

2016 Base Report

# A New Model of Jewish Engagement: The Impact of Base Hillel



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## A New Model of Jewish Engagement

In Winter 2015, Base Hillel—a new model of Jewish engagement for students and their friends—commissioned a project evaluation by Professor Steven M. Cohen and Dr. Arielle Levites. The early findings capture the first few short months of Base’s operation in New York City.

### Researcher’s Summary

Base has developed a formula for reaching a highly sought-after population for Jewish engagement: young, unmarried, socially-liberal Jews. It does so in large part by appealing to the sensibilities and interests of this demographic.

Base provides participants with a warm, joyful place to share Shabbat and Jewish holidays with other like-minded people. Base celebrates Jewish tradition while valuing inclusiveness, cosmopolitanism, and pluralism. The presence of Jewishly knowledgeable rabbinic couples adds a much valued sense of authenticity and depth. That these rabbinic couples are young, approachable, and welcome others into their own cozy homes provides an experience that is both culturally rich, as well as informal and intimate. This is in sharp contrast to other Jewish settings, which are often seen as cold and institutional. Base is an accessible form of small-batch, artisanal Judaism, designed for a Millennial aesthetic that eschews the mass-produced and overly-ceremonial.

Base has been successful in attracting and integrating a diverse group of young Jews. In doing so they have created an ideal blend of both highly-socialized and culturally informed Jews, and those newer to Jewish practice, with fewer formal Jewish educational and communal experiences. This diversity creates an atmosphere of novelty and freshness which participants find stimulating. Perhaps more importantly, this mix of participants with a variety of Jewish backgrounds and experiences helps the rabbinic

couples induct those less familiar with Jewish ritual and tradition in a way that feels unforced, less formally educational, and more “natural.”

Here is a review of the key findings in Base’s pilot year:

- Over 1,400 people have attended a Base program in the pilot year.<sup>1</sup>
- Participants respond very favorably to two key ingredients of Base: *Young rabbinic families in their own homes, features which create an experience participants see as both warm and authentically Jewish.*
- Base participants report overwhelmingly positive images of Base, describing it as: *welcoming, accepting, and open-minded*
- Base primarily attracts three key constituencies for Jewish engagement: *young adults in late-twenties, never married, politically liberal*
- Base participants report diverse Jewish backgrounds: *27% attended day school while 21% had no formal Jewish education at all.*

While preliminary, the data thus far are highly encouraging. Base appeals to and attracts a much-sought-after demographic. Participants have been overwhelmingly positive in their assessment of Base. It is fair to say they are effusive in their reports of their Base experiences. This goodwill that Base staff have generated points to participants continuing, and perhaps even deepening, their relationship with Base.

Looking ahead there is real promise for Base to address a pressing concern in Jewish communal life: reaching unengaged young adults and fostering their connection to Jewish life, meaning, and community. Base is a key experiment on this front, with the promise of making important inroads with this demographic as it both expands and matures as an organization.

— Steven M. Cohen and Arielle Levites, 2016

<sup>1</sup> Beyond the pilot year, over 1,800 unique individuals have attended a program.



#### Participant Interview

I attended a Shabbat dinner and the Megillah reading. At both events I learned a good deal about the Jewish tradition, and met people that were interesting. I am most impressed by Base’s . . . focus on relationships and people rather than buildings, committees, or rules. I think this is what our temples and churches often forget.







**Participant Interview**  
 I believe that Base is very important for my fiancé and me as we continue to learn about where Judaism and Catholicism fit in both of our lives. It has given us a safe haven free from judgment where we can follow through on our community service ambitions. We are able to meet and talk to similar couples in the safety of Avram's home which is full of warmth.

