

**The Future of the Jewish Home**  
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## **Home Alone vs. Life With People**

**By Steven M. Cohen**

### The Questions

Numerous American Jewish institutions outside of Orthodoxy are experiencing shrinking numbers and, in many cases, an aging population. At one time, the shrinking+aging phenomenon was seemingly limited to established membership organizations such as B'nai B'rith, Hadassah, NCJW, American Jewish Congress and others. More recently, the Conservative and Reform synagogue movements report declining numbers, fewer synagogues, and aging memberships. Federation donors have dropped in number over the years camouflaged in part by increased generosity of the persistent loyalists.

Alongside these observations from the field, so to speak, come research reports that highlight ever-increasing rates of intermarriage as well as declines in such identity indicators as “Jews-by-religion” or Israel-engaged.

In such a context, it is no wonder that communal leaders as well as parents of Millennials are wondering, in effect, Where have all the young Jews gone? And, insofar as they can be reached, can they be engaged in Jewish life?

Against this background, this paper asks some vital, policy-relevant questions about the future of the Jewish home: To what extent are young adult Jews engaged (or unengaged) in Jewish home or communal life? And, insofar as their engagement – at home and elsewhere – falls short of that implicitly expected or desired by Jewish communal leaders, policymakers, and practitioners, how do we understand their levels and patterns of engagement?

### The Data Set: The Greater New York Jewish Community Study

To begin to address these questions, we turn to the Greater New York Jewish Community Study of 2011. Among its many advantages for our purposes are its large sample size (5,993 overall) and its numerous measures of Jewish engagement, a selection of which appear in the tables below. New York is also critical in that it embraces nearly a quarter of American Jewry (over 1.5 million Jews out of about 6.7 million). The study area, as reported below, extends beyond New York City to embrace suburban Westchester as well as Long Island.

## A Policy-Relevant Sub-sample

While the data set embraces a large number of Jews with varying characteristics, only some are highly pertinent for present purposes. Specifically, in the service of present policy purposes, the analysis focused upon those 25-34 years old, with the comparison group consisting of those 10 and 20 years their senior. The analysis set aside the 18-24 year olds because, in part, those under 25 either live at home with their parents or, certainly, heavily reflect the Jewish engagement patterns of their parents. (For example, relatively large numbers of 18-24 year olds in the New York data set report synagogue membership, no doubt reflecting their parents' having paid membership dues.)

In addition, the analysis excluded the Orthodox, in part owing to the sense (generally well-founded) that those who identify as Orthodox in the 25-34 age bracket score rather high on several measures of Jewish engagement. Their high rates of engagement place them outside the usual purview of policymakers and educators seeking to address the putatively low engagement levels of Jewish young adults.

Moreover, for purposes of achieving some comparability with Jews elsewhere in the US, the analysis needs to set aside this highly engaged and somewhat outsized group. The Orthodox in New York are almost 3 times as frequent in New York as elsewhere; by excluding the Orthodox from the analysis, we achieve a New York area sample that more closely approximates that found throughout the United States. That said, we need to recall that New York is still "special," in such characteristics as its large component of Russian-speaking Jews and its simply enormous population size. One differentiating feature is that the intermarriage rate is far lower in New York than in other parts of the country. Moreover, New York is home to a plethora of Jewish institutions, including the home headquarters of numerous national Jewish agencies. No amount of tinkering can construct a New York-area sample that totally resembles Jews elsewhere.

With these modifications, we have constructed a large and diverse sample that can help us explore the distinctive characteristics of those 25-34, alongside those 35-44, and 45-54. Below are some relevant characteristics of the sub-sample used for this analysis:

Non-Orthodox Younger Adults, Greater NY Jewish Community Study: 2011

The Study embraced New York City + 3 suburban counties, with the bigger concentrations in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Nassau County.

|               | Percent |  |  |
|---------------|---------|--|--|
| Bronx         | 3.4     |  |  |
| Brooklyn      | 20.5    |  |  |
| Manhattan     | 26.1    |  |  |
| Queens        | 12.7    |  |  |
| Staten Island | 2.9     |  |  |
| Nassau        | 16.7    |  |  |
| Suffolk       | 7.7     |  |  |
| Westchester   | 9.9     |  |  |
| Total         | 100.0   |  |  |

We are focusing upon those 25-34, in comparison with those 10 and 20 years older.

|       | Percent |  |  |
|-------|---------|--|--|
| 25-34 | 19.5    |  |  |
| 35-44 | 37.1    |  |  |
| 45-54 | 43.4    |  |  |
| Total | 100.0   |  |  |

We have excluded the Orthodox from our tabulations, leaving large numbers who are Reform and Conservative by self-definition, and even larger numbers who have no denominational attachment or define themselves as having no religion altogether (yet, in a separate question they may also identify as Jewish, “Aside from religion ....”

