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Report on the Cooperative Research Project of Chicago Area Jewish Schools



The Jewish School Study is a cooperative research project of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, the Community Foundation for Jewish Education, the Associated Talmud Torahs, the Mandel Foundation, and the University of Chicago.

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Purpose of the Study

This research project conducted a pilot study of adolescents in Jewish day and supplementary schools in the Chicago metropolitan area. The purpose of the study was to learn how Jewish identity develops in adolescents and what role religious day and supplementary schools have in identity development. To obtain this information, we surveyed and interviewed students, parents, teachers, and school administrators at nine schools. Most students in our study have positive feelings about their Jewish identity and are proud to say that they are Jewish. This positive sense of Jewish identity was observed among adolescents, ages 12 to 18, across denominations.

Highlights of our Findings

- Adolescent Jewish identity can be understood as consisting of three essential dimensions: Jewish centrality, ritual practice, and communal membership.
- Although Orthodox adolescents tended to score highest on all three dimensions of Jewish identity, many Reform and Conservative adolescents scored at the same level as Orthodox adolescents on one or more dimension of identity.
- The concept of Jewish identity may be more complex than originally suggested. We cannot assume that denomination can tell us definitively the strength of Jewish identity among adolescents.
- Across denominations, parents' primary reason for sending their children to either day or supplementary schools is to teach Jewish values and a moral framework. Teaching religious/ritual practices seems to be parents' secondary goal for sending their children to Jewish schools.
- Day school education is heavily oriented toward texts (Torah, Prophets, Talmud, Hebrew comprehension), whereas supplementary education is more issue-oriented (Holocaust, Tzedkah, and to a lesser extent, Israel).

Sample

Of the nine schools that participated in this study, three are day schools and six are supplementary schools. The schools represent different denominations within the Jewish community including Lubavitch (1), Modern Orthodox (1), Conservative (2), Reform (3), and Reconstructionist (1). The sample of 834 students is almost evenly divided among Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform denominations. The response rates varied from 64 to 83 percent. To protect confidentiality, we only differentiate between Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Lubavitch adolescents. Reconstructionist adolescents are included with the Reform group. The sample also included more than 400 parents, 40 teachers, and 9 heads of school.

What Does Being Jewish Mean to Me?

The adolescents were asked several questions about Jewish identity. Based on these questions, three measures of identity were constructed: *Jewish centrality*, which refers to a personal assessment of the abstract importance of Judaism in one's daily life; *ritual practice*, which refers to one's observance of the laws and rituals associated with Judaism; and *communal membership*, which describes one's participation in the Jewish community. The table below lists the items used to create these measures.

Jewish centrality¹

- I am proud to be Jewish.
- I have a clear sense of being Jewish.
- I have a strong sense of belonging to Jewish people.
- I feel I have a special responsibility to Jews in need in the world.
- I think it is important to have friends who share being Jewish.
- I look to Judaism for help with important decisions.
- There is something about me that non-Jews can never understand.

Ritual practice

- Summed Ritual Practice variable²
 - Did you fast this past Yom Kippur?
 - Did you or your household celebrate Yom Ha'atz ma'ut (Israel Independence Day) in any way this year?
 - Does your household use separate dishes for meat and dairy food?
 - Do you avoid handling or spending money on the Sabbath?
- Does someone in your household light candles on Friday night?³
- Which statement best describes your practice (with regards to keeping kosher)?⁴

Communal membership⁵

- During the past 12 months how often have you attended a Jewish worship service?
- During the past 12 months how often have you followed the news about Israel?
- During the past 12 months how often have you listened to a tape, CD, or record because it contained Jewish content?
- During the past 12 months how often have you read a book because it had Jewish content?
- During the past 12 months how often have you used the internet for Jewish related information?
- On a typical Saturday, how many hours do you spend attending Jewish worship services?
- Can you read Hebrew?

Constructs of Identity

Significant differences were found among the responses of Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox adolescents on all three identity measures. Significant differences were also found between the means of Modern Orthodox and Lubavitch students on the *Jewish*

¹ Responses to these items are on a 1 to 4 scale.

² The Ritual Practice variable includes 4 questions that were coded 0 for no and 1 for yes. The summed variable has a range of 0 to 4.