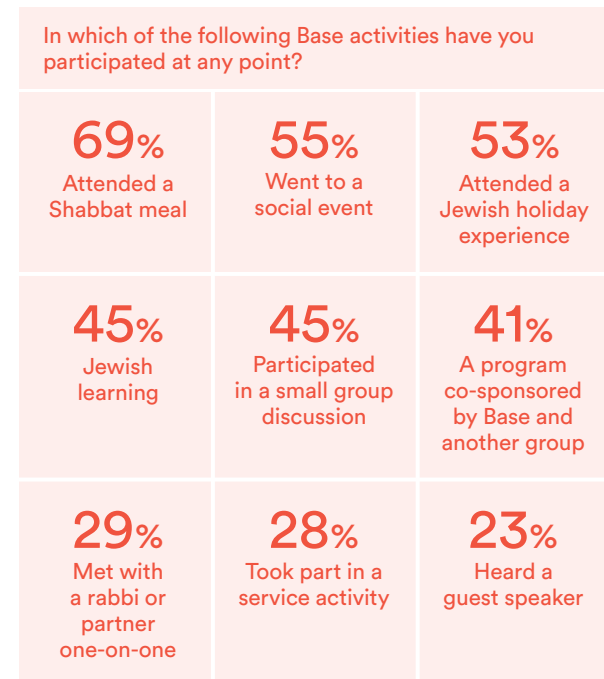


## 1. Gateways to Participation

# The Biggest Draws to Base are Shabbat & Holidays, Social Events, and Personal Connections

### A. Types of Participation

Shabbat meals are the most widely reported form of participation, followed by attending a social event and attending a Jewish holiday experience. These major gateways to Base participation feed into other activities, such as Jewish learning and small group discussions.



### B. Reasons for Participation

Nearly half of participants cited invitations from friends as the reason for coming to Base. Almost as many cited Shabbat and holiday celebrations.



### Researcher's Commentary

The activity patterns signal the intertwining of the social with the Jewishly meaningful . . . Base offers the advantage of offering a home environment, including a married couple with young children. For largely unmarried young adults, such an environment may hold special appeal and instructive meaning.



2. Atmosphere

# Base offers a warm and joyful atmosphere. Participants feel comfortable being themselves without fear of judgment.

## A. Positive Feelings

Nearly two-thirds of respondents report that Base connects them to Jewish meaning. Almost all met people who they felt were very different from them and made friends at Base. And, almost all totally reject the ideas that they feel uncomfortable inviting their friends or that diversity of viewpoints isn't tolerated.

To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements?			
	To a great extent	Somewhat	Not at all
Base has a warm joyful atmosphere	95%	5%	0%
At Base I feel comfortable being myself without fear of judgment	85%	14%	1%
Base connects me to Jewish meaning and spirituality	64%	29%	7%
I met people who are very different from me	41%	50%	8%
I have made friends at Base	31%	52%	17%
I feel uncomfortable inviting my friends to Base	10%	10%	80%
There's not much room for a variety of viewpoints at Base	4%	8%	88%

\* Red = Good Feelings Index

## B. Positive Images

Given a variety of positive and negative images, almost all respondents endorsed the positive images and almost all rejected the negative images. Through repeated encounters with Base, its professionals, and Base participants, people develop and strengthen their warm feelings toward Base.

Images of Base	
Unwelcoming	4%
Welcoming*	95%
Contrived	3%
Authentic*	90%
Thin & shallow	6%
Rich & deep*	85%
Boring	4%
Stimulating*	89%
Not too Jewish*	39%
Too Jewish	15%
Innovative*	81%
Conventional	6%
Open-minded*	93%
Narrow-minded	3%
Accepting*	95%
Judgemental	4%

\* Positive Image Index



**Participant Interview**  
I made a new friend outside of Base who invited me and I liked it so much that I attend on my own. I've brought many friends to experience Base.







**Participant Interview**  
 Base was literally a one of a kind experience. I have participated in many Jewish programs and classes, but Base tops them all. Apart from the learning process, the participants in the group were what made it so great. Everyone had something authentic to say or to express in terms of their thoughts or opinions about a topic. I seriously felt I was in a group of wise men and women. It was a thought provoking experience.

### 3. Assessing Impact

## Base participants report changes in Jewish practice, learning, and perspectives, with reports more frequent the more they participate.

#### A. Wide Testimony of Impact

When asked about their Base experiences, in addition to reiterating the image of Base as welcoming, respondents also widely affirmed that the Base couple models a relationship from which they can learn. Accordingly, they widely attributed impact in several ways, among them: seeing the importance of

Judaism, Shabbat, and the Jewish calendar in their lives. Over two-thirds credited a Base rabbi or spouse with giving them support or advice on personal issues, and almost as many claimed they made a change in their lives and/or in their Jewish practice because of something they learned at Base. Over a third have “hung out” with someone they met at Base.

To what extent do you agree with the following?