Denominational Identity

|                              | Percent |  |
|------------------------------|---------|--|
| Conservative                 | 25.6    |  |
| Reform                       | 30.6    |  |
| Reconstructionist            | 1.8     |  |
| Other: No denom, No religion | 42.0    |  |
| Total                        | 100.0   |  |

Age-related Variations in Three Types of Jewish Engagement

The concept of “Jewish engagement” ranges over a wide range of feelings, practices, patterns of association, and communal affiliation. An analysis of the wide variety of items (survey questions) that appeared in the New York identified about a half dozen clusters of items that are empirically correlated. That is, for

example, those who attend Shabbat meals are also likely to have Shabbat candles lit in their home.

This analysis focuses on three clusters of items bearing upon religiosity, holiday participation, and communal affiliation. The tables below present the groups of correlated Jewish engagement items by age, and then a scale or index of those items crosstabulated by age. We begin with four items I label as indicators of religiosity. (The most noteworthy material is highlighted in yellow.)

For four religious indicators, we find inconsistent and non-uniform differences across age, with mounting religious service attendance directly associated with age.

*Religiosity Indicators and Index by Age*

|   | 25-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 |
|---|-------|-------|-------|
| Shabbat meal sometimes+regularly        | 36    | 38    | 42    |
| Attend Few Times Yr or More             | 29    | 36    | 48    |
| Friday night candles lit usually+always | 22    | 19    | 24    |
| Kosher home                             | 25    | 21    | 21    |

When the four items are combined into an Index of Religiosity, we find that overall, younger Jews are indeed less “religious” than somewhat older Jews, with the more pronounced gaps associated with synagogue attendance and Shabbat meals.

*Index of Religiosity by Age*

|                           | 25-34  | 35-44  | 45-54  |
|---------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Index of Religiosity High | 19.8%  | 18.0%  | 24.8%  |
| Medium                    | 34.1%  | 36.6%  | 37.3%  |
| Low                       | 46.1%  | 45.4%  | 37.9%  |
| Total                     | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |

For three annual and fairly widely practiced holiday celebrations, we find some slight differences between young adults 25–34 and their slightly more active elders.

*Holiday celebration by Age*

|                               | 25-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 |
|-------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Yom Kippur fast all day       | 57    | 58    | 58    |
| Seder usually+always          | 65    | 68    | 72    |
| Hanuka candles usually+always | 64    | 67    | 70    |

In turning to the Index of Holiday Celebration (combing Yom Kippur fasting, Seder attendance and Hanuka candle lighting), we find that the one notable age-related difference is that more young adults are “holiday-inactive.” That is, a greater share of 25–34 year olds refrain from participating in any of these annual Jewish than among those 10 and 20 years their elder.

*Index of Holidays by Age*

|                        | 25-34  | 35-44  | 45-54  |
|------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Index of Holidays High | 45.0%  | 42.3%  | 47.1%  |
| Medium                 | 33.3%  | 43.5%  | 37.7%  |
| Low                    | 21.7%  | 14.2%  | 15.2%  |
| Total                  | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |

In contrast with the mixed results for religiosity and holiday participation, on most measures of communal affiliation, the younger adults substantially trail their elders. In most instances, on membership, volunteering and donating, those 25–34 trail those 35–44 who, in turn trail those 45–54.

*Affiliation indicators by Age*

|  | 25-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 |
|--|-------|-------|-------|
| J organization, belong or regularly participates, anyone in HH | 23    | 19    | 21    |
| Volunteered for a J org'n                                      | 24    | 26    | 36    |
| Synagogue member   | 32    | 36    | 47    |
| UJA, gave  | 09    | 16    | 23    |
| J charities other than UJA, gave                               | 39    | 43    | 61    |
| Feel part of a J community, a lot                              | 20    | 23    | 32    |

The relationship of the Index of Affiliation with age is in fact quite strong.

