week and not who they may or may not marry in 20 years time.

And third, although we need to treat them as people in the present, they are clearly also an indication of what society – and in this case, with this particular research - what the Jewish world will probably look like in the future.

It is important to acknowledge from the outset that in general there has been little research conducted about Jewish teenagers. Most of the research that has been carried out has generally been conducted, or at least sponsored, by Jewish institutions that have a vested interest in engaging Jewish teens. Even this particular research commissioned by the Rose Community Foundation, has been sponsored by a foundation with a long-standing commitment towards Jewish engagement.

In general most research about Jewish teenagers has, and continues to be, focused on why is there such a dramatic decrease in participation in all forms of Jewish life post the age of bar and bat mitzvah. It is also important to note that most research, including this one, focuses primarily on a non-Orthodox population, so some of my comments will not necessarily reflect this segment of the teen population – although limited anecdotal evidence suggest that this boundary is also becoming increasingly blurred.

But that being said, it is important to understand what this research is and what it is not. In the main, it is a meta-analysis of the research conducted about Jewish teens in the last decade or so. By design it pools together a lot of what we already know. One would suspect that it shouldn't therefore shed new light on Jewish teen engagement – and therefore the biggest surprise for me – is that it does. The report raises several issues to the surface that few other reports have done, and the merger of research, implications of research and gaps in research has been very rarely attempted in this domain. This report is also different than many other studies before it because it

has not been conducted by one of the general usual Jewish research suspects and this is also welcomed.

Today, very briefly I want to highlight 10 issues that I think this report draws attention to. In highlighting these points I want to be somewhat provocative – and ask further questions, draw attention to where further research and understanding is needed, but refrain from offering any answers or solutions.

The truth is that I could have raised many issues – far greater in number than the 10 which will follow - and we welcome your comments and feedback, both on this call and in future settings. So for example I am not going to discuss social media and technology here – even though we all understand it to be essential in understanding today's youth and society as a whole. Instead I am drawing attention to some particulars of this study in order to illuminate several bigger issues that I believe are critical for our collective understanding of who Jewish teens are today and what is necessary to engage them in meaningful Jewish activities today and tomorrow.

1. Generation Me is also Generation Wii: This report clearly situates Jewish teenagers in the broader context of American society and teen culture. It asks what it means to be an individualist in a capitalist, consumer-driven marketplace. Teenagers today are not surprisingly categorized as narcissistic, materialistic and part of Generation Me. But on the flip side – we know that they also care. There are hundreds of thousands of teens involved in social causes, political campaigns, and charity. Maybe this is a factor of technology but it is still a very real phenomenon.

2. 21st Century Judaisms: If it ever was, Judaism is quite clearly now described by Jewish teenagers today as more than just a religion. Teens identify with being Jewish as a religion, but also as a culture, an ethnicity, a heritage, and as a people. In fact the language that they use to describe being Jewish is often more closely related to African-American or Hispanic youth rather than other religious groups in America. The question must be asked, what are we as a Jewish community, whose primary identification for its adult population is still through congregational affiliation, doing to meet this changing nature of what being Jewish means to the younger population?

3. Global Tribe: Can you be a Global Citizen and a Member of the Tribe? Clearly the Jewish teenagers of today can be. For them it is possible to be both a universalist and a particularist –as they seemingly easily morph between their multiple identities depending on where they are at any point in their lives. Whereas Jewish engagement may once have focused on making the Jews a stronger people, it now seems to need to be balanced with the desired to use one's Jewish self to help make the world a better place in which to live.

4. Consumers, Producers and Trust: Teenagers today are both consumers and producers of culture and Judaism should not be seen as any different in this regard. It is not surprising that teenagers express a distrust of Jewish institutional life – its buildings and its leaders – they are perceived as always wanting something from them – Come here! Do this! Belong here! Instead, what happens when we trust this population to create their own Jewish experiences – this should not be seen as a failure because they choose not to join the synagogue of their parents, but a

success because we have given them the skills, the literacy and the wings to fly on their own. Likewise we need to really ask what issues of community mean in an era of “do-it-yourself” Judaism and understand whether one can exist as an individual within the Jewish experience. But one thing is certain, and the teens are saying it themselves – they are innovators and entrepreneurs – often searching for ways to solve the world’s problems. Where in the Jewish world are they being given the opportunity to develop, cultivate and implement their Jewish entrepreneurial spirits?