I felt uncomfortable when someone seemed to pass judgment on me or my lifestyle



A Base rabbi or rabbi's partner provided me with support or advice on personal issues\*\*



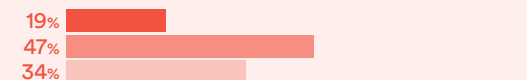
I made a change in my Jewish practice because of something I learned or heard at Base \*\*



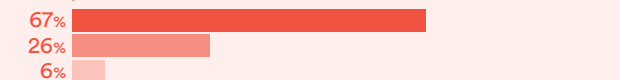
I began to see Shabbat as an important part of my week\*\*



I made a change in my life because of something I learned or heard at Base\*\*



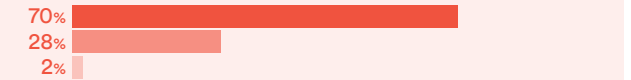
At Base I saw that Judaism could play an important role in my life



At Base I was able to express my commitment to community service.



The Base couple models a relationship I can learn from \*\*



I became more aware of the Jewish calendar in my life\*\*



Base is a welcoming space for all kinds of Jewish people



■ Not at all ■ Somewhat ■ To a great extent

\*\* Change index



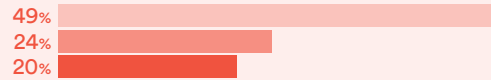
## B. More Activity = More Impact

Those who have increased participation at Base have a strong association with even more positive images, express more positive feelings, and testify to a greater breadth and extent of change in their Jewish engagement.

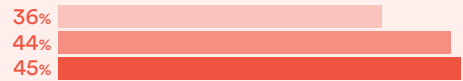
### Positive Images of Base by Base Activity Count

(Open-minded, accepting, not too Jewish, stimulating, rich & deep, innovative, authentic)

#### High



#### Moderate



#### Low



■ activity count ■ activity count ■ activity count

### Change Index by Base Activity Count

(Got personal advice, saw Judaism could play important role, saw Shabbat important, Jewish calendar, change in my life, change in Jewish practice.)