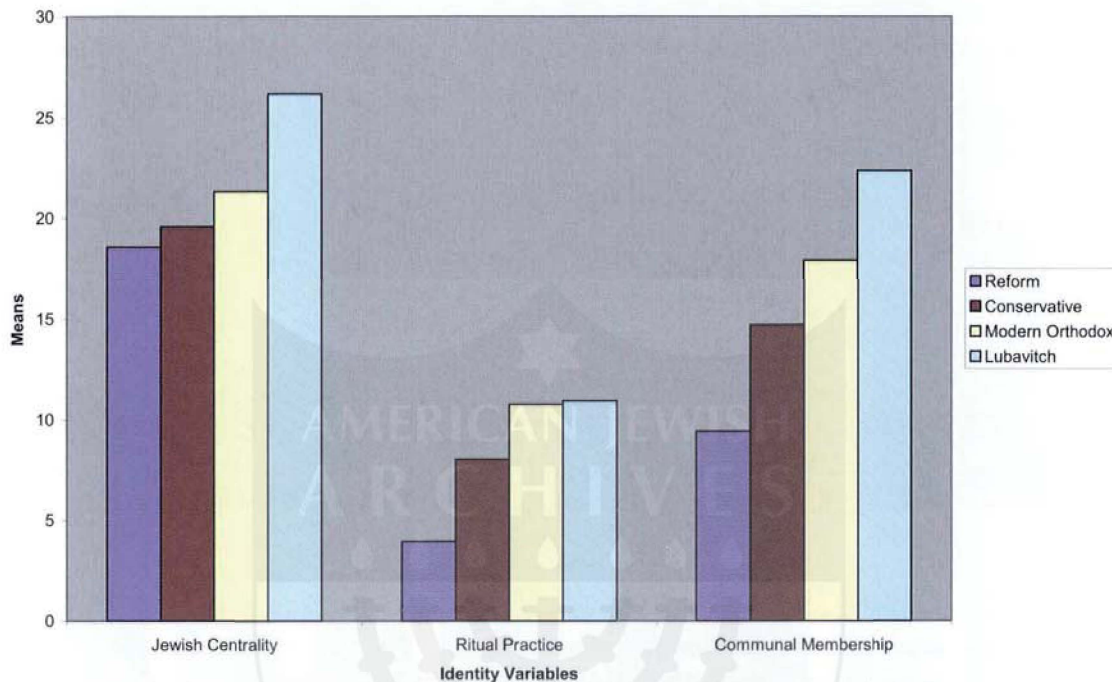
³ Response options for this question are as follows: 1 = Never; 2 = Some Friday nights; 3 = Most Friday nights; 4 = Every Friday night.

⁴ Response options for this question are as follows: 0 = I don't keep Kosher; 1 = I don't eat pork/shellfish; 2 = I don't eat meat and dairy together/I keep kosher at school; 3 = I keep strict kosher at home only; 4 = I keep kosher all the time/I keep strict kosher.

⁵ Responses range from 0 to 5 except for the last item where they range from 1 to 5.

centrality and *communal membership* measures, but not on the *ritual practice* measure.⁶ Reform students have the lowest means on all three constructs, while Lubavitch and Modern Orthodox students have the highest means.⁷

Figure 1: Jewish Identity Variables Means



Note: Range for Jewish Centrality: 7 to 28; Range for Ritual Practice: 1 to 12; range for Communal Membership: 1 to 33.

Of the three identity measures, *ritual practice* shows the largest variation in responses; the mean for Reform students on *ritual practice* is more than one standard deviation lower than the mean for Modern Orthodox students.⁸ *Ritual practice* is the only identity measure where Lubavitch adolescents do not differ significantly from Modern Orthodox adolescents. *Jewish centrality* scores have the least variation across groups. This indicates that although Reform adolescents often feel less involved in their community or less connected to ritual practice, they still feel very connected to the idea of Judaism in their lives.

To confirm that adolescents who do not have high scores on ritual participation or communal membership continue to feel a strong sense of *Jewish centrality*, another item

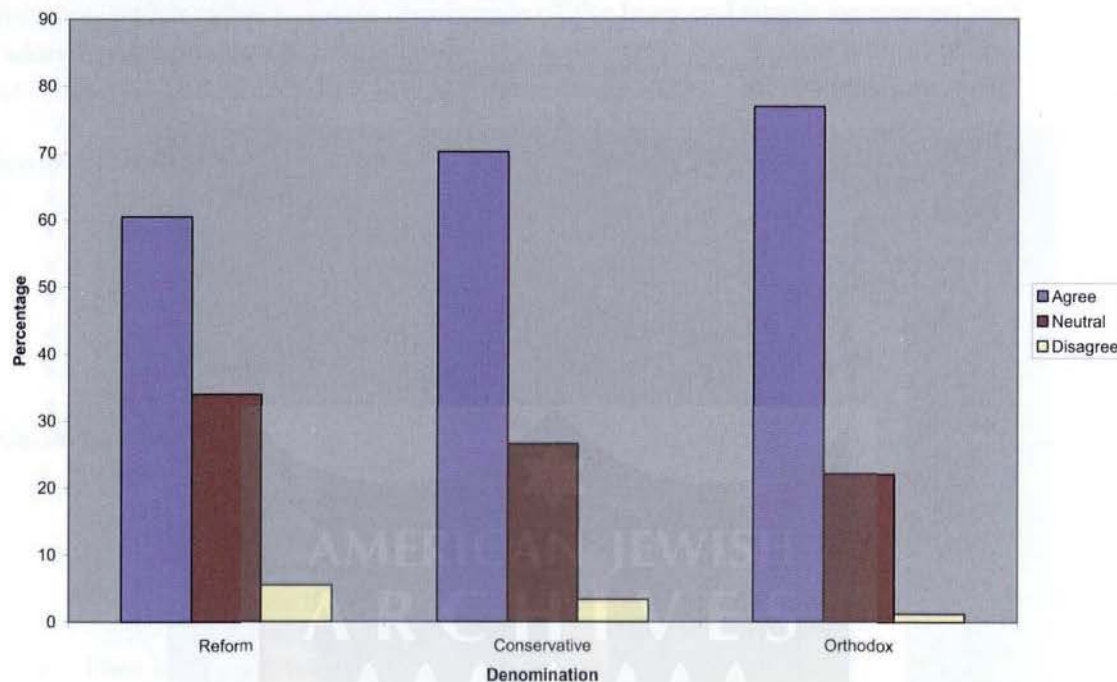
⁶ All differences are significant at the $p \leq .01$ level with the exception of the difference between Orthodox and Lubavitch for Ritual Practice, which was not significant.