5. Feminization of Judaism: I am not sure what the politically correct way of saying this is – so I’ll just come out and say it. On many levels (except for high level leadership) we have created a Judaism in America that attracts females and does not attract males. Non-orthodox Jewish leadership is dominated by female teachers, counselors, advisors, madrichot, and subsequently engaged Jewish teenagers. In most of our activities for example collaboration is valued more than competition, and typical male behavior is frowned upon. We have choices to make – we either acknowledge that what we are providing in Jewish experiences is counter-cultural in terms of gender or we make efforts to widen our offerings, broaden our leadership and systematically look at ways to bring Jewish males back to Jewish life after their Bar Mitzvahs.

6. Role Models: It is almost unbelievable to think that even with the investment in Jewish leadership programs and money invested in Jewish experiences that teenagers continue to claim that they lack positive Jewish role models in their lives. Besides family members and Jewish icons in popular culture – who should these role models be? Passionate, dynamic, Jewishly inspired young adults who can relate to the teenagers of today. Where is the Jewish Teach for America? Where is the Birthright Next follow up that turns alumni into ambassadors? What can we learn from youth ministry programs? Why do we continue to fail to offer the best and brightest in the Jewish world the opportunity to influence and contribute in the most meaningful ways? And ultimately who is training the next generation of Jewish youth professionals?

7. The Wealth Divide: Jewish day schools, summer camps and the Israel experience, we are told all work to enhance Jewish identity, and when working together the impact is multiplied. And they are all expensive. We, as a community, have determined that in order to be an engaged Jew today is an expensive life, and given that choice is dominant in this generation, why are we surprised that people are choosing more affordable non-Jewish options. Either we create affordable Jewish options or subsidize those that we know work – but either way we cannot continue to perpetuate a Judaism for the elite.

8. What Comes Before matters: If you want to engage Jewish teenagers you have to recognize that you are starting from behind. Most Jewish teens finish their Bnei Mitzvah being told by their parents (and sometimes from their rabbis) that they are graduating. Graduating from what? Jewish life? Jewish learning? Given that so many youth dislike their pre-bnei mitzvah experiences (or at least convinced by their peer groups that they are supposed to dislike these experiences) what are our options? Either delay Bnei Mitzvah ceremonies until the completion of high school, which before you scoff, actually sociologically and psychologically makes more sense as a time to enter into adulthood. Or, and possibly more realistic, don’t just examine your community’s teen programs. You need to look at what comes before and indeed what comes after those teenage years.

9. Value-Added Judaism: It's very easy to say that Jewish teens today don't care and nor do their parents. But what this report clearly shows is that teens do care, they are busy, and they are continually searching for meaningful opportunities in life. Remember the two key questions that adolescents have, and will always continue to ask of themselves are: Who am I? and Where do I belong? Instead what happens if we re-frame and suggest that in today's market driven economy, where choice is paramount, that we, as a community, need to be offering options to today's Jewish teens that are value-added, highly valued, and look good on their "resumes-of-life".

10. Authentic Teen Voices: I want to urge with this last point that we need to continue to engage authentic teen voices in better understanding teenagers. Let me use the example of anti-Semitism as cited in the study. It could be that many Jewish teens today experience anti-Semitism. It could be that there are major regional differences when it comes to anti-Semitism. And, and here is where I would suggest caution, it could also be just regular teen behavior and name calling pointing out something different about a fellow teenager. It doesn't make it acceptable, but categorizing it is anti-Semitism, conjuring up images of who knows what, also doesn't do justice to teens being teens. The only way to really know what the teenagers meant when they said that they had experienced anti-Semitism is to ask them. If you do not have a teenager on your advisory boards, steering committees, curriculum committees, federation boards and the like – wake up. These teens today are not only our future but they are our present.

There are **3 major questions** that I want to leave you with today:

1. Why should a Jewish teenager today choose to be Jewish?
2. How can one be simultaneously all about me, all about the Jewish people, and all about the world-at-large?
3. If we know that teenagers have changed, education has changed, technology has changed, and Jews have changed – why are the dominant forms of Jewish teen engagement decades, and in some cases almost a century old?

I am leaving reading this report feeling very optimistic. The fact that literally hundreds of you signed up to be on this call is very exciting. I want to charge all of you with taking this report and this discussion back to your communities, to your institutions, to your professional and lay leaders, and to your teens – and to challenge them. What are we doing to engage today's Jewish teens in more meaningful Jewish journeys? I want to suggest that with our combined effort that Jewish teens can and should be the next demographic cohort in the Jewish community that receives major focus and attention.

I can be contacted for any follow-up conversations at bryfmand@bjeny.org