#### High



#### Moderate



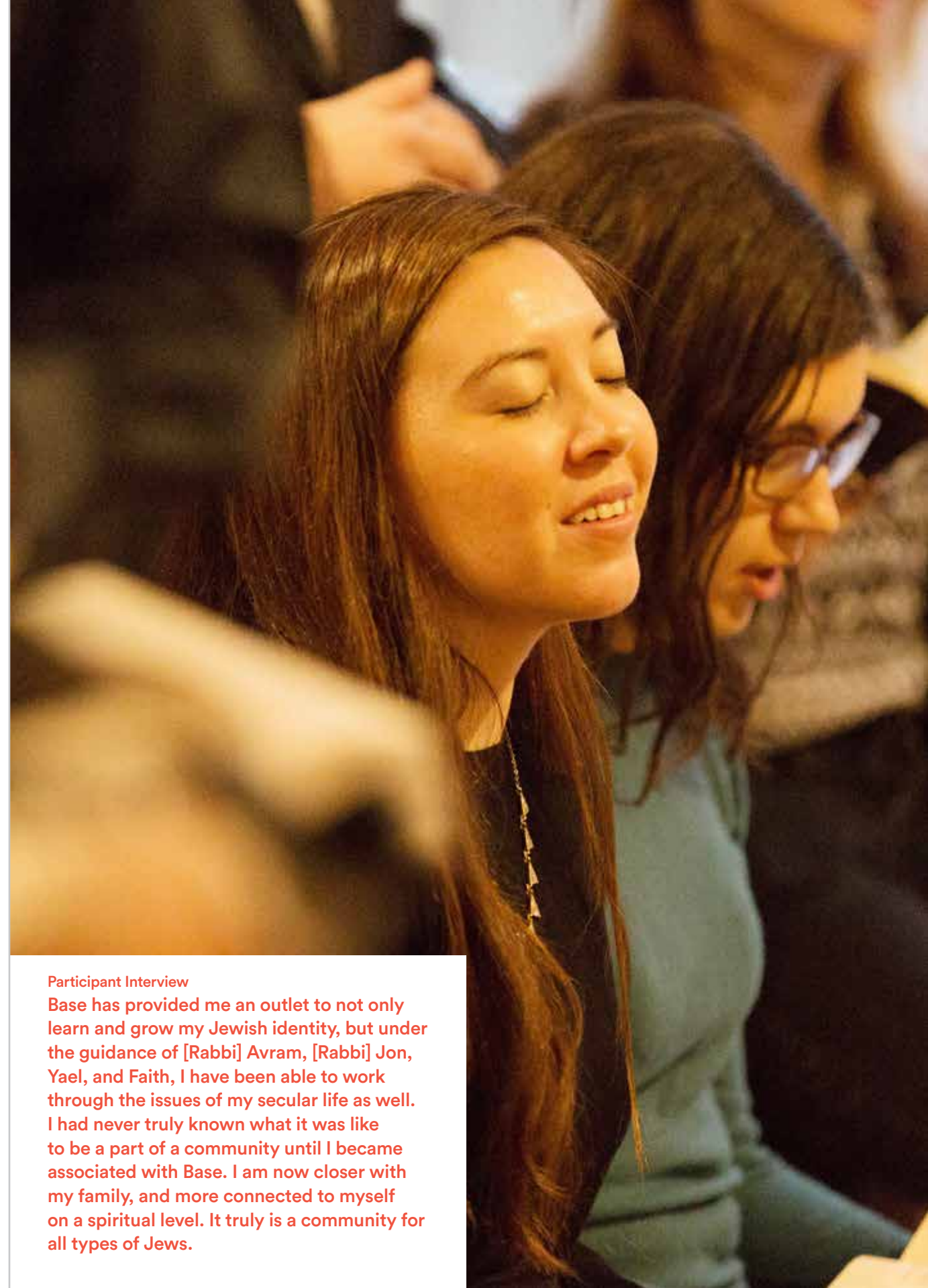
#### Low



■ activity count ■ activity count ■ activity count

### Researcher's Commentary

Methodologically, retrospective reports of change attributed to one or another reason must be viewed with some skepticism. Nevertheless, these results certainly testify to widely held appreciation of Base, and a valuable asset for recommending the Base to others and recruiting even more active Base participants in the future.



### Participant Interview

Base has provided me an outlet to not only learn and grow my Jewish identity, but under the guidance of [Rabbi] Avram, [Rabbi] Jon, Yael, and Faith, I have been able to work through the issues of my secular life as well. I had never truly known what it was like to be a part of a community until I became associated with Base. I am now closer with my family, and more connected to myself on a spiritual level. It truly is a community for all types of Jews.





**Participant Interview**  
 I'm attracted to Base because Avram and Yael draw from a deep well of Yiddish tradition, exposing me to a version of Judaism that is simultaneously foreign and familiar. The importance of niggunim and singing also resonate with my upbringing, and I think Avram and Yael both realize music's power to engage people like me coming from different backgrounds of Jewish literacy. Avram and Yael are youthful, which is why I can relate to them, yet they're also spiritually insightful and are raising a family grounded in Jewish values and joy, which is why I feel I can learn so much from them as I carve my own path.



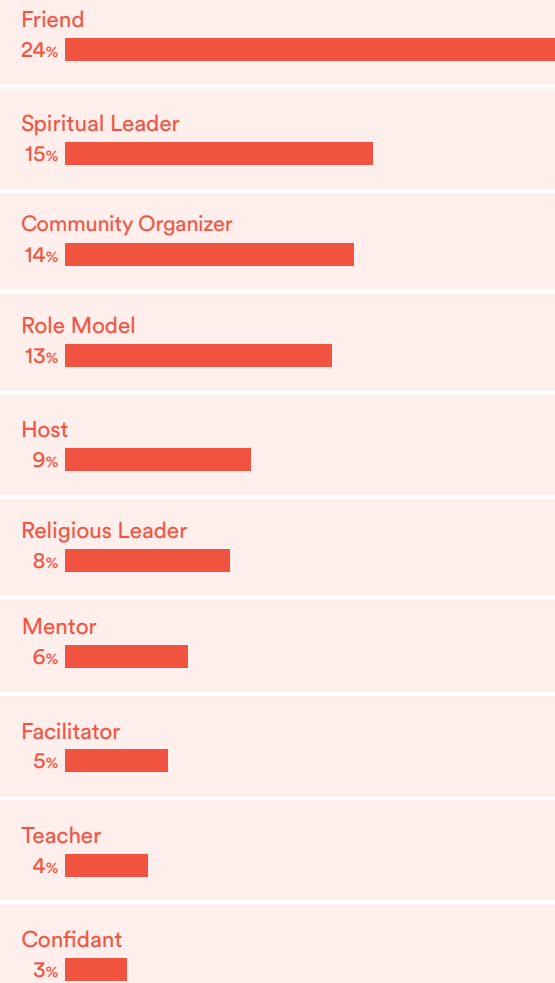
#### 4. Professional Staff

Base Rabbis and Educators are seen as friends, leaders, organizers, and role models, for whom there is widespread appreciation.