⁷ Means for Jewish Centrality are: Reform 17.79; Conservative 19.96; Orthodox 21.33; Lubavitch 26.16. Means for Ritual Practice are: Reform 3.87; Conservative 8.36; Orthodox 10.76; Lubavitch 10.94. Means for Communal Membership are: Reform 9.29; Conservative 15.21; Orthodox 17.90; Lubavitch 22.93.

⁸ Standard deviations are as follows: Jewish Centrality 4.87; Ritual Practice 3.65; Communal Membership 7.13.

measuring how proud one feels to be Jewish was examined.

Figure 2: Percentage of Adolescents saying "I am Proud to Be Jewish" by Denomination



"I am proud to be Jewish" was scaled from 1 to 5 where 4 and 5 indicate agreement; 3 indicates neither agreement of disagreement; and 1 and 2 indicate disagreement.

The Orthodox category is a combined categories of modern Orthodox and Lubavitch Students.

Nearly three-quarters of adolescents reported that they agreed with the statement "I feel proud to be Jewish"; less than 3 percent of students disagreed with the statement. 60 percent of Reform, 70 percent of Conservative, and 77 percent of Orthodox adolescents claimed to be proud to be Jewish.

Experiences that Make Me Feel Jewish

Adolescents were asked to recount any experiences or relationships that made them particularly happy to be Jewish, as well as any that "turned them off" from Judaism.⁹ From these *positive* and *negative* experiences we formed seven categories that encompass nearly all of the responses:

Positive Experiences

- Sense of Jewish Community and Relationships
- Bar/Bat Mitzvah
- Religious Law and Practices
- Jewish Camp and Youth Groups
- Connection to Israel
- Sharing Judaism with Others
- Jewish Education

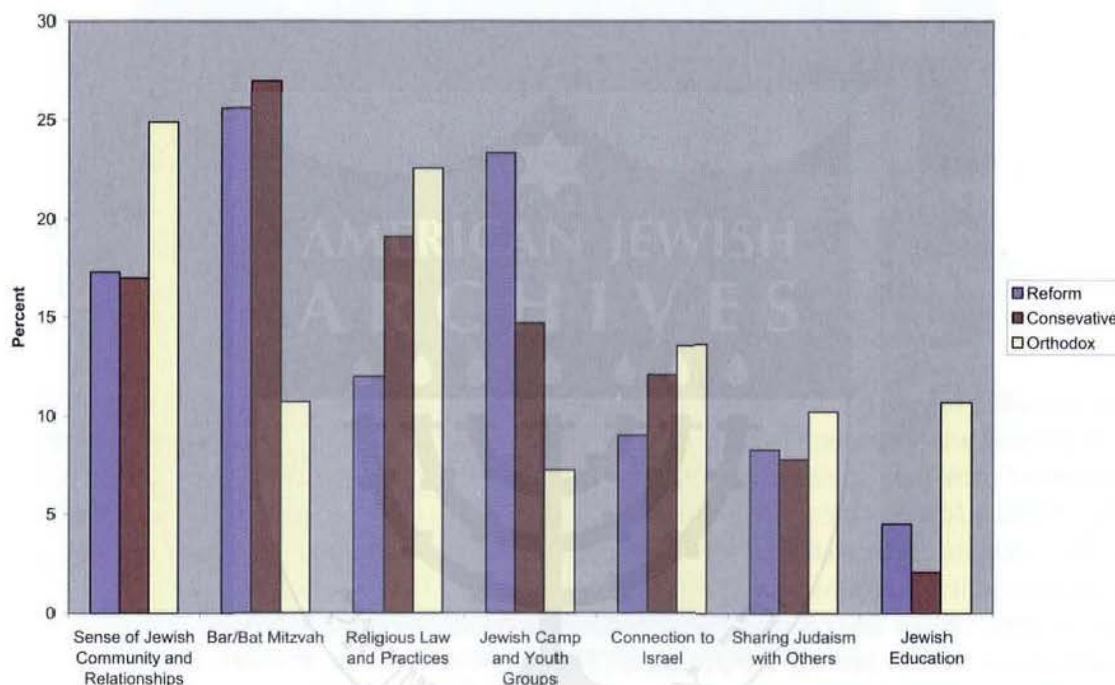
Negative Experiences

- Jewish Closed-mindedness
- Anti-Semitism
- Religious Law and Practices
- Feeling Different/Not Fitting In
- Jewish Education
- Middle East/Israeli Conflict
- Religious Services

⁹ Adolescents were asked "Have you ever had an experience which turned you on to (off from) Judaism? If yes, please describe the experience."