*Index of Affiliation by Age*

|                      |        | 25-34  | 35-44  | 45-54  |
|----------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Index of Affiliation | High   | 26.4%  | 28.0%  | 42.3%  |
|                      | Medium | 30.3%  | 34.2%  | 32.6%  |
|                      | Low    | 43.3%  | 37.8%  | 25.1%  |
| Total                |        | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |

The Impact of Family Structure: Marriage, Children and Intermarriage

From the results above, speaking in general terms, younger adults are indeed less Jewishly engaged than the elders, but the differences are small with respect to religiosity, modest with respect to holiday participation, and pronounced with respect to affiliation. How are we to understand these differences? One important consideration is the shifting family pattern as people age.

Notably, younger people are more likely to be non-married with no children, and less likely to have Jewish children (a circumstance that generally implies the presence of a Jewish spouse). We see the progression in the following table:

*Family Structure by Age*

|                  |  | 25-34  | 35-44  | 45-54  |
|------------------|--|--------|--------|--------|
| Family Structure | Non-married, no kids                   | 41.0%  | 26.5%  | 26.0%  |
|                  | Married or coupled with a Jew, no kids | 21.7%  | 20.5%  | 24.0%  |
|                  | Jewish kids present, married or not    | 25.7%  | 37.9%  | 36.5%  |
|                  | Non-Jewish spouse or partner           | 11.7%  | 15.1%  | 13.4%  |
| Total            |  | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |

Now, consistent with a large literature on American religion in general and Jewish identity in particular, we find that for these younger adults, all forms of Jewish engagement are tied to each. For example, as we see below, religiosity is very much a function of family structure with very wide gaps between those families raising Jewish children and the non-married or the intermarried.

*Index of Religiosity by Family Structure*

|                      |        | Family Structure     |  |                                     |                              |
|----------------------|--------|----------------------|--|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
|                      |        | Non-married, no kids | Married or coupled with a Jew, no kids | Jewish kids present, married or not | Non-Jewish spouse or partner |
| Index of Religiosity | High   | 8.1%                 | 23.1%                                  | 36.7%                               | 6.2%                         |
|                      | Medium | 36.5%                | 29.8%                                  | 45.6%                               | 23.6%                        |
|                      | Low    | 55.4%                | 47.1%                                  | 17.7%                               | 70.2%                        |
| Total                |        | 100.0%               | 100.0%                                 | 100.0%                              | 100.0%                       |

In addition, almost all families with Jewish kids present undertake some, if not all, the annual Jewish holidays, in sharp contrast with the non-married and the intermarried.

*Index of Holidays by Family Structure*

|                        | Family Structure     |  |                                     |                              |
|------------------------|----------------------|--|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
|                        | Non-married, no kids | Married or coupled with a Jew, no kids | Jewish kids present, married or not | Non-Jewish spouse or partner |
| Index of Holidays High | 21.8%                | 49.8%                                  | 70.3%                               | 20.2%                        |
| Medium                 | 50.9%                | 40.3%                                  | 26.4%                               | 44.5%                        |
| Low                    | 27.3%                | 9.9%                                   | 3.3%                                | 35.3%                        |
| Total                  | 100.0%               | 100.0%                                 | 100.0%                              | 100.0%                       |

And as much as family structure affects religiosity and holiday celebration, with Jewish kids in the home, Jewish affiliation soars.

*Index of Affiliation by Family Structure*

|                           | Family Structure     |  |                                     |                              |
|---------------------------|----------------------|--|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
|                           | Non-married, no kids | Married or coupled with a Jew, no kids | Jewish kids present, married or not | Non-Jewish spouse or partner |
| Index of Affiliation High | 13.1%                | 36.4%                                  | 60.1%                               | 7.3%                         |
| Medium                    | 41.0%                | 29.3%                                  | 28.6%                               | 31.2%                        |
| Low                       | 45.9%                | 34.2%                                  | 11.3%                               | 61.5%                        |
| Total                     | 100.0%               | 100.0%                                 | 100.0%                              | 100.0%                       |

The influence of family status is so pronounced that it largely explains age-related variations in Jewish engagement. **With family status controlled, we find hardly any age-related differences in religiosity. For religiosity, family is, in effect, the whole story.** (The table below is divided into the four family structure categories. Within each category, the table presents the relationship of age with religiosity.)