#### Perceived Role of Professionals

Participants see the Base professionals as a “friend” more than any other role. Other somewhat frequently mentioned characterizations are “spiritual leader,” “community organizer,” and “role model.”

Which of the following roles best describes how you think of [best-known professional]?



#### Researcher's Commentary

The four religiously committed and observant personalities that stand at the center of the Base experiment have managed to transcend the social distance for formal deference that are frequently associated with rabbis, rabbis' spouses and, indeed, clergy generally. They have established personal relationships, yet at the same time serving in effect as inspiring teachers, be it directly—such as in text-centered classes or the Shabbat table—or more indirectly, by modeling an attractive Jewish life style in a family setting. Participants appreciated the presence of a rabbi or other learned person who could lend structure and authenticity to conversations, and without the gulf of generation or authoritarianism.



5. Diversity

# Base features demographic diversity across Jewish background, engagement, affiliation, parentage, and social makeup.

## A. Jewish Centrality and Socialization

Among the participants who are Jewish, over two-thirds see being Jewish as very important in their lives and almost as many have mostly Jewish close friends. But, at the same time, over a third have mostly non-Jewish close friends.

How important is being Jewish in your life?	
Very Important	71%
Somewhat Important	20%
Not too important	5%
Not at all important	4%

How many of your close friends are Jewish?	
All of them	9%
Most of them	55%
Some of them	33%
Hardly any of them	4%
None of them	0%

= 64% most or all

## B. Jewish Identification and Engagement

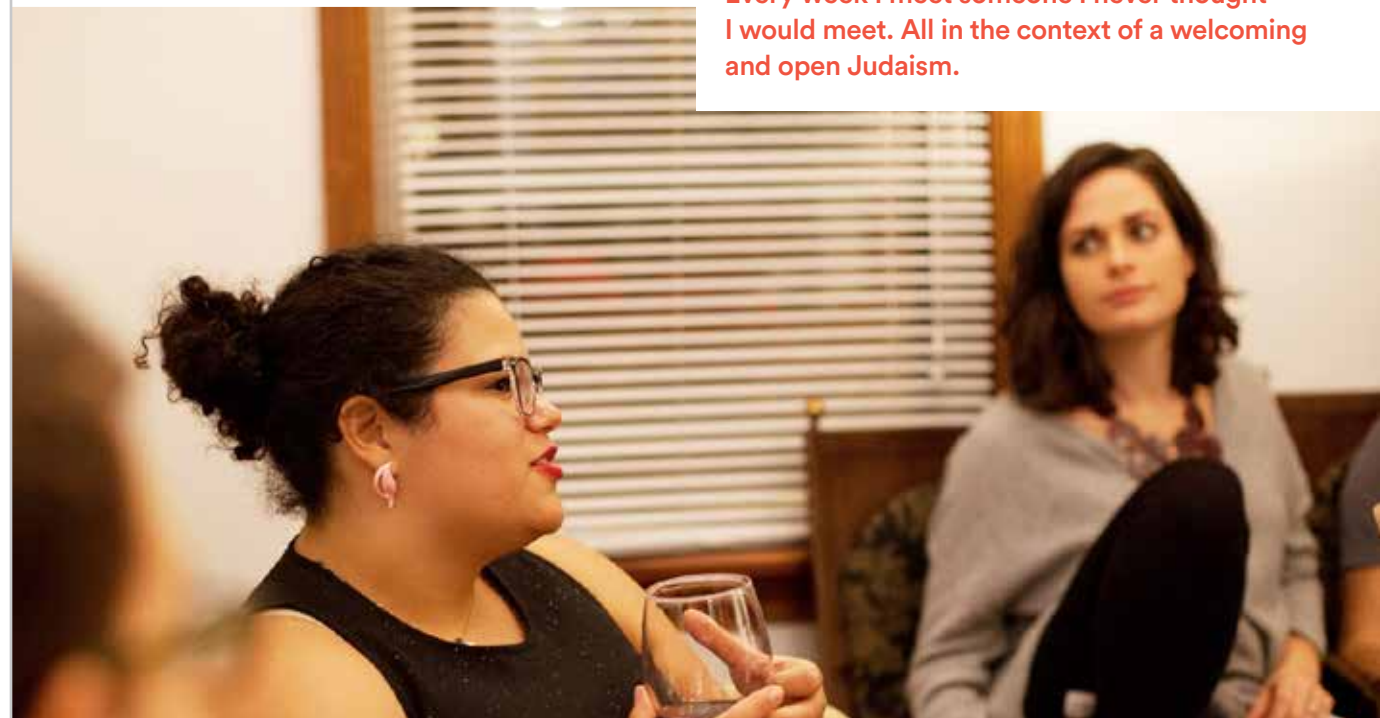
One-fifth attend religious services weekly, almost a third see themselves as Orthodox or Conservative, and almost half go to Shabbat meals at friends' homes "many times." Almost half attend synagogue for the High Holidays or less often. Three-in-eight identify with no Jewish religious denomination, and this year half went to Shabbat meals just a few times or less. Perhaps most notably, of those married or partnered, almost a quarter report non-Jewish spouses/partners. In addition, fully 7% of the participants are non-Jewish. Base participants derive from a wide diversity in denominational upbringing, as roughly equal numbers say they were raised Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and all other possibilities. Among them, as many as 11% were not raised Jewish.