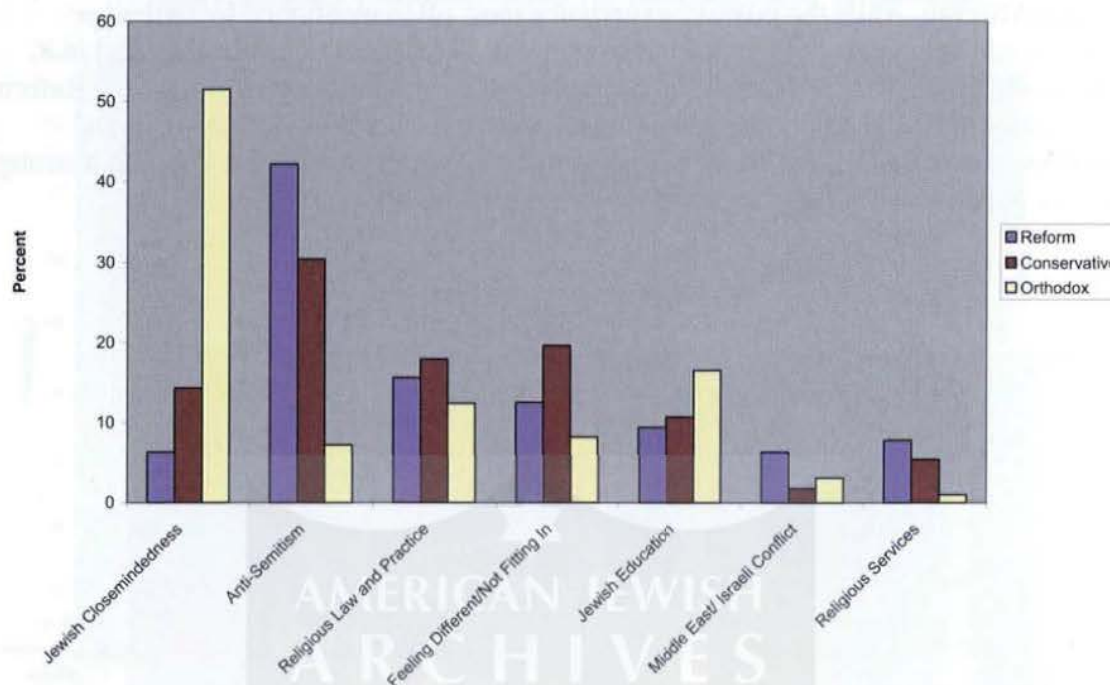
The positive experience most often mentioned by Reform and Conservative students was Bar/Bat Mitzvah, while the positive experience most often mentioned by Orthodox students was being part of their Jewish community and the relationships they had in it. Camps and youth groups were also very important as positive experiences for the Reform adolescents, while religious law and practices were important for Conservative and Orthodox adolescents. A sense of Jewish community and relationships was also a strong positive experience for Reform and Conservative students.

Figure 3: Positive Experiences



Differences between Orthodox and Non-Orthodox students with respect to negative experiences are even more pronounced than differences in positive experiences. For both Reform and Conservative adolescents, the most frequently cited negative experience was Anti-Semitism, which accounts for nearly half of all the responses of Reform students, and nearly a third of Conservative students. For Orthodox students, the negative experience most frequently mentioned was Jewish Closed-mindedness, which accounts for more than half of the responses from this group. The least important negative experience for all adolescents was the Middle East/Israeli Conflict. This could be because the survey was returned in the summer of 2000, before the Palestinian and Israeli conflict heightened to current levels.