*Index of Religiosity by Family Structure and Age*

|  |                      |        | 25-34  | 35-44  | 45-54 |
|--|----------------------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| Non-married, no kids                   | Index of Religiosity | High   | 7.3%   | 7.0%   | 9.6%  |
|  |                      | Medium | 36.5%  | 36.6%  | 36.4% |
|  |                      | Low    | 56.2%  | 56.4%  | 54.0% |
|  | Total                | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |       |
| Married or coupled with a Jew, no kids | Index of Religiosity | High   | 20.6%  | 16.9%  | 28.7% |
|  |                      | Medium | 25.8%  | 29.0%  | 32.1% |
|  |                      | Low    | 53.6%  | 54.1%  | 39.2% |
|  | Total                | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |       |
| Jewish kids present, married or not    | Index of Religiosity | High   | 42.6%  | 32.2%  | 38.8% |
|  |                      | Medium | 44.4%  | 43.6%  | 47.7% |
|  |                      | Low    | 12.9%  | 24.3%  | 13.4% |
|  | Total                | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |       |
| Non-Jewish spouse or partner           | Index of Religiosity | High   | 3.7%   | 3.4%   | 9.9%  |
|  |                      | Medium | 20.0%  | 29.2%  | 19.6% |
|  |                      | Low    | 76.3%  | 67.3%  | 70.6% |
|  | Total                | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |       |

The same is true for annual holiday celebrations. For holidays, it's “all in the family,” as the non-married and intermarried participate far less frequently than the inmarried with no kids and those raising Jewish children (generally with a Jewish spouse).

*Index of Holiday by Family Structure and Age*

|  |                   |        | 25-34  | 35-44  | 45-54  |
|--|-------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Non-married, no kids                   | Index of Holidays | High   | 20.6%  | 16.7%  | 27.0%  |
|  |                   | Medium | 53.0%  | 59.4%  | 42.1%  |
|  |                   | Low    | 26.5%  | 23.8%  | 30.9%  |
|  | Total             |        | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| Married or coupled with a Jew, no kids | Index of Holidays | High   | 58.6%  | 46.3%  | 48.7%  |
|  |                   | Medium | 28.4%  | 44.9%  | 41.8%  |
|  |                   | Low    | 13.0%  | 8.7%   | 9.4%   |
|  | Total             |        | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| Jewish kids present, married or not    | Index of Holidays | High   | 76.5%  | 66.6%  | 71.6%  |
|  |                   | Medium | 12.6%  | 30.2%  | 27.5%  |
|  |                   | Low    | 10.9%  | 3.2%   | .9%    |
|  | Total             |        | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| Non-Jewish spouse or partner           | Index of Holidays | High   | 34.3%  | 19.2%  | 15.6%  |
|  |                   | Medium | 20.8%  | 47.9%  | 50.5%  |
|  |                   | Low    | 44.9%  | 32.9%  | 33.8%  |
|  | Total             |        | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |

However, even when controlling for family structure, age retains its relationship with affiliation: older Jews affiliate more than younger Jews, and matters of marriage and children do not explain that relationship.

*Index of Affiliation by Family Structure and Age*

|  |                      |        | 25-34  | 35-44  | 45-54  |
|--|----------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Non-married, no kids                   | Index of Affiliation | High   | 16.0%  | 11.2%  | 12.8%  |
|  |                      | Medium | 27.8%  | 37.8%  | 52.3%  |
|  |                      | Low    | 56.2%  | 51.0%  | 34.9%  |
|  | Total                |        | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| Married or coupled with a Jew, no kids | Index of Affiliation | High   | 27.7%  | 31.0%  | 44.5%  |
|  |                      | Medium | 34.8%  | 27.7%  | 28.3%  |
|  |                      | Low    | 37.5%  | 41.3%  | 27.2%  |
|  | Total                |        | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| Jewish kids present, married or not    | Index of Affiliation | High   | 49.4%  | 49.6%  | 72.6%  |
|  |                      | Medium | 34.9%  | 36.4%  | 19.9%  |
|  |                      | Low    | 15.8%  | 14.0%  | 7.4%   |
|  | Total                |        | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| Non-Jewish spouse or partner           | Index of Affiliation | High   | 6.3%   | .8%    | 14.1%  |
|  |                      | Medium | 19.5%  | 31.7%  | 35.4%  |
|  |                      | Low    | 74.3%  | 67.5%  | 50.6%  |
|  | Total                |        | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |

Conclusions

From the analysis above, we can infer several takeaways.



- The impression of low involvement among younger adults is heavily shaped by their relative absence from communal life. At home (religiosity and holiday celebration), the differences between young and not-so-young are less pronounced.
- Family matters. A lot. Jewish children sharply boost rates of all involvement, being single or married to a non-Jews limits or depresses them.
- In terms of home-based Judaism, the young are not any different from those 10 or 20 years older, once we control for family configuration.
- The moral of the story: To boost home-based Jewish involvement among the young adult cohort, try to replicate or approximate the presence of Jewish family members, or family-like friends and associates.