Aside from special occasions like weddings, funerals and bar mitzvahs, how often do you attend Jewish religious services at a synagogue, temple, minyan or havurah?	
Once a week or more	21%
Once or twice a month	32%
A few times a year, such as for high holidays	28%
Seldom	11%
Never	8%

= 47% High Holidays or less often



**Participant Interview**  
Base is a perfect place to meet people from a variety of backgrounds and hear their stories. Every week I meet someone I never thought I would meet. All in the context of a welcoming and open Judaism.



**Participant Interview**  
It was lovely there!! I feel it is important to mention somewhere that I myself am not Jewish but was welcomed so very warmly.





**Participant Interview**

The Base is a great place to go if you are either very involved with Judaism or not, whether you have doubts about Judaism or not. The rabbi and partner, at least Avram and Yael, are extremely understanding and welcoming of all people, no matter whether you agree or disagree. This is a space, whether that be for LGBTQI people or people who are not Jewish (there are many interreligious couples that come), people converting, people of color, and just generally different standpoints...



In which of the following Jewish religious denominations were you raised. Which, if any, do you consider yourself now?

Orthodox	26%	13%
Conservative	23%	17%
Reform	21%	14%
Reconstructionist	2%	1%
Chabad	0%	0%
Post-denominational	0%	10%
Just Jewish	9%	26%
Other Jewish	3%	6%
Not Jewish	11%	7%
Not sure	4%	5%

In the past 12 months, how often, if at all, have you:

	Many times	A few times	Once or twice	Never
Attended a Shabbat meal at someone else's home?	49%	33%	16%	3%
Invited friends to a Shabbat meal at your home?	22%	21%	23%	33%

Does your (spouse/partner) consider him/herself Jewish or partly Jewish, or not Jewish?

Jewish	72%
Partly Jewish	6%
Not Jewish	23%

**C. Participation Across the Jewish Spectrum**  
 Across Jewish engagement types, we find similar levels of participation in Base activities. In other words, more Jewishly engaged individuals are no more likely to participate in Base activities than those least engaged in Jewish life.

Base Activity Count Index\* by Jewish engagement

Number of Base activities types*	Jewish engagement index**		
	Low	Moderate	High
Many types	23%	31%	26%
Some types	39%	41%	35%
Few types	38%	28%	39%
Total	100%	100%	100%

\*Shabbat, holidays, service activity, learning, meeting with rabbis or spouses, small group discussion, speaker, partner group program  
 \*\*Importance of being Jewish, Jewish friends, attends services, Shabbat meals

**Researcher's Commentary**  
 The pattern of equal participation across the Jewish identity spectrum contrasts sharply with the typical pattern found on campuses, where both Hillel and Chabad tend to experience higher levels of participation among those with higher levels of initial Jewish engagement and socialization.



#### D. One-Fifth with No Jewish Parents

Mirroring the diversity in current levels of Jewish engagement, we also find considerable diversity in Base participants' upbringing. Significantly, as many as 12% report that neither of their parents is Jewish, dividing almost evenly between non-Jews and converts to Judaism.

Number of parents who consider(ed) themselves Jewish:	
0	12%
1	8%
2	80%

#### E. Day School or No School

As for Jewish schooling, while 27% reported having a day school education, almost as many reported no Jewish schooling whatsoever. The number reporting having gone to summer camp is 60%, much like the NY area as a whole.

Main source of Jewish schooling received until age 13:	
Day School	27%
Hebrew or religious school	47%
Other	5%
None	21%

Attended an overnight summer camp with Jewish content: 60%

#### Researcher's Commentary

The overall picture emerging is one in which those who were highly socialized in Jewish life in their younger years participate in Base activities alongside those with much weaker Jewish familial and educational connections.