Figure 4: Negative Experiences



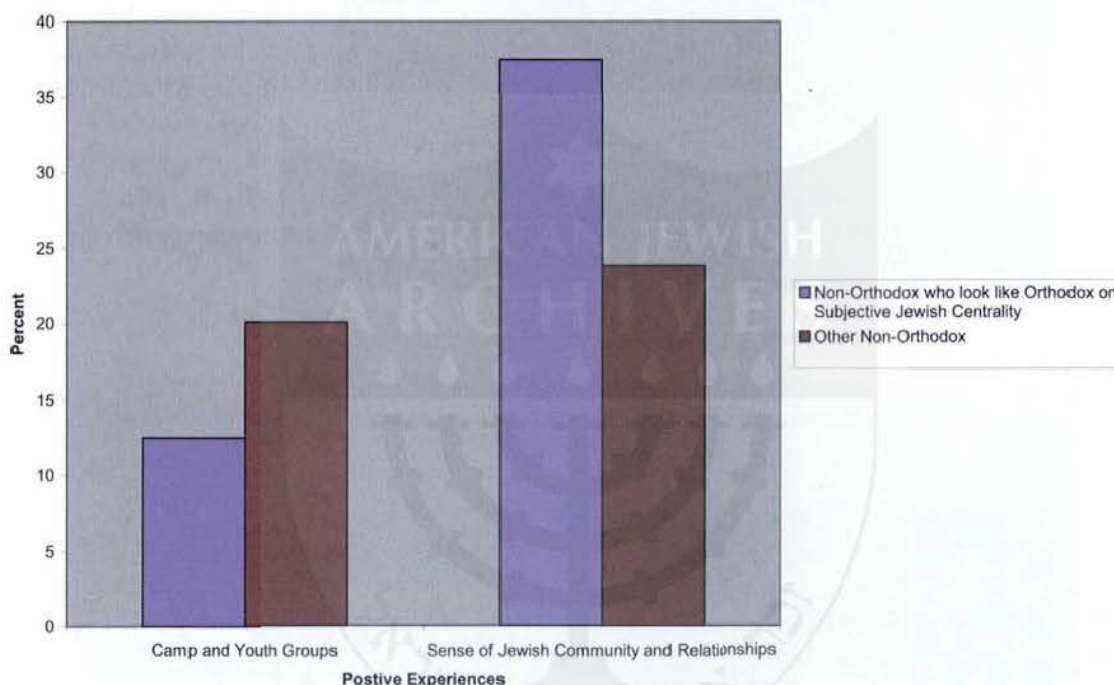
One possible reason for the large number of Reform and Conservative adolescents who indicate that anti-semitism is their main negative experience with Judaism could be the amount of time they spend in a secular environment. Unlike the Orthodox adolescents, who attend a Jewish day school and who mostly live in communities where the majority of the residents are Jewish, the Reform and Conservative adolescents spend a larger part of their lives in situations where anti-semitism is more likely to occur. Orthodox adolescents, unlike their Reform and Conservative counterparts, have much more involvement in non-secular environments (as can be seen by their ranking of positive experiences); their primary negative experience tends to be an internal complaint regarding their community (Jewish closed-mindedness) rather than the external complaint of anti-semitism.

Beyond Denomination: Identity Measures and Non-Matched Students

Jewish identity does not always follow denominational lines. We identified a subgroup of adolescents as non-matched whose responses on one or more of the identity measures did not correspond to the mean response of those adolescents who share a similar denominational affiliation. An example of this would be a Reform student whose mean response on the *Jewish centrality* measure is either the same or higher than the average mean score for Orthodox students. Conservative and Reform non-matched students did not differ significantly from each other; students are therefore grouped by the broader categories of non-Orthodox and Orthodox. While there are non-matched students in both of these categories, the majority of non-matched students were non-Orthodox. Among the three identity constructs, *Jewish centrality* had the largest group of non-matched non-Orthodox students, while *communal membership* had the largest group of non-matched

Orthodox students. Among non-Orthodox adolescents 145 out of the 442 (33 percent) with an eligible score on *Jewish centrality* scored at the same level as Orthodox students. These students were fairly evenly distributed between Conservative and Reform denominations. As a group, these students were less likely to answer that camp and youth group participation was their positive experience with Judaism and more likely to answer that sense of Jewish community and relationships was their main positive experience. More than one-third of these students answered that their positive experience with Judaism was sense of Jewish community and relationships.

Figure 5: Non-Matched Non-Orthodox Students on Jewish Centrality



The second and third largest groups of non-matched students were non-Orthodox students who scored similarly to Orthodox on *communal membership* and *ritual practice*, respectively. Non-Orthodox students who were non-matched on *communal membership* tended to rank “Connection to Israel” as their positive experience significantly more often than matched non-Orthodox students. Similarly non-Orthodox students who scored in the range of means that defined matched Orthodox answers on *ritual practice* were significantly more likely to say “Connection to Israel” or “Sharing Judaism” was their positive experience than all other non-Orthodox students.

Figure 6: Non-Matched Non-Orthodox Students who Look like Orthodox Students on Communal Membership

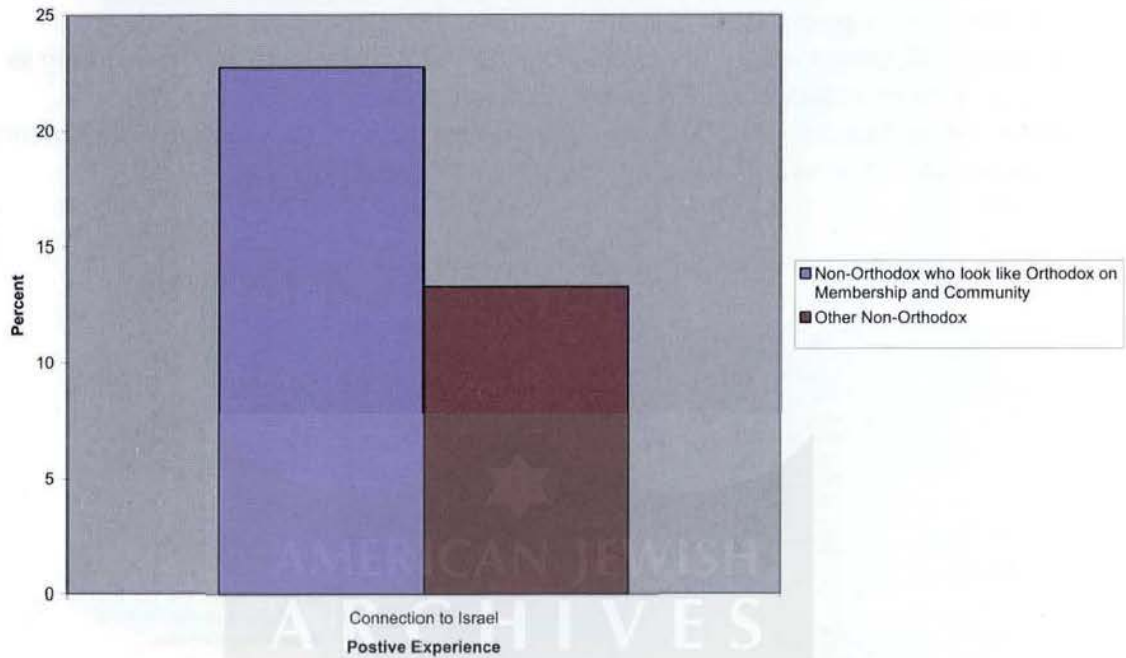
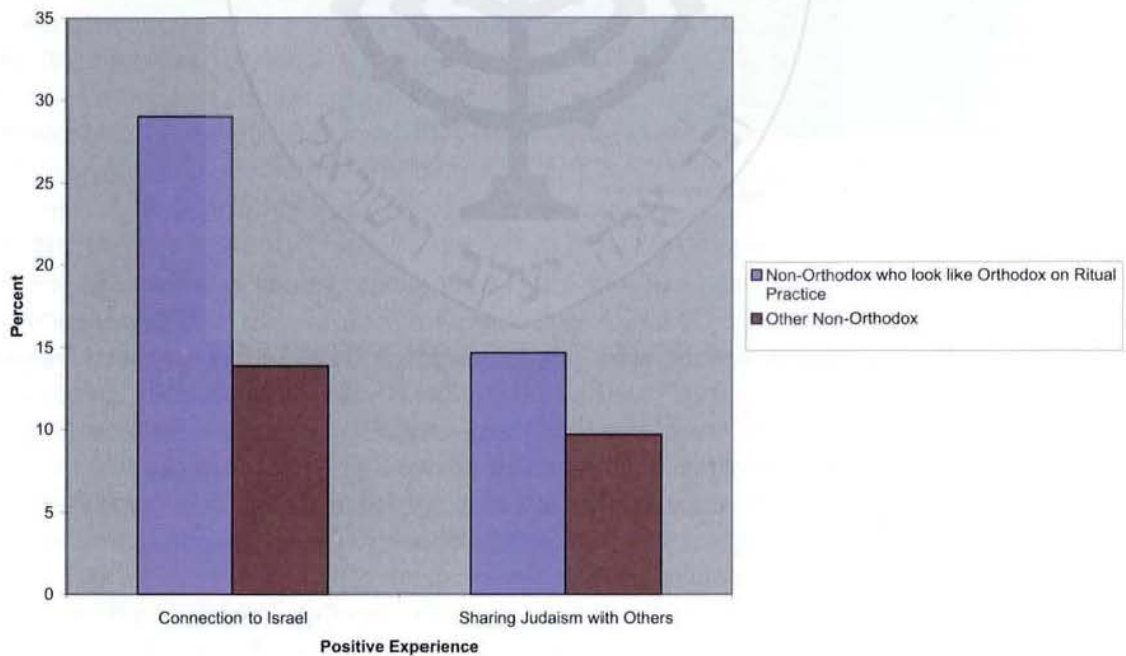


Figure 7: Non-Matched Non-Orthodox Students who look like Orthodox Students on Ritual Practice



Although these results are tentative, they suggest that active participation in the Jewish community and activities such as trips to Israel, teaching in a Jewish school, or even

telling friends about Jewish practices and beliefs helps to increase the intensity with which a Jewish adolescent identifies with Judaism, taking denomination into account.