#### F. Former activists and absentees

Since many Base participants in New York are graduate students and their friends, we see diversity, as well, in participants' Jewish campus experience as undergraduates — divided between activists and absentees. For Hillel, about as many said they went many times as who said they participated just one or twice or not at all.

At college, attendance at programs sponsored by Hillel, Chabad and others				
	Many times	A few times	Once or twice	Never
Hillel	25%	44%	18%	13%
Chabad	44%	18%	22%	16%
Another campus Jewish group	48%	19%	17%	17%

#### G. High Levels of Israel Travel

The only feature of Base participants' Jewish background with relatively little diversity emerges with respect to travel to Israel — a noteworthy distinction. Most have visited three times or more, and over 90% have been to Israel — a level of contact that far exceeds the general profile among young Jewish adults in the New York area.

Number of times you've been to Israel:	
3 times or more	54%
Twice	18%
Once	19%
Never	9%

= 91% ever



#### Participant Interview

There is no question that Jon and Faith have created a home away from home for a large cross-section of Brooklyn Jews. It is no accident that the vast majority of Base regulars are not native to Brooklyn (I am an exception). They provide a model for what many of us fear no longer exists in the modern world: traditional religious commitment combined with liberal values and a classically fulfilling domestic life combined with professional success. Being in their home is a breath of fresh air every week.



#### Participant Interview:

Base is a place where I can go to experience Jewish culture, values, and ideals in an open, comfortable environment. It allows me to interact with people who are different from myself. It's outreach without the pressure of attendance. It is Judaism on your terms which makes people want to grow and move along at their own pace. Overall a wonderful institution that inspires Jewishness to all who attend.





**Participant Interview**

Base has been a great addition to my Jewish life. My partner is more religious than me, and through Base I have found a way to connect with some of the Jewish traditions I did not before (i.e. Shabbat). I love that Base is open and welcoming and does not discriminate against LGBT or treat women differently than men. These are concerns I have had with my heritage in previous experiences. My partner and I plan to stay members at Base for a long time.



**H. Demographics**

Women slightly out-number men. Most are in their late 20s, almost three-quarters are neither married nor cohabiting, and over two-thirds—far more than the average among American Jews—define themselves as politically liberal.

Age	
12–24	23%
25–29	51%
30–34	16%
35 or older	10%

Marital status	
Married	16%
Living with a partner	11%
Divorced, separated, widowed	1%
Never been married	71%

Political views	
Very conservative	0%
Conservative	5%
Moderate	21%
Liberal	46%
Very Liberal	24%
Not Sure	4%

= 70% liberal

Gender	
Female	55%
Male	43%
Other	2%

**I. Picture of Diverse Upbringing**

A remarkable mix is well-illustrated by the presence of 27% who graduated Jewish day schools, and the combination of non-Jews, converts and Jewish children of 1 Jewish parent (19% in all).

A typology of diversity in Jewish upbringing:

Day school graduate	27%
Jewish child of 2 Jewish parents*	54%
Jewish child of 1 Jewish parent*	7%
Convert to being Jewish*	3%
Non-Jewish	9%
Total	100%

\*Amongst respondents reporting no day school attendance.

**Researcher's Commentary**  
 As prior research informs us, young adults (20s and 30s), the non-married, and politically liberal are each associated with lower levels of Jewish engagement, however measured. The presence of so many Base participants who share these three characteristics suggests a remarkable and distinctive achievement in providing an environment that engages them in Jewish life.



## Research Context

### Questions and Methods

Steven and Arielle conducted their research on a number of fronts, including:

1. Interviews with stakeholders, professionals, and partner organizations
2. Interviews with Base participants, both in the fall of 2015 and spring of 2016
3. Observation of Base events and programs
4. A Survey of Base's Customer Relationship Management (CRM) list of participants and others.
5. This yielded a high response rate of 321 respondents. After eliminating non-participants from the survey, N=301.

### Primary areas of interest

- How does Base function? What educational methods does it employ?
- How is Base viewed by participants? How is Base received?
- Who comes? How diverse are they? In what ways?
- Why do they come?

To see the full survey questionnaire visit [bit.ly/BaseSurveyQuestionnaire](http://bit.ly/BaseSurveyQuestionnaire).

### Emerging Questions for Further Research: Sustainability, Scale, and Outcomes

A few questions and opportunities emerge for further research in Base's second year.

- How can Base encourage more friendships amongst participants that can progress and develop outside of Base events? Some Base participants (36%) have "hung out with someone you met at Base outside of a Base event," but most have not — pointing to a main objective for Base professionals heading into the second year of operation.
- Currently Base staff are the engine for all events, activities, and relationships. Can participants share in responsibilities? If so, in what ways?
- To what extent is Base meeting its own goal of catalyzing Jewish life beyond the Base community? Do partner organizations believe Base is supporting and strengthening their work?
- Since its launch in New York City, Base has expanded to Chicago, to a "Powered by Base" model in Washington, DC, and to a "Pop-Up Base" model in Berlin. New Bases are set to open their doors in Los Angeles and Miami in 2017. Does the Base model work "out of town"? How will the new Bases fare? Will the same operating principles apply?
- Base relies on the energy, creativity, and commitment of its exceptionally talented staff. As the organization becomes larger and more formalized will it retain its sense of inventiveness and excitement? Will staff burn out?
- As Base moves beyond its pilot year, what participant outcomes might we expect to see?

### Background: What is Base?

In August of 2015, Hillel International's Office of Innovation launched Base Hillel in New York City. With the support of UJA-Federation of NY, two Bases opened their doors: Base BKLYN in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and Base DWTN, located near Union Square in Manhattan.

Base is the home of a pluralistically-minded rabbinic family who opens their doors to students and their friends. Base supports local communities by forging partnerships with neighborhood organizations. The primary activities of a Base can be divided into three categories: Shabbat and Holiday Hospitality, Learning, and Community Service.

### Shabbat and Holidays

Each Base hosts meals for Shabbat and Jewish holidays. Everyone is welcome at a table enlivened by song, late-night conversations, shared ritual, and joyous encounters. Base draws on the tradition of Jewish home life as an educational, community-building space to make every young Jew feel at home with Judaism and the Jewish people.

### Learning

Each Base is home to a rabbi and their spouse or partner. Our rabbis are pluralistic men and women who are passionate about working with emerging adults. Rabbis study Jewish texts one on one, in small groups, and in informal conversations. These leaders welcome young Jews into a life animated by ideas, ritual, and family.

### Service to the Community

Each Base is a hub of service activity. Some cook meals for the homeless. Others regularly visit the sick. We seek to inspire young Jews to see Judaism as service to the community beyond themselves.

Base's vision is that of a rooted, Jewish cosmopolitan who enjoys a life:

1. Enmeshed in a thick Jewish social network
2. Guided in part by a Jewish mentor (an approachable and admirable role model)
3. Infused with a love of the study of Torah
4. Sanctified by the Jewish calendar
5. Enhanced by deep encounters with Jewish diversity
6. Aspiring to service over consumption as a guiding ethos

## Base Team

### Faith Leener

Base Co-Founder and Senior Educator  
of Base BKLYN  
*Relentless Optimist, Philosophical Toast  
Giver, To-do list Maker*

### Jon Leener

Base Co-Founder and Senior Rabbi  
of Base BKLYN  
*Beatles Maniac, Unapologetic  
Dreamer, Sportaholic*

### Avram Mlotek

Base Co-Founder and Senior Rabbi  
of Base DWTN  
*Yiddish Troubadour, Ping Pong  
Extraordinaire, Spiritual Activist*

### Yael Kornfeld

Base Co-Founder and Senior Educator  
of Base DWTN  
*Soul Singer, Messy Chef, Lover of  
Snail-mail*

### Dan Smokler

Chief Innovation Officer,  
Hillel International  
*Serial Schemer, Teacher of Torah,  
Fitness Freak*

### Dr. Tamara Tweel

Director of Strategic Development,  
Hillel International's Office of Innovation  
*Devout Teacher, Arbiter of Cold  
Borscht, Klutz*

### Erica Frankel

Managing Director  
Hillel International's Office of Innovation  
*Performance Artist, Wordsmith,  
Quiet Revolutionary*

### Aliza Dzik

Senior Design Fellow  
Hillel International's Office of Innovation  
*Systems Savant, Unabashed Belter,  
Handstand Master*

Generous Support has come from UJA  
Federation of New York





**“A wonderfully innovative and much needed resource for young Jews in their 20s and 30s. Needs to be replicated in every major city.”**

**“Love this place so much. What an amazing organization with a great mission. Base has been amazing for me and I love going!”**

**“Possibly the best thing to happen to the Jewish people.”**

**—Participant Interviews**