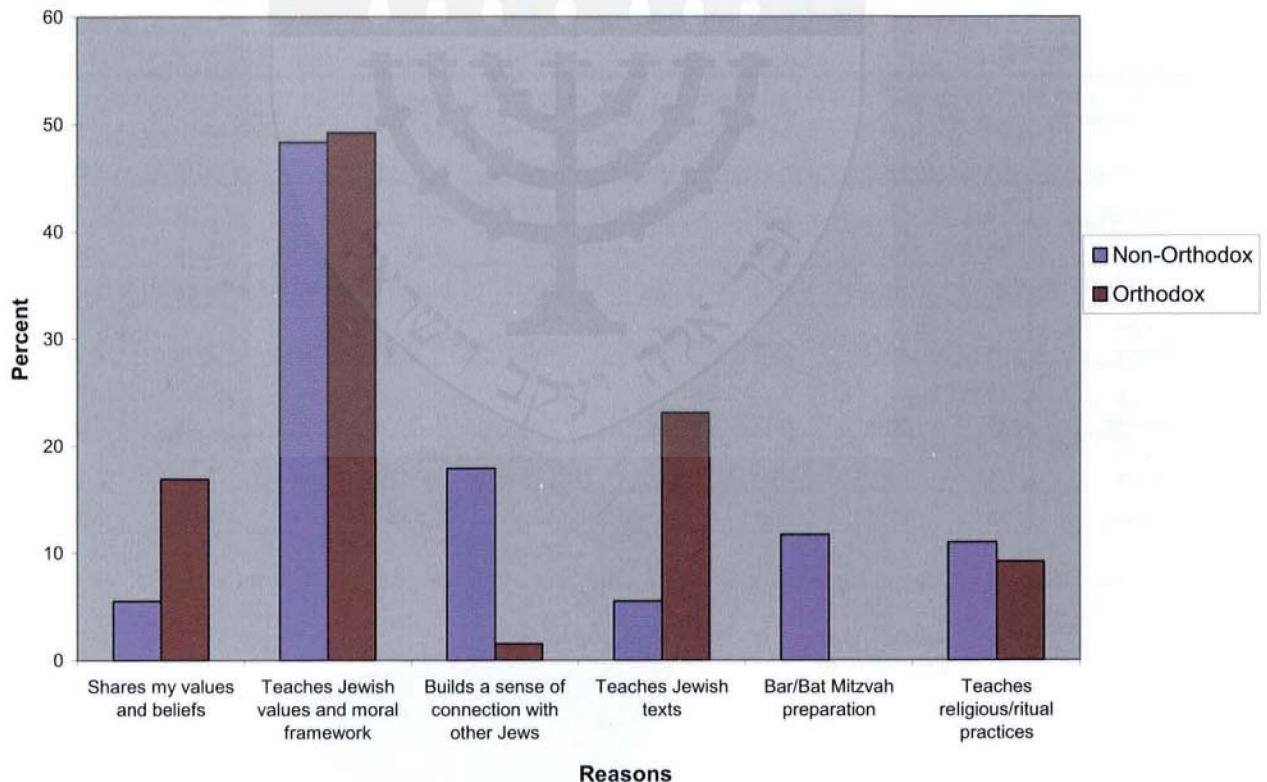
Choosing a Jewish School

In the parent survey mothers and fathers were asked to identify the primary reason for sending their child to a Jewish school. Parents were presented a list of 37 reasons for choosing a Jewish school and asked to rank them. Reasons range from a willingness to address social and moral issues, to location, to school trips to Israel. Six reasons were consistently ranked highest:

The school...

- teaches a Jewish moral framework and values
- teaches religious and ritual practices
- builds a sense of connection with other Jews
- shares my values and beliefs
- offers Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation
- offers classes in Jewish texts

Figure 8: Parent's Reasons for Choosing Jewish Education



Note: All differences are significant at $p \leq .01$ except "Teaches Jewish values and moral framework" and "Teaches religious/ritual practice" which are not significant.

Figure 8 indicates that parents of all denominations are most interested in schools that focus on helping their children to adopt Jewish morals and beliefs. Teaching religious ritual traditions is a secondary goal for both Orthodox and non-Orthodox parents. Reform and Conservative parents also said that they were looking for a Jewish school which would increase their children's interaction with Judaism and the Jewish community, as is shown by the relatively high percentages for both "builds a sense of connection with other Jews" and "Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation." Orthodox parents, who tend to live in a less secular environment, desired Jewish schools that share their beliefs and teach Jewish texts.

Curriculum at Jewish Schools

The adolescents were asked to evaluate their school's curriculum in five ways: (1) whether they had the opportunity to learn about particular subjects in school; (2) the extent of their knowledge of the subject; (3) the importance of knowledge about each subject; (4) the ability to explain the subject to a friend; and (5) whether the student wants to know more about a given subject. They were given eight content areas to evaluate: text study, holidays, Siddur, customs, Jewish history, Jewish thought, Jewish values, and Hebrew.

	Opportunity to learn		Extent of knowledge		Importance of subject		Ability to explain subject		Desire to learn more	
Range	(0-1)		(0-3)		(0-3)		(1-3)		(1-3)	
Denomination	Non-Ortho	Ortho	Non-Ortho	Ortho	Non-Ortho	Ortho	Non-Ortho	Ortho	Non-Ortho	Ortho
Text Study	.64	.87	1.37	1.97	1.52	2.18	1.68	2.11	2.00	2.48
Holidays	.73	.97	1.93	2.52	1.81	2.57	2.00	2.49	2.04	2.60
Siddur	.70	.91	1.97	2.53	1.82	2.63	2.03	2.46	1.98	2.58
Customs	.67	.73	1.76	1.88	1.92	2.45	1.96	1.98	2.13	2.59
Jewish History	.74	.83	1.78	2.00	1.93	2.32	1.95	2.00	2.18	2.54
Jewish Thought	.44	.53	1.05	1.33	1.46	2.01	1.50	1.66	2.06	2.44
Jewish Values	.74	.86	1.80	2.16	1.92	2.48	2.08	2.36	2.12	2.51
Hebrew	.76	.97	1.88	2.51	1.99	2.58	2.01	2.37	2.26	2.59

Note: Bold values are not significant; all other coefficients are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

¹⁰ Five different questions were asked about each curriculum area: (1) "Have you had an opportunity to learn about this subject?" (1 = yes, 0 = no) (2) "What is the extent of your knowledge?" (0 = Nothing, 1 = a little, 2 = some, 3 = a lot) (3) "How much is it important to know about this subject?" (0 = Nothing, 1 = a little, 2 = some, 3 = a lot) (4) "How well could you explain this subject to a friend?" (1 = Not very well, 2 = Somewhat well 3 = Very well) (5) "Do you want to learn more about this subject?" (1 = no, 2 = maybe, 3 = yes)

The table produces the mean responses for Orthodox and non-Orthodox for each curriculum area. Overall the table indicates that Jewish adolescents feel an opportunity to learn about most aspects of Judaism.

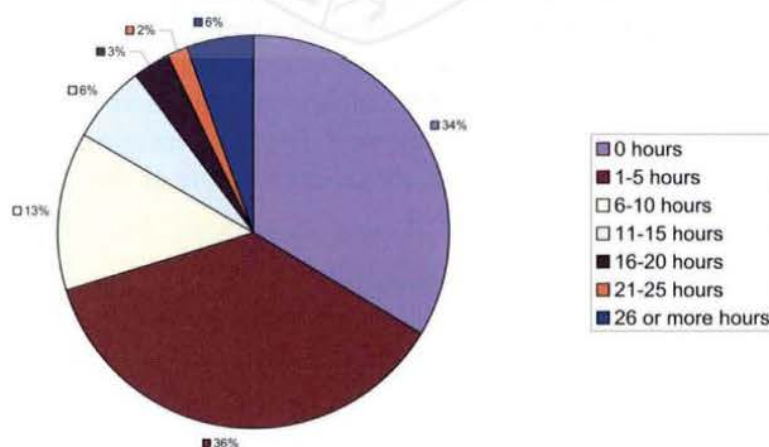
Non-Orthodox and Orthodox students have very similar scores in the areas of customs and Jewish history. There was no significant difference between non-Orthodox and Orthodox students in ability to explain these subjects to their friends, and only a marginal difference between the two groups in knowledge of customs. Both Orthodox and non-Orthodox students rated Jewish thought the lowest of the eight content areas. This suggests that expanding the curriculum to better address this content area could create a richer Jewish learning environment.

Orthodox adolescents rated their curriculum consistently higher than non-Orthodox students. For both groups, the opportunity to learn about a particular subject was positively correlated with the desire to learn more about that subject.¹¹ In subjects that tend to be emphasized in supplementary schools, such as customs, holidays, and Jewish history, Orthodox and non-Orthodox adolescents rated their curriculum similarly. Instead of indicating less interest or commitment to Jewish education by non-Orthodox students, the consistent difference between the two groups could be attributed to the larger amount of time available for Jewish education in day versus supplementary schools.

Summary

- Overall, Jewish adolescents are positive about their Judaism. Seventy-one percent of students answered that they had a positive experience of Judaism. Only 36 percent of students reported having any negative experiences connected with Judaism.
- Adolescents were interested in learning more about their religion, even though the

Figure 9: Hours Spent Doing Activities that Make Students Feel Jewish per Week



¹¹ Significant positive correlations exist between desire to learn and opportunity to learn for each subject area with the exception of customs ($p < .001$).

majority tend to spend less than five hours each week doing something specifically Jewish.

- Adolescents who are more involved with Judaism have a stronger identification.
- Contrary to the popular conception that students in this age group are apathetic, especially about religion, Jewish adolescents are interested in their religion, shown by the high percentage of students who indicated they would like to learn more about all subjects.
- Both Orthodox and Non-Orthodox parents rate conveying a Jewish ethical and moral framework as their most important reason for choosing a Jewish school. For both groups, this reason was more important than teaching of ritual practice.

Recommendations

This study shows that the more involved Jewish adolescents are in Judaism, the more important and positive Judaism is in their lives. Encouraging adolescents to take part in Jewish activities helps these young people feel part of the Jewish community and reinforces their connection to Judaism. Trips to Israel, participating in religious traditions, sharing Judaism with others, and having a stronger connection to the Jewish community are pivotal in developing stronger connections and identification with Judaism, especially for those adolescents who identify themselves as Reform Jews.

With respect to Jewish day and supplementary schools, students suggest that there is a void that is not being filled by their school. They indicate a desire to learn more in nearly every subject identified as part of the Jewish curriculum. Subjects such as Jewish thought are identified as needing more emphasis. Although supplementary schools are perceived as providing opportunities to learn about history and customs, students indicate that other subjects, such as texts and Jewish thought, need further attention.

Finally, it appears that creating a strong Jewish identity in adolescents rests with the family. Families can encourage their adolescents to lead a more active Jewish life by participating in Jewish life themselves. Simply participating in religious practice does not necessarily help to foster a strong sense of Jewish identity. Rather, it seems that the more families practice Jewish traditions, participate in Jewish community activities, and discuss questions of spirituality with their adolescents, the more positively their children feel about being Jewish. Schools are important places for learning about Jewish life, but it appears that they cannot be a substitute for the critical role of families in creating a strong sense of Jewish identity in